

26 July 2021

1 Introduction

1.1 This strategy sets out Medway Council's approach to fulfilling its duties as set out in the 2010 coalition government's white paper '[the importance of teaching](#)'. While Councils in England still have a crucial strategic and operational role in local education systems, as demonstrated by the wide range of statutory duties and powers still vested in them, there is now a range of other bodies, all of which share or in some cases replace the local Council in terms of powers vested in them by statute.

1.2 By way of example, the regional schools commissioner (RSC) is now the accountable government body in local areas with responsibility of decisions (such as the opening and closing of academies, interventions and agreeing, or not, that a maintained school should become an academy school).

1.3 Accordingly, this document sets out:

- the champion of pupils, parents and communities;
- a maker and shaper of effective commissioning
- a convenor of partnerships

1.4 It then sets out the Council's commitment to children, their families and our schools through:

- being a strong champion for parents and families, for vulnerable pupils and of educational excellence;
- encouraging good schools to expand and encourage free schools or academies to meet the demand for pupil places;
- coordinating admissions and ensuring fair access to all schools, including academies and free schools;
- standing up for the interests of parents and children, and promoting high standards;
- acting as the champion for vulnerable pupils in our area, specifically and including responsibility for SEN, LAC and young people in custody; and
- assuming the key strategic commissioning role, championing educational excellence.

1.5 As a Council we embrace this role. We:

- believe strongly that schools and early years settings (settings) should be autonomous and should drive their own improvement (and in fact Medway schools have been autonomous since before the unitary Council was vested);
- celebrate the new capacity, expertise and energy that the academies programme has created;
- support the new governance mechanisms for schools and settings to work strongly and collaboratively with each other that the new agenda brings; and
- are clear that for schools that are poorly performing becoming a sponsored academy is our recommended solution, but also that poorly-performing academy schools are a matter for the Council, which will support and challenge academy schools through the mechanisms available to it.

1.5 We are keen to explore with our schools and settings the opportunities that different collaborative academy governance models offer to schools at all points of the performance spectrum. We are equally convinced that there is a powerful and essential role that the local authority must continue to play in education if, as a Council and as a nation, we are to see the improvement in quality that our children and young people deserve, and our economy needs.

2 The role of the Council in supporting settings to achieve the area's education vision

2.1 The acid test of the residual powers and responsibilities of the Council with regard to schools and settings is whether it can provide the leverage to address areas of long-standing underperformance that have proved intractable in the past. It is possible, but only if all the key partners in the education system are harnessed towards a common set of goals and work effectively together. The role of the local authority lies in holding this broad alliance of partners together, and ensuring that education does not develop in isolation from the wider forces that shape Medway as a place.

2.2 Securing the improvements for which we all strive is ultimately down to the hard work of teachers in the classroom and leaders in schools. However, in some respects the local authority is uniquely placed to support schools in this endeavour. Medway Council:

- continues to hold a range of statutory responsibilities essential for the effective operation of the education system such as ensuring a sufficient supply of school places and supporting vulnerable children, as well as continuing to be the maintaining authority for community schools;
- is best placed to bring schools together to take decisions which serve the collective needs of a whole community of children and young people, rather than just those children and young people who attend a particular school – for example being the organising force for 'child friendly Medway';
- is able to bring an in-depth and evidence-based perspective on the needs of local communities, based on knowledge of how communities use wider Council services, demographic and population data and economic trends;
- provides an essential link for schools into social care, youth justice, health, family well-being, lifelong learning, economic regeneration and employment services; and
- as an elected body, the continues to have a powerful democratic mandate to ensure that services support good outcomes for all children, young people and their families in Medway, which is what voters expect in relation to all public services, including education.

2.3 Research commissioned by the LGA and DfE identified three emerging dimensions of the local authority's role in education. These are categorised as the local authority as a:

- maker and shaper of effective commissioning;
- champion of children, parents and the community; and
- convenor of partnerships.

THE LOCAL AUTHORITY AS CHAMPION OF PUPILS, PARENTS AND COMMUNITIES:

2.4 The government's position since 2010 has been that in a more autonomous school system, local authorities have an indispensable role to play as champions of children and parents, using their democratic mandate to challenge every school to do the best for their population.

2.5 The role of the local authority as a champion of pupils, parents and communities sits well alongside their broader responsibilities in relation to developing effective, sustainable and cohesive 'places', for example through their responsibilities for planning, employment, working with businesses, supporting families and encouraging life-long learning. It also sits well alongside their democratic mandate to ensure good outcomes for children and young people.

THE LOCAL AUTHORITY AS A MAKER AND SHAPER OF EFFECTIVE COMMISSIONING:

2.6 The changes that have come into force in the last decade have far-reaching implications for how schools respond to parental demand for places, who provides schools, and how schools access support and challenge. At each of these three levels it is clear that, in the new education landscape, choice and competition are to be important drivers of quality.

2.7 In responding to and facilitating these choice-based reforms, the local authority has an important contribution to make as an intelligent commissioner of schools, as a provider of support services and challenge, and in supporting schools and parents in making effective commissioning decisions.

THE LOCAL AUTHORITY AS A CONVENOR OF PARTNERSHIPS:

2.8 Schools recognise that in a well-functioning education system there are times when they can be more effective if they act together, and there are responsibilities that schools exercise jointly rather than individually. However, in the new education landscape the forces of competition, particularly in terms of attracting pupils in circumstances where funding is tight, might at times be stronger than the forces of collaboration.

2.9 Medway Council has set out in detail, through its Medway education partnership and in particular its 'strategic principles' shared by a partnership of 'middle tier' organisations, school leaders and governors, how a dynamic, forward looking local partnership might be developed.

2.10 Beyond this, the local authority plays a key role in facilitating partnerships between a very broad range of providers and services, such as health, the police, lifelong learning providers, social work, mental health services, drug and alcohol services, targeted youth work, and employment services. Accordingly, it is able to promote successfully their joined-up engagement with schools and vice-versa.

3 The Council's commitment to children, their families and our community of schools

AS A CHAMPION OF CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE, FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES WE WILL

3.1 Continue to monitor the performance of all schools in Medway, irrespective of whether they are academies, community schools, voluntary aided or controlled schools or free schools: we will draw on the full range of quantitative performance data available, such as national test and examination results, exclusions and Ofsted data.

3.2 At the same time, we will also be systematic in tracking other softer sources of information such as admissions information, issues raised with elected members, turnover of staff and pupils, and schools' capacity, including the role of the realigned teaching schools. We will use the information that we collect on a termly basis to develop a clear view of those schools that have the capacity to support others and those that may be in need of additional support and use this to guide our offer to schools.

3.3 Agree a clear protocol with academies for how we will respond to and escalate concerns that are identified through our performance analysis: initially we will write to the school outlining the issues or concerns that we have identified and the actions that we believe should be taken to address these, as set out in the school effectiveness strategy, 2021/23.

3.4 Take rapid and decisive action in any underperforming community school: we are clear that where local authority schools are not performing well we have a duty to intervene. Our approach is to take decisive and rapid action in the event that a school is judged to be inadequate by Ofsted, or in the assessment of the local authority is poorly performing or significantly underperforming.

3.5 Our expectation is that part of the action plan for all such schools will be to identify a high-quality academy sponsor. We are also taking action to support intensively and challenge those schools that are currently assessed as 'requiring improvement' by Ofsted, and are not on track to be good. We will be looking to broker in the significant capacity available in other high-performing schools in Medway to get these schools back on a rapid upwards trajectory.

3.6 Strengthen the role and contribution of local authority governors of school: we recognise that in our local authority governors we have a valuable resource whose potential is currently under-utilised. We will therefore be embarking upon a training programme for all existing local authority governors to ensure that they understand how they can most effectively discharge the local authority democratic duty to be a champion for children, young people, families and communities in the work that they do.

3.7 We will bring local authority governors together on a zone basis once a term so that they can learn from each other and keep abreast of developments. We will also offer a highly skilled and trained local authority governor to any academy who would like one, as well as developing the strategic role of local authority governors with those academy chains that oversee multiple academies in Medway.

3.8 Ensure the appropriate overview and scrutiny in relation to education: we will provide the overview and scrutiny committee with reports on standards in education, on the back of which they will determine particular issues or areas which they will investigate further, with the support of the local authority.

These might include looking more deeply into the pattern of education provision or performance in a particular area, inviting academy sponsoring bodies or headteachers in to provide an account of how they are contributing to high standards in Medway, or investigating a particular issue such as fair access. These investigations will be rapid, evidence-based, and result in practical recommendations for schools, the local authority and its partners.

AS AN EXPERT COMMISSIONER AND ENABLER OF COMMISSIONING WE WILL

3.9 Work closely with the Department for Education to ensure that proposed academy solutions for Medway respond to the distinctive needs of our communities: through our clear understanding of the data, our relationships with schools, our links into local communities and our strategic partnerships with academy sponsors we will make ourselves an invaluable partner in any discussion with the Department for Education, through the Regional Schools Commissioner, about sponsored academy solutions for individual schools that are underperforming and advocate strongly for the interests of our community as a whole.

3.10 Commission the right provision and support to ensure that our most vulnerable children fulfil their potential: we recognise that collectively we need to work better and smarter if our most vulnerable children are to succeed. We will subject provision for special educational needs in Medway to constant review, concentrating particularly on meeting the needs of children with autism and social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) difficulties, for whom there is currently a deficit of places in state-funded schools.

3.11 We are making outstanding progress on commissioning special and mainstream school specialist places required to meet those needs, and have used capital funding through the government's free school programme (160 places for pupils with SEMH and SLD), and capital borrowing (56 secondary places at Abbey Court and 100 ASC places at Bradfields). Existing capital funds are being used to fund 175 places in five secondary academy schools.

3.12 Enable parents to make informed choices about schools in their area: we use the full range of data and information we have to publish an annual performance report about schools in Medway. The report makes it easy to analyse, compare and contrast the performance of our schools in a wide range of relevant subjective areas. We also use and will publish key data from the government's local authority interactive tool, as well as providing links so that anyone in the community can access and use comparative data on performance.

3.13 These data can support parents in their initial preferences for schools and in asking the right questions about the quality of their children's education and learning. We provide focused support for vulnerable and hard to engage families to ensure they make best use of the opportunities open to them and enjoy equal and fair access to good schools, including supporting them through admission appeals to ensure they have equality of opportunity.

AS A CONVENOR OF PARTNERSHIPS WE WILL

3.14 Work with our primary schools to develop zone-based partnerships as hubs for peer to peer challenge and support and for commissioning school improvement services: the menu and allocation of support is to be determined by schools but assisted by officers in the LA's school effectiveness service.

3.15 Support the strategic development of teaching school alliances: the teaching school on the MEPG will work closely with the teaching school hub as they are reconfigured to help them to develop the range of challenge and support, including deployment of specialist teachers, so that support is targeted towards those schools with the greatest needs and has a proven impact on outcomes. We will explore, with the teaching school hub, how they might contribute to the local school partnership model outlined above to create a strategic, coherent and seamless offer to schools.

3.16 We are, and will continue to, bring schools together so that they can take well-informed decisions about admission numbers and fair access that are in the best interests of a community of pupils. We will, more and more, encourage schools, wherever possible, to take collective responsibility for decisions about admissions numbers and fair access arrangements.

3.17 To do this, we will facilitate the bringing together of schools and provide the data and analysis to inform transparent and objective decision-making. We will continue to refine the protocols with schools to govern decision-making and ensure that these support the best interests of all pupils in a community, not just the pupils at a particular school. We will advocate strongly on behalf of all pupils, and particularly the most vulnerable, to ensure that their interests are met.

3.18 We believe that by delivering the commitments set out above we can support schools and academy trusts in Medway to make the improvements in education that our children and young people deserve, and that are **set out in the MEPG's strategic framework for education in Medway in the twenty-first century**.

3.19 However, we recognise that the remit to influence, to champion and to support the education agenda does not come by right. We will therefore, on an annual basis, invite schools to assess systematically how well we have lived up to our commitments and the impact that we have had. The findings of this scrutiny will be built into our own development plans so that we continue to improve year on year.

4 The partners in the middle tier and their responsibilities

4.1 As demonstrated by the constitution and terms of reference of the MEPG, and the strategic framework for education in Medway in the twenty-first century, which proposes strategic principles that can be shared by all settings in Medway, the Council is committed to working with middle tier partners and our head teachers to:

- draw in the most effective expertise and capacity;
 - enable decisions to be made and actions to be taken that are in the interests of the whole community of children and young people in our areas;
 - create the conditions for collaboration and collective responsibility – in general but specifically ensuring the appropriate support of transitions between primary and secondary school, between year 11 and year 12 (or leaving school), and before leaving school at the end of year 13;
 - be strongly governed; and
 - have an enduring and demonstrable impact on outcomes.
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