

## **The council role in education**

### **Purpose of report**

For discussion.

### **Summary**

The LGA has been contributing to the Department for Education (DfE) review of the local authority role in education, through an External Advisory Board (EAB), chaired by Alan Wood, former President of the Association of Directors of Children's Services. CYP Board Chair Cllr Richard Watts and LGA Head of Policy (People) Sally Burlington represent the LGA on the Board.

As a result of the discussions that have taken place at EAB meetings, the Children and Young People Board lead members jointly wrote to the Secretary of State for Education at the start of January, setting out proposals for four key areas, including a 'reset' in relations between central and local government on schools. The full letter is attached at **Appendix A**.

This paper also provides, for information and discussion, a summary of the points made in our responses to the Department's consultations on the proposed introduction of a national school funding formula and proposed changes to high needs funding.

### **Recommendations**

That the LGA Leadership Board:

- i. discuss how the proposals set out in the letter to the Education Secretary Justine Greening MP can be developed further; and
- ii. note the summary of the LGA response to the schools funding consultations set out at paragraphs 11 and 12.

### **Action**

Officers to take action arising out any discussion, as directed by members.

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## **The council role in education**

### **Background**

1. The LGA supports the aim of the DfE review of the local authority role in education and children's services: to establish a clear and sustainable future role for councils. In our Autumn Statement submission, we asked that councils be given a clear and strategic role in overseeing local schools systems, accompanied by appropriate resources, powers and flexibilities.
2. Councils have responded positively to increasing school autonomy and increasing expectations that schools should become responsible for their own improvement. Using a variety of models, they have worked with schools to establish authority-wide school improvement partnerships and have encouraged and supported schools to work in local clusters, federations, Multi-Academy Trusts and Teaching School Alliances.

### **A 'reset' in relations between central and local government on schools**

3. There is a cross-party view within the LGA that the current debates about school structures are increasingly a distraction from addressing the very real challenges in our education system. While the evidence can be presented to support a number of different arguments, councillors believe that structural reforms are only a limited part of the answer to raising educational standards in England.
4. We are clear that local councils support the desire for an autonomous school-led system, but have not considered themselves as 'providers' of education since the introduction of Local Management of Schools in 1990. However, we do believe that local government plays an essential role in the strategic oversight of the local schools system but currently lacks the powers to be truly effective at this job.
5. We would like to see a 'reset' that acknowledges that local councils aren't providers of education but, in return, allows us to have the powers to effectively shape and commission provision, place plan and champion the interests of the most vulnerable pupils. Councils should be freed up to convene links between schools and other key partners in an area such as employers. We want to move the debate on school structures into a place where central and local government can better work in partnership to tackle the big questions our education system faces in delivering the best outcomes for children and young people.

### **LGA lobbying priorities**

6. The Government recognises that councils have an important continuing role in education. They focus on the council role in place-planning, protecting the needs of the most vulnerable children (including children with Special Educational Needs and Looked After Children) and acting as champions for children and families. We continue to lobby the DfE to ensure that councils have sufficient funding and powers to fulfil these roles effectively.

7. We have also stressed the need for a clear council role in supporting school improvement and holding schools to account for the educational outcomes for local children and young people. With 91% of council-maintained schools rated as Good or Outstanding by Ofsted, we believe councils should be recognised as school improvement partners who can work with Regional Schools Commissioners to drive improvement in all schools, including academies.
8. We believe that the Department should reverse the planned £600 million cut to the Education Services Grant. The announcement in November of a £50 million school improvement fund for councils and a £150 million strategic school improvement support fund for schools go some way to reversing the impact of these cuts. However, we remain concerned that schools are being asked to fund the other services paid for by ESG from September, including council statutory education duties.
9. Councils have a strong record in convening local partnerships to protect and promote life-chances of children and young people, including Health and Well-Being Local Safeguarding Children's Boards. We would like to see this extended to cover education, with local education forums being responsible for tackling issues including sufficiency of school places, developing links between schools and employers and ensuring the needs of vulnerable children are met.

#### **Responses to the national schools and high needs funding consultations**

10. The LGA has submitted responses to both the national schools and high needs funding consultation, which closed on the 22 March.
11. The proposals set out in the national schools funding consultation focus on the various blocks that will make up the proposed formula, with some councils and their schools seeing an increase in funding where others are facing a reduction. The LGA is therefore unable to comment on the distributional proposals which will have a differing impact on member councils. Our response focuses on the following issues relevant to all councils:
  - 11.1. concern that the proposed funding formula will not deliver increases in funding commensurate with rising need; and the clear need for councils, working with schools, to retain local flexibility in determining what works best in their areas;
  - 11.2. concern that the proposal to only have one year of the 'soft' formula in 2018-19 will present a challenging timescale for schools and councils; we believe any changes should be phased in more gradually to help those facing budget reductions to adapt;
  - 11.3. doubts about the effectiveness of the proposal that maintained schools should be asked to fund, from their own budgets, council statutory duties that are currently funded from the Education Services Grant; and
  - 11.4. our belief that flexibility to move funding, with the agreement of schools forums, between the schools and High Needs Block must remain.
12. Our response to the high needs funding consultation focuses on the following issues:

- 12.1. a need to resolve the fundamental issue that High Needs Block funding has been insufficient in recent years to reflect rising needs;
- 12.2. in acknowledging rising needs, the DfE should provide additional funding to meet the pressures, to ensure councils can meet all aspects of their statutory duties;
- 12.3. the consultation is a missed the opportunity for the DfE to use their own independent research, undertaken by the ISOS Partnership, to develop a responsive formula, and have made some simplistic assumptions which cannot be justified; and
- 12.4. the impact of the proposed changes set out in the national schools funding formula consultation to ring fence the schools block, reducing the ability of councils and schools to use resources flexibly to fund high needs pressures.

#### **Implications for Wales**

13. As education is devolved there are no implications for Wales arising.

#### **Financial Implications**

14. None.