

QUESTIONNAIRE

Question 1

What are the strengths of the current governance arrangements of Scottish education?

Comments

In responding to this issue, we note the wide variety of organisations involved in governance, but concentrate here on Local Authorities.

Local Authorities currently provide a key role in the support and challenge of schools, providing support for Head Teachers and Teachers to enable them to focus on the core job of learning and teaching, curriculum development and improving outcomes for children and young people. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Report recognised that local authorities are an important part of developing Curriculum for Excellence and in supporting the excellence and equity developments. Schools continue to improve attainment and outcomes for pupils, and benefit from the quality assurance and improvement approaches offered by Local Authorities. Head Teachers consider their central role to be leaders of teaching and learning and appreciate the support provided by officers, including wider teams in Legal, Human Resources, Information Technology and Financial Services. There is already positive engagement with parents and councils such as Aberdeenshire are keen to ensure that the views of all parents are listened to, not just those parents who are already directly engaged with education. It is worth noting high levels of parental satisfaction with the services provided. All of these are key strengths.

There is a clear line of political accountability in the current governance arrangements which parents and other stakeholders understand. Local schooling is managed through local governance and the links to national policy is evident in the present system.

Aberdeenshire's positive approach to tackling bureaucracy was recognised in the recent HMIE Report on Tackling Bureaucracy and Head Teachers appreciate the approaches to minimise unnecessary work for schools.

Question 2

What are the barriers within the current governance arrangements to achieving the vision of excellence and equity for all?

Comments

Again, we concentrate here on the Local Authority role.

The OECD identified three areas, accountability, capacity building and strategic thinking. We believe there is little evidence to support an assumption that the role of the local authority creates any barriers. In fact, there is considerable evidence in Aberdeenshire that the current governance arrangements enable the aspirations of excellence and equity to be taken forward. Aberdeenshire has taken a clear approach for delivering excellence and equity which includes working on a multi-agency basis with other services. Interventions based on data and information can benefit individual children and families, and it is important that governance arrangements do not stop the multi-agency approach to providing major services to children & families.

Accountability and capacity building are therefore built into local government. However, there is a need to align the strategic thinking at national, local and community level to ensure that there is a whole systems approach to governance, which keeps the focus on outcomes for children.

Question 3

Should the above key principles underpin our approach to reform? Are there other principles which should be applied?

Comments

We agree in general with the key principles.

Aberdeenshire shares the commitment to delivering excellence and equity, where children and young people are at the heart of improvements. We recognise the key role of individual schools and associated clusters, but also the benefits of working in an integrated, multi-agency way across services as well as other public sector and third sector organisations. There is no evidence that local authorities create barriers for schools in delivering on such principles. While most of the principles outlined should be applied, there needs to be considerable clarity on a 'transparent funding system' for schools e.g. Aberdeenshire schools vary so much in size and context that it is very difficult to see how a one funding system will be adequate. We believe schools on their own cannot deliver on the principles. However, by working with the Local Authority and with other partners schools can deliver better outcomes for children, young people and families. Through providing appropriate challenge, Local Authorities can ensure specific approaches undertaken in schools are supported by the general principles stated in the document and to comply with the aspiration of equity and excellence.

Question 4

What changes to governance arrangements are required to support decisions about children's learning and school life being taken at school level?

Comments

No changes in the law are required. What is necessary is clarity on the role of each "layer" within the system. The role of the Local Authority could be reinforced and strengthened, through increased partnership working with national agencies and other Local Authorities. Key areas for attention are supporting the national development of effective learning and teaching in a planned and strategic way, and in supporting the development of Head Teachers and teachers in the classroom and at leadership levels. Evidence would indicate that where effective support from 'the middle' is provided for professional development and leadership, schools and Head Teachers perform better. Likewise, where there are any concerns with leadership or the quality of learning and teaching in a school, the Local Authority has to respond both as an employer and as the Education Authority to provide appropriate support and interventions.

Head Teachers are already officers of the Local Authority, and take decisions at school level while also maintaining their Authority role. Local Authorities are well placed to devolve responsibilities and resources to schools whilst continuing to provide valuable support and challenge. However, there are areas where better alignment of school, cluster, Local Authority and Regional support can be improved. A particular example would be devolving responsibilities for Initial Teacher Training to Local Authorities (or regions) and the related workforce planning for teachers.

There is also a requirement to operate within national framework e.g. terms and conditions of teachers are determined by Scottish Negotiating Committee for Teachers (SNCT), class size maxima, Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010.

Question 5

What services and support should be delivered by schools? What responsibilities should be devolved to teachers and headteachers to enable this? You may wish to provide examples of decisions currently taken by teachers or headteachers and decisions which cannot currently be made at school level.

Comments

Currently, Head Teachers have direct responsibility for leading and managing each school and teachers are responsible for leading learning and teaching for their pupils. Teachers decide on how best to implement Curriculum for Excellence and benefit from extensive support materials and resources provided by Aberdeenshire officers and Head Teachers. Head Teachers are responsible for significant aspects of leadership and management including the overall implementation of Curriculum for Excellence in each school as well as decisions regarding overall approaches to learning and teaching, management of devolved resources, approaches to raising attainment, quality assurance and working with parents and partners. Head Teachers/teachers already have responsibility for self-evaluation that underpins Quality Assurance processes. The Local Authority's support in all of these areas, however, is valued by schools and school staff participate in a wide range of development activities, working groups and quality improvement activities. In the main, Head Teachers do not wish to be responsible for all financial accountability or for all aspects service delivery, rather they wish to focus on their professional skills in leading learning in schools. With an increased focus on non-learning and teaching functions, Head Teachers (and therefore teachers) could be distracted from the core approaches for delivering excellence and equity in education.

The 2012 Devolved School Management Guidelines provide an excellent basis to informing which budget should and should not be devolved. This should be the starter for any change to devolving budgets and would be important to work with school representatives (and wider school community and Local Negotiating Committee for Teachers) to ensure appropriate support is in place and learners have confidence to make decisions. There is, however, scope to look at how Head Teachers can manage their promoted post structures within individual schools while aligning to national objectives.

Head Teachers should not be required to undertake administrative tasks associated with managing budgets, but should have the ability to make decisions on how resources are utilised based on accurate and timeous information provided to them. To do this they need good systems to support such decision-making and to be challenged to ensure use of budget is aligned with the School Improvement Plan and, where appropriate, based on evidence.

Question 6

How can children, parents, communities, employers, colleges, universities and others play a stronger role in school life? What actions should be taken to support this?

Comments

Many parents currently play a strong role in our schools. They wish to have the ability to influence and have a voice. It is important that parents' views are taken into account, including those parents from more deprived or vulnerable situations. It is worth emphasising that Local Authorities make strenuous efforts to effectively engage with all families, particularly those who have not traditionally contributed to such activities. There is no evidence that parents wish to be directly in control of schools, but they do need to have clear communication with the education system when they need it. Most Authorities, including Aberdeenshire, will support schools and teachers to engage well with parents.

In Aberdeenshire, there is already very good practice in engagement with universities, North East Scotland College, community groups and other partners. Curriculum for Excellence and Developing the Young Workforce has supported such developments, as has GIRFEC in providing both strategic and local planning approaches.

Aberdeenshire would suggest enabling the Local Authority to continue to build on this would be the best approach rather than assuming that a different form of governance will make a difference to widespread parental involvement.

Question 7

How can the governance arrangements support more community-led early learning and childcare provision particularly in remote and rural areas?

Comments

The challenges in engaging with remote and rural areas are well understood. Any changes to governance may hinder local community-led engagement (if it becomes bureaucratic). Typically numbers of users accessing childcare provision are low, the unit cost higher and therefore settings are cross subsidised. The scale and complexity of possible changes should not be underestimated. It will be necessary in any proposed arrangements that communities realistically have the capacity to undertake and support locally based childcare.

As part of our strategic approach to the provision of 1140 hours of childcare, plans are in place to ensure that we respond to the needs of our remote and rural communities for flexible, accessible and affordable childcare. However, this will be expensive and will need capacity building and time.

A review of where and when learning takes place particularly, but not exclusively, for early years should be conducted. This is linked to further implications in respect of Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010.

Question 8

How can effective collaboration amongst teachers and practitioners be further encouraged and incentivised?

Comments

We believe there is already good practice across the country.

Aberdeenshire already provides opportunities to support teachers and practitioners in effective collaboration through a wide variety of professional development opportunities. Many opportunities exist in Aberdeenshire where staff in schools and across clusters are brought together to collaborate on ideas to improve learning within all classrooms across the Local Authority. In general terms, feedback from staff is positive; this should be built upon and strengthened. There would appear to be no evidence, including the content of the OECD report, that structural changes to educational governance would provide greater incentives and encouragement for teachers.

Teachers resent the implication that they need to be “incentivised”. What is needed, particularly in the North East, is more teachers and time for teachers to collaborate with each other to develop teaching skills.

Question 9

What services and support functions could be provided more effectively through clusters of schools working together with partners?

Comments

Most schools are already arranged in clusters. Again, changes to governance here would not affect that arrangement where effective practice in clusters is ably supported by officers in a variety of educational areas. Aberdeenshire’s GIRFEC arrangements in localities (which reflects the cluster arrangement) is also important in providing approaches to developing excellence and equity, and working with school clusters and existing community arrangements will reinforce the positive work already taking place around children’s services.

Question 10

What services or functions are best delivered at a regional level? This may include functions or services currently delivered at a local or a national level.

Comments

Aberdeenshire already works in an effective regional grouping. The Northern Alliance of Local Authorities has forged strong, collaborative links to support a wide range of developments where a more efficient and effective way of developing key priorities for mutual benefit has proved to be positive and continues to develop well. Areas around curriculum development for instance in literacy, professional learning of Head Teachers and central officers, a focus on workforce planning and early years development has demonstrated that Local Authorities can work in effective partnerships without changing governance arrangements. Collaboration requires a flexible and iterative approach to ensure that positive outcomes for children and young people is the priority. This will increasingly include the partnership working within the wider children’s services, social work and health. Local Authorities will continue to have accountability and a statutory responsibility and regional working supports this duty. The approach taken by authorities in the north and north east is to work together collaboratively on areas which bring about Best Value and contribute to the functions of local authorities to provide the educational function in their area. Imposing a one size fits all regional structure will not bring about collaboration and we would strongly advise that changes are developed together and are based on existing relationships where they exist.

The area for development would be those developmental functions presently sitting with Universities, Education Scotland and the SQA where regional responses to such issues as teacher shortages and development could be better tackled.

We believe that understanding the “pipeline” of the teacher workforce planning at a regional level would benefit schools and communities in the North East.

Ensuring the SQA understands the needs of schools in relation to ensuring a context for qualifications would also have merit, though this should always be nationally organised.

Question 11

What factors should be considered when establishing new educational regions?

Comments

See response to Q.10. It is important to allow Local Authorities to continue to have local democratic accountability to the communities and to provide support and resources for local authorities to enter into agreed natural collaborative partnership working. Currently, our professional working relationships in the Northern Alliance have enabled collaborative working which is having a positive impact on educational developments. We consider that these arrangements are pragmatic and conducive to effective working. We do not believe that imposing a formal regional structure will be beneficial to children and families. In Aberdeenshire, we consider that we have very effective arrangements. If there are any particular issues in other regions of Scotland, we do not believe that such an imposition will be a solution to such issues where there are already existing positive arrangements.

Question 12

What services or support functions should be delivered at a national level?

Comments

It will be important to have clear responsibilities for national qualifications, currently with the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA). Also, the role that General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS) provides is important in supporting the teaching profession and professional standards, although where possible appropriate flexibility to support workforce planning on a local level would be welcome.

It is assumed that inspection of education will remain with Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Education (HMIe).

Development work can be supported by national agencies such as Education Scotland, but there may be more benefit in regional working with Local Authorities to reinforce local priorities in a national context. For instance, Developing the Young Workforce works well on a regional basis recognising local economic and employability contexts. Getting It Right For Every Child approaches require a national direction, but again must be reflected in local community planning and locality developments to ensure that multi-disciplinary work reflects the needs of local communities.

Question 13

How should governance support teacher education and professional learning in order to build the professional capacity we need?

Comments

The current arrangements where Local Authorities can support the professional development and staff are important to reinforce. A comprehensive range of training and support is provided through a combination of Local Authority professional development programmes and strategies, as well as access to wider training and development which is delivered by national bodies and other organisations.

Whilst there is a professional benefit in having a qualification for Head Teachers, there is also the potential for some able staff to be dissuaded from becoming Head Teachers if the qualification is mandatory. In Aberdeenshire, it is already challenging to recruit quality Head Teachers and the imposition of a qualification of this nature could ironically be a deterrent.

Teacher education does not necessarily mean the brightest and best should take a management role. A system which allows our best teachers to influence at local and regional level would be ideal, but the present system of reward does not allow this to happen.

Question 14

Should the funding formula for schools be guided by the principles that it should support excellence and equity, be fair, simple, transparent, predictable and deliver value for money? Should other principles be used to inform the design of the formula?

Comments

Self- evidently the formula should be guided by these principles and it is not clear how a formula, by itself, would deliver best value.

Clearly, pupil roll will be a key factor and appropriate adjustments need to reflect deprivation, requirements of pupils with additional support needs and local circumstance. There are a number of technical issues associated with a national funding formula and how this would be implemented e.g. property costs will vary depending on size (floor area) of school, etc.

There is also a danger the approach would result in significant effort considering inputs and impact on individual authorities/schools, not least given the complexities of how services/budgets are currently provided rather than the focus for improving outcomes.

As important as the formula is, ensuring that budget and School Improvement Plans are aligned and there is appropriate development of Head Teachers (and other staff) as leaders.

These are potential benefits of having a national benchmark and holding authorities to account for their spending/formula decisions (in the same way schools can be held to account at local level). However, there are dangers associated with micro management of Local Authority function as this may have unintended consequences in the context of wider excellence and equity ambitions.

Notwithstanding this, Association of Directors of Education in Scotland Resources Network is undertaking work in this area, including benchmarking, reviewing use of toolkit which accompanied 2012 guidelines and promoting good practice. The principles of the 2012 review are still relevant particularly in respect of subsidiarity and empowerment.

Question 15

What further controls over funding should be devolved to school level?

Comments

The DSM 2012 Guidelines provide the basis for considering which budgets should be devolved, not least by applying a key principle of subsidiarity. Head Teachers and communities in each area should be actively engaged in this discussion and supported to make the right decisions i.e. they need to be assured support arrangements/management information, training, etc. is effective.

In practical terms, there is nothing to prevent most, if not all, budgets being devolved under existing arrangements. There should also be differentiation based on size of school e.g. while all staffing budgets, including supply, can be devolved in secondary schools this would not be appropriate in a small primary school, not least due to the risk associated with staff absence/vacancy management.

Question 16

How could the accountability arrangements for education be improved?

Comments

The accountability that Local Authorities have through the democratic process is important to reinforce, including scrutiny of the quality of provision by local elected members. Schools and Head Teachers currently are accountable to parents and local communities, with the support and challenge of Local Authorities providing a clear structure and quality assurance role. Head Teachers are senior officers of the Local Authority and should remain so. It would be wrong to assume that Local Authorities do not empower teachers, Head Teachers and schools; rather, the middle should be strengthened by supporting the role that Local Authorities play in creating a strategic oversight of priorities which are developed in partnership with key professionals in schools and other services.

Question 17

Is there anything else you would like to add regarding the governance of education in Scotland?

Comments

There is a danger this review is too focused on school and devolving budgets, rather than wider strategic ambition of improving outcomes for young people and communities.

Over the last ten years, the development of Children's Services structures within local authorities has resulted in a more holistic and supportive service provision to all children.

Overall, we consider that in Aberdeenshire our governance arrangements have been very effective. We would wish to retain local democratic accountability for educational provision and ensure that elected members are able to oversee the standards of education in Aberdeenshire as is currently the case.

There are a number of identifiable and significant challenges facing school-age education in Scotland ranging from the available budget to teacher recruitment difficulties. This governance review does not answer any of the most pressing problems and therefore it would not seem to be a key priority at this time.

