



## CHILDREN AND LEARNING SCRUTINY PANEL

### SUMMARY OF THE PANEL'S FINAL REPORT - PRIMARY EDUCATION REVIEWS

**Purpose** - The aim of the Scrutiny investigation was to examine the process of how reviews of primary education provision are undertaken.

**Findings** - The panel heard that the number of pupils of primary school age in Middlesbrough has been falling for a number of years and this trend is forecast to continue. This led to a surplus 14% of primary school places at the beginning of 2005, with this figure forecast to increase to 25% by 2009. Long term action - including possible school closures and amalgamations - will continue to be necessary to address this issue.

Evidence was gathered via discussions with the relevant Portfolio Holder, officers from Children, Families and Learning and Regeneration and headteachers.

### CONCLUSIONS

The scrutiny panel found that, in general, the primary education review process is well managed and that strenuous efforts are made to inform and engage stakeholders and to determine their opinions. However, the panel considers that some aspects of the process could be strengthened. Its detailed conclusions in relation to the scrutiny exercise are as follows:

- a) That action is necessary to address falling pupil numbers and high levels of surplus school places to ensure that resources which are directed at pupils' teaching and learning are maximised.
- b) That the key aspect of the resultant primary review process is ensuring that information is made available to ensure that all interested parties fully understand the process and how they can participate in and influence it.
- c) That although the local authority goes beyond statutory requirements in its arrangements of making information available to interested parties, some aspects of how representations are dealt with - in terms of the two stage process - may not be clear to all involved parties. It is important to ensure that it is made clear that any decisions made in respect of primary reviews are not pre-determined and that any representations which are made are given full consideration.
- d) That the consultation process offers the opportunity for all interested parties to become involved in the process - although resultant participation levels vary.
- e) That comments received from consultation are used as the basis of determining which course of action the Council will pursue in any reorganisation.
- f) That open ended timescales, which create uncertainty for stakeholders, are an issue.

- g) That there are important links between primary education reviews and the Council's wider policies- including planning/regeneration issues. Mechanisms are in place at an officer level within the Council to bring together the differing aspects of these processes to maximise the benefits of a joint approach.
- h) That it is important to minimise disruption to pupils caused by reviews of education arrangements. Measures are already taken to ensure disruption is minimised for pupils moving between the National Key Stages 2 and 3 of education and work has begun to make similar arrangements in the case of primary education reviews.
- i) That there are important links between primary education reviews and the extended schools agenda. For example, surplus places could possibly be developed as learning facilities for local communities. Middlesbrough's strategy in this area should be made clear.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUBMISSION TO THE EXECUTIVE:**

1. That all documentation published in relation to primary education reviews is examined to ensure that:
  - a. All aspects of the process are explicit and clear.
  - b. All interested parties are aware of how they can influence the process and how representations are dealt with - particularly that representations can be made in support of proposals and not just in opposition.
  - c. Any preferred options are transparent, balanced and present a reasoned case.
  - d. It is clear to all parties, including governing bodies, that they must provide any comments in writing in order for them to be taken into account.
2. That it is ensured that participants in the review process are clearly advised that comments, views or objections made at the informal consultation stage of the process need to be re-affirmed if they are to be also considered at the formal consultation stage.
3. That timescales for reviews should be identified where possible.
4. That mechanisms continue to be developed and strengthened to maximise the benefits of inter-departmental and inter-agency working in relation to primary reviews.
5. That all schools potentially affected by a review - including those on the periphery - are kept fully informed of developments.
6. That reporting mechanisms from public meetings are reviewed to ensure that:
  - a. information from, and records of, the meetings can be easily obtained.
  - b. interested parties attending those meetings are informed that any points raised at the meeting should be put in writing to ensure that they are taken into account in the review process.
7. That a procedure - such as that which has been developed to ensure a smooth transition for pupils moving between National Key Stages 2 and 3 of education - is developed by the local authority to ensure that disruption caused to pupils by reviews of education arrangements is minimised.

8. That the extended schools agenda is actively considered and taken into account in all primary reviews and that a procedure is developed to ensure that this - and also consultation with local communities about alternative school usage - takes place.

**COUNCILLOR LINDA WILSON  
CHAIR OF CHILDREN AND LEARNING SCRUTINY PANEL**