

NORTH YORKSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

23 July 2008

STATEMENT OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES PORTFOLIO HOLDER (Early Years education and all school related education issues and advisory services)

COUNTY COUNCILLOR JOHN WATSON OBE

National Challenge

The National Challenge is a government initiative focused on the lowest attaining secondary schools in the country – defined as those where fewer than 30% of pupils gained 5 or more good GCSE grades including English and maths in 2007.

There are 638 schools in the country (21% of schools). Four of our secondary schools fall into this category (just under 10%):

- Risedale School
- Raincliffe School
- George Pindar School
- Harrogate High School

The 'challenge' is to ensure that these schools get more than 30% of pupils gaining 5 or more good GCSEs including English and maths by 2010. The local authority must give the necessary support to make sure this happens, including placing a 'National Challenge' adviser with the school for up to 20 days; and so called 'structural interventions' if necessary. These could include: changes to the leadership and governance of the school; replacement of the school with an academy; closure of the school; the formation of a hard federation.

We already had substantial support measures in place, and strategies to extend the support were in train for some of the schools. Those strategies include Use of Support Schools, Federations, Interim Executive Boards, in various combinations as appropriate. It is right to take a differentiated approach because the circumstances of the four schools vary, and they are at different points in their recovery programmes. Because we take pupil performance seriously, and are proactive about extending our range of school improvement strategies, we expect to meet DCSF deadlines for submitting a robust set of plans (called Raising Attainment Plans) for the schools.

Delivering the 14-19 Curriculum Reform in Rural Areas

The 14-19 agenda is underpinned by the government's determination to raise the age of participation in education or training, to 17 by 2013 and 18 by 2015.

By 2013 all 14-19 learners should be able to choose from one of 4 educational routes:- Diplomas (17 in total); Apprenticeships; GCSEs and A Levels; Foundation Learning Tier. Schools, colleges and work based learning providers must develop further partnership working in order to deliver the full curriculum range. The recently published DCSF report 'Delivering 14-19 Reforms in Rural Areas' acknowledges that this is a particularly challenging agenda for rural counties such as North Yorkshire. It offers further central government support through additional funding and partnership work with other rural counties. North Yorkshire is considering a number of innovative solutions in order to make the curriculum offer accessible to all our young people, including: enhanced e learning; mobile classrooms; skills centres and residential facilities; integrated transport solutions.

North Yorkshire's Strategic Education Plan for 11 -19 provision highlights our strategy for the roll out of the curriculum entitlement across the county. The plan addresses not only the general issues around curriculum reform, but those challenges that are specific to us in North Yorkshire.

The key element of our plan is to give strategic direction to our 6 Area Learning Partnerships (consortia). We are also supporting them with practical help with sharing of best practice, co-ordinated working and cross county groups, transport, workforce development and employer engagement.

First teaching of Diplomas in North Yorkshire begins in the Ryedale Area in September 2008, with 22 students enrolled on the Creative and Media Diploma. From September 2009 Diplomas will be delivered across all six of the 14-19 partnership areas with further growth in 2010. All of the partnerships have plans in place to meet the specific requirement to develop provision for pupils who are LDD, SEN, Gifted and Talented and Disaffected.

There is currently an action plan in place for young people who are not in education, training or employment (NEET). The county NEET strategy plan will reduce even further the low numbers in this group and specifically target those areas, such as the coastal area, where numbers are higher. This is a key county target and involves a wide range of curriculum intervention, support, coaching and mentoring programmes.

Integral to the 14-19 agenda is the requirement to ensure all learners have access to impartial and high quality Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG). A major part of the IAG requirement has been the development of a web based area wide prospectus. This will have a major impact in 2008/9 and is the result of a successful joint initiative between North Yorkshire and York.

School Meals

It has been decided to increase school meal prices from September 2008 from £1.80 to £2.00 per meal. However in view of the particular pressures on families with more than one child there will be no increase in the charge for the second or subsequent child from one family who take a meal at the same school.

The reasons for the price increase are the large increases in food prices arising at a time when we are committed to, and indeed required to, provide healthy meals meeting Minimum National Standards. The budgeted cost for food has increased by 50% since the introduction of the healthy meals initiative a couple of years ago. Labour costs are also rising with the continued impact of the very large increase in the pay rates for many catering staff together with the introduction, first time, of an incremental pay scale. During the current year the service has also lost the benefit of the YPO dividend which, in itself, was equivalent to a reduction equivalent to 5p per meal.

Even with this increase there will be an estimated deficit of the order of £500K which will have to be met from hard pressed school budgets. This is lower than previous predictions but there are significant risks relating not only to the level of take-up but also the likelihood of further cost increases.

We are continuing to make progress with refining the way in which the Primary Meals Service is offered and there are to be consultations, at Cluster level, with Primary Schools to introduce a Service Level Agreement. This is intended to emphasise that the promotion of healthy meals, including achieving national targets for the increase in take-up, is a joint responsibility between the school and the North Yorkshire Catering Service. This approach was endorsed by the helpful review by the Scrutiny Committee.

Building Schools for the Future

All Local Authorities in the second half of the BSF programme are being asked to submit a bid for re-prioritisation in the programme by October 2008. North Yorkshire falls into this category as when the programme first started in 2003 our schools were allocated to waves 10-12 and waves 13-15 of the programme (wave 13-15 being the last phase). Prioritisation was based largely on deprivation and standards.

The thinking now is to start more Local Authorities on the programme to spread the benefits more evenly across the country. We are working on our October bid which asks LAs to look at packages of up to four/five schools with a combined value of around £150M. Again there is an emphasis on deprivation and standards as a key factor.

We are working on the bid across the summer with a view to securing agreement by Members in early October. We expect to hear whether we have been successful in March 2009.

Low Bentham Community Primary School

Following agreement by the Executive after full consultation and publication of Statutory Notices were carried out, Low Bentham CP School will close at the end of the summer term. Pupil numbers had been expected to fall to four or five by September.

The catchment of Low Bentham CP will become part of the area for High Bentham CP School.

The Executive have agreed that any capital receipt received from the sale of the school site can be used to support the replacement school for the Benthams. The County Council has been seeking to replace this school since 2006 but there have been problems in securing a site.

Admissions and Appeals

The Authority seeks to maximise the proportion of pupils being allocated their school of preference. Places at Community, Voluntary Controlled, Foundation Schools and Voluntary Aided Schools are allocated according to the criteria published annually in the "Guides for Parents", one for secondary, including secondary selective schools, and one for primary school. This information is also available on line and contains details of how our admission arrangements operate, how parents can preference schools and appeal against decisions not to admit children to a school of preference.

The percentage of first preferences which the LA has been able to comply with has fluctuated marginally for both the primary (2007: 95.6%, 2006: 97.3%, 2005: 98%, 2004: 98.7%) and secondary (2007: 94.4%, 2006: 97.9%, 2005: 97.1%, 2004: 96.3%) sectors for the last four years. In the secondary sector this year this figure is expected to fall. This is because of the anticipated effect of the new allocation system of "equal preference" which was introduced in the 2007 Code of Practice for Admissions. It is understood that there has been a similar effect in most other Authorities. Final figures on the numbers of preferences satisfied will be available in the late Autumn and will be reported to the next County Council meeting.

Numbers of admission appeals have risen over the last four years, doubling between 2006 and 2007. In 2004 there were 438 appeals (Primary, Secondary and in year). The total for 2007 was 918. This year appeal numbers are expected to be maintained or be a little over 2007 levels.

The percentage of parents who are successful at appeal for primary and secondary schools has fallen within the LA in the last two years, but still exceeds the most recently published national % data available. Final figures for 2008 are not yet available, but initially seem to be similar to this pattern to date.

In May this year the Authority received the fifth referral to the Adjudicator about selection arrangements in Skipton. The Adjudicator announced his findings on 14 July. The Adjudicator's 13 page report is generally very positive about the arrangements the Council and the two Skipton Grammar Schools make. He stated that he believed "the selection arrangements for both schools, in themselves, provide fair access to educational opportunity" and that parents had access to sufficient information to be able to make informed decisions about applications. He also stated that he believed that North Yorkshire had complied with previous Adjudications. However, he partly upheld one part of the objection and requires the schools to monitor the operation of admissions arrangements, in particular assessing their intake in respect of disability, racial diversity and religious belief to gather information about equalities. This will be a requirement for all schools, not just the Grammar Schools.

County Councillor John Watson OBE
Executive Member for Education