

KENT COUNTY COUNCIL

SELECT COMMITTEE - PUPIL PREMIUM

MINUTES of a meeting of the Select Committee - Pupil Premium held in the Bewl Room - Sessions House on Thursday, 23 November 2017.

PRESENT: Mr M Whiting (Chairman), Mrs C Bell, Mrs T Dean, MBE and Dr L Sullivan

IN ATTENDANCE: Mr G Romagnuolo (Research Officer - Overview and Scrutiny), Mrs K Goldsmith (Research Officer - Overview and Scrutiny) and Mr J Cook (Scrutiny Research Officer)

UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

19. Linda Pickles, Principal Adviser for Primary School Improvement
(Item 1)

Ms Pickles, Principal Adviser for Primary School Improvement, returning to supply additional information to the Committee following their consideration of other witness evidence, provided an updated overview of the issues seeking to clarify points raised by the Committee.

Ms Pickles commented that while there were some issues with Pupil Premium, particularly that it could be considered a 'blunt tool' in some circumstances, it was still clearly recognised as the best option. She noted that schools were recognising that there were a range of factors to consider as relevant when assessing the need for any additional education provision and that this had to be balanced carefully when managing large groups of vulnerable families which may involve a broad range of education needs for the children. She also commented that the selective education arrangements in Kent compounded some of the issues.

Question: Was there a correlation between schools which use pupil premium more effectively and those that show greater flexibility around Free School Meal funding?

Ms Pickles explained that schools varied in their demonstrated ability or approach to using all funding streams and that those good at using one funding stream well was good at using all them and vice versa. This was reflected in terms of where a school was good, it was consistently good across a range of factors. She confirmed that this was confirmed by Kent's Ofsted results for primary schools.

In terms of considering effective use, Ms Pickles advised that it was important look at progression ranges as the key factor. She explained that the gaps in attainment in Kent were closing, showing good use of the appropriate processes to provide increased provision and improve outcomes for disadvantaged pupils. She noted that a list of schools not highly rated by Ofsted might not give a clear indication of poor use of Pupil Premium, however, as the wide range of factors involved made a snapshot assessment unhelpful for assessing this issue.

While considering sharing the best approaches to Schools, the Committee and Ms Pickles discussed the development and use of toolkits by Local Authorities. Ms Pickles explained that the marketing and development of toolkits varied across local authorities. She noted that Essex Council had provided the toolkit free of charge to some subsidised schools which had low performance levels.

Question: Why can't Government review the necessary data to confirm pupil status sooner and ensure schools can access funding as soon as it needed?

Ms Pickles explained that while there were issues regarding parents not applying for Free School Meals or providing the necessary information for Pupil Premium eligibility, this was an engagement issue and needed to be addressed through more understanding and acceptance of being FSM or Pupil Premium. There remained a perception issue around the stigma associated with being an 'FSM' family. She also confirmed that it was not appropriate to automatically share data or seek additional checks as this breached families' privacy rights.

She advised that Kent was good at working with schools to monitor progress and assess pressures on education based on numbers of children requiring additional support.

Question: Was there a problem of Pupil Premium funding being spread too thin?

Ms Pickles clarified that the rules related to Pupil Premium and FSM support meant that all funding had to be targeted on supporting the relevant pupils and should not be used to top up other education funding. She noted that Governors had a legal duty to ensure this. This meant that it was very important to promote and highlight the best ways to spend Pupil Premium to achieve the best improvements for the relevant pupils.

This linked to a discussion of pooling Pupil Premium resources across groups of schools to achieve savings while still delivering the appropriate support. Ms Pickles explained that there had been mixed results across 'clusters' of schools engaged in this practice, some had seen improvements in outcomes and others had not. Many of the schools involved were already good or outstanding rated by Ofsted so they were better positioned to already be making best use of Pupil Premium. She was not sure this process would necessarily help address issues in less well performing schools which may have more fundamental issues to be addressed first, noting that negative collaboration could reinforce bad practice.

Question: What were the key issues related to transition between Primary and Secondary education in relation Pupil Premium?

Ms Pickles advised that schools should be picking up on key problems as early as possible so that any gaps can be addressed before they grow and leave a significant conceptual gap in skills and knowledge for secondaries to manage. The data showed that where issues or additional support needs were recognised and addressed early, progress was better. Ms Pickles commented that the good practice at Primary level was better than that seen at Secondary level so currently much greater impact. So, it would be positive if some of the good practice could be picked and replicated at a Secondary level for where issues arise later or are not fully addressed at the Primary stage.

Ms Pickles explained that she expected Virtual School Kent to pick up much of the transition elements to help ensure appropriate actions and support. She hoped that this

would include better communication of expectations and information sharing so that secondaries were better prepared to offer the right support and were clearly committed to continuing the provision necessary support packages.

Ms Pickles advised that there was no evidence to suggest that formal links between Primary and Secondary schools improved outcomes or progress in relation to Pupil Premium or FSM children.

As Primary and Secondary schools were not well situated to pool any resources for pupil premium (as the pupils would not be registered at the secondary until they have been offered a place), there was no scope to explore such an arrangement but pooling and joint work between Infant and Junior levels could be explored as this had shown promise.

Question: As Pupil Premium started in 2012, is an appropriate level of improvement being seen in education?

Ms Pickles explained that gaps in attainment had narrowed in Kent but that the measurements had also been changed so it was difficult to fairly assess progress. She noted that it would likely be 30 years before the attainment gap would be significantly narrowed nationally. She explained that the main focus of Ofsted now was considering the more academically able disadvantaged children, who it was believed would be capable of significant academic success given appropriate support. This had to be balanced around the lower attainment expectations for children with more complex and significant needs. Ms Pickles clarified that there was a disproportionately low number of SEN pupils registered for Pupil Premium and that this was an area of focus for encouraging schools and the council to signpost appropriate to get appropriate assessments in place to ensure that children could access all the support to which they were entitled.

In discussing the potential for increasing the focus on academic attainment, to exclusion of other factors, Ms Pickles noted explained that the broader progress measures in place assisted in addressing under achievement issues including academic attainment. She commented that Ofsted had progress as a key measurement, particularly in the case of disadvantaged pupils, which helped ensure a holistic approach to providing support. She also advised that a tighter focus on attainment only, with the inherent challenges around pupils' varied natural level of academic potential meant that some schools may seek to avoid taking on children with pupil premium if they did not think that they could ensure the expected attainment levels.