



DEVON COUNTY COUNCIL

Report on the Director's Conferences held in February 2004

1.0

INTRODUCTION

"High standards; high equity"

- 1.1 Director's Conferences were held in February 2004 at six venues across the County. They were for Head Teachers and Chairs of Governors, to take forward a discussion on formulating a shared 'Vision for Learning' in Devon. This vision will underpin Devon's first Single Education Plan.
- 1.2 208 people attended the conferences. A discussion paper was distributed: it can be found on www.devon.gov.uk/learning/plans_and_priorities/vision_for_learning (telephone Keith Anderson on 01392 383369 if you would like a hard copy). Colleagues were asked to identify three first principles and three practical issues. A separate report of the oral debate is also available.
- 1.3 Response forms were handed out and to date 130 have been returned (they are still coming in). Some colleagues took the response forms back to their schools and filled them in after discussion there. Others filled them in on the day, but often in collaboration with other schools. The response numbers referred to in the feedback notes therefore sometimes represent collective rather than individual views.
- 1.4 Further ideas are now coming in following Phil Norrey's meetings with Governors (these will continue until Easter).
- 1.5 Some clear indications are now emerging as to where you think the direction of travel should take us. They will be shaped into a consultation document for the summer term.
- 1.6 **It has been striking that schools have been able to stand back from their own specific context to take a wider view, some commenting that we need a shared position on what education in Devon offers, 0-19. So secondaries have lent weight to the case for intervention in early years; and early years and primary providers have urged the promotion of lifelong learning.**
- 1.7 Many responses included the need for good communication agreed, not just between the LEA and schools or across schools. When we have agreed our vision

we need to communicate it to other agencies and to parents: they must understand what we want to achieve. We must infect communities with enthusiasm and higher aspirations.

- 1.8 If you were not able to participate in any of the Conferences please do feel able to contribute at this point, either as an individual or through debate at your Governing Body. The 'principles and practice' feedback sheet can be found with the Discussion Document as indicated in 1-2 above.
- 1.9 It is striking and heartening that so many colleagues want to be part of a collective approach to achieving excellence, and to registering the achievement of every learner in Devon. Please join in the debate! it will shape our approach for the next 20 years.

2.0

DEVON'S VISION FOR LEARNERS

"This is what people in education have always believed"

- 2.1 The issue most keenly debated was how Devon should articulate its expectations for learners.
- 2.2 Many respondents commented that they were particularly attracted to one thought: that we should find what is special in each child and nurture it, so that each young person grows up confident in what he or she can do, not demotivated by what he or she has found difficult.
- 2.3 Every respondent referred in some way to the centrality of the learner (of whatever age) in the learning process.
- 2.4 Just over one third of responses expressed this in terms of our focussing on the needs of learners rather than institutions or providers. Just under a third expressed strong support for a broader curriculum with broader outcome measures and less fixation on tests and performance indicators.
- 2.5 The highest aggregate covered a range of aspirations for well-rounded young people which covered
- independent learners who have developed learning skills, rather than knowledge;
 - learners who want to learn throughout life;
 - young people who enjoy learning, and are therefore well-motivated to continue (these three related areas were mentioned in about one third of all replies);
 - young people confident in their own judgements and able to withstand peer pressure;
 - young people with good social and relationship skills;
 - young people with good communication skills;
 - young people who are good citizens, respecting the rights and need of others, able to manage their own lives, and participating in democracy.
- 2.6 These areas of response, as you would expect, overlapped. Although mostly spanning the age range from 0 to 19 several respondents also noted that they want to encourage participation in adult learning
- because it has its own intrinsic value for the individual;
 - because it contributes to vibrant communities;
 - because it establishes good role models and in turn promotes interest in learning in children.
- 2.7 **Responses told us that key to Devon's vision for learners should be establishing high expectations. About 50% of those responding**

mentioned it specifically as a first principle, making it the highest single factor people agreed on.

Some specific points were

- we should talk of expectations for individual learners (rather than 'all learners');
- expectations are not necessarily academic;
- expectations must be realistic;
- we must also extend the gifted and talented learner;
- we should all focus on potential not test scores;
- we want 'a Devon of high aspiration'.

3.0

INNOVATION

"we all need to be passionate about creating learning environments"

3.1 106 responses included comments relating to the role of teachers, and in particular the part an LEA could play in promoting innovative and creative practice. These fall into four broad areas:

- partnering schools in support for new teachers;
- promoting sharing of best practice;
- supporting schools in drawing on the experience of long-serving teachers but also helping them to reinvigorate their practice;
- influencing teacher training.

3.2 About a third of respondents made innovation a key point in their returns, asking that Devon LEA should

- 'be a catalyst for change';
- 'encourage others to take risks'
- and 'learn through experimentation even if it fails';
- 'stimulate new approaches to the curriculum'.

There has been comment that much of the innovation of the 70s and 80s has now been lost, and Devon could be a field leader in recapturing the creative spirit.

3.3 **A high level of commitment to continuing professional development is envisaged, and there are many further references to innovation in this context, including requests for a 'skills base', time out (exchanges, sabbaticals, secondments or just time for reflection), promotion of 'skills networking' and opportunities to discuss and celebrate success (over a third of responses covered these areas).**

3.3 Some specific comments were

- 'spend your money on the sharing of good practice and innovation';
- 'learn to do things differently in order to do them better';
- ensure access to training needs for all;
- practitioners should be given time to reflect on their work.

Responses suggested that good in-service training for teachers should encourage creative thinking, show them new educational techniques and allow them to keep up with the pace of change.

- 3.5 Responders also urged us to ensure the Vision makes specific reference to the central role of teachers. Their professionalism and commitment (especially with the most challenged and challenging learners) should be recognised and their voices heard. Several asked for teachers to be included in the debate. The LEA and school managers and governors should all be aiming to inspire teachers to the highest professional attainment, and finding a balance between support for the new and respect for the long-serving.
- 3.6 Comments on Workforce Remodelling were divided between those who saw it as a good opportunity for releasing teachers to teach, and those who are concerned as to how it will be achieved within the budget identified.
- 3.7 The emerging view appears to be that if Devon gets its vision in place, and is able to convert it to practice, it will be a place where teachers want to teach. However, it should also be noted that in the wider demographic context several schools have highlighted the need for low-cost housing in their areas.

4.0

EARLY YEARS AND FAMILIES

"the sooner we get to them the better"

- 4.1 70% of responses highlighted the need for investment in the earliest stages of a child's life, and in the benefits of involving parents/carers and the extended family. There was a considerable overlap in these, and also with the way agencies could work together: this is reported in the next section.
- 4.2 **All comments about parental interest, involvement and responsibilities do not, of course, refer solely to primary children or indeed pre-school. However, the thrust of responses was to very early intervention, from birth or even pre-natal.**
- 4.3 The 67 responses which indicated the high priority they gave to parents as first educators also suggested that this prioritising was rooted in their concerns: 28 felt that the involvement of parents needed to be fostered as they are often not aware of how important they are in a child's development. 7 responses specifically expressed concern for parents' own low aspirations, which locked children into a cycle of deprivation; and 15 advocated work with prospective parents or those with new babies.
- 4.4 52 responses set a high value on universal good quality early years provision, but there is a divide in opinion over how far we have achieved this. 37 set out their proposals for extending what we have (e.g. encouraging families on site, setting high expectations); 10 comment on a current patchwork of provision and some fragmentation in transition; 5 call for an overhaul of Devon's approach to the Foundation Stage. Several expressed concern at some children starting 'formal' schooling too early and invited us to learn from Europe.

5.0

WORK WITH OTHER AGENCIES

"Education can't do it alone"

- 5.1 There was a high level of recognition that if providers are serious about putting the needs of children and young people before the needs of institutions, this includes other agencies. About a third of the responses explored issues arising from this.
- 5.2 There is a balance of references to agencies (such as Police, Probation, Connexions) associated more with the adolescent; to those agencies relating to early intervention in early years; and to those which could be either (e.g. schools as focal points for multi-agency approaches).
- 5.3 The highest priority put forward was that there should be a multi-agency approach, with particular references to Joint Agency Teams and how they might serve the needs of vulnerable children. 14 respondents thought that schools should be at the centre of such collaborative efforts, with 4 proposing collaborative work organised over more than one school, and one admitting to what many may feel: being supportive but 'nervous'.
- 5.4 Specific comments included
- the approach across agencies must be strategic;
 - we also need to share knowledge and expertise;
 - other agencies need to see the learner as central too;
 - there will be training needs;
 - Social Services based within schools or groups of schools would be good;
 - Government Departments must learn to work together too.

6.0

COLLABORATIVE FRAMEWORKS

"the will to work in collaborative arrangements is there"

- 6.1 93 issues were raised concerning the need for schools to work collaboratively, in addition to specific points made with reference to small schools and multi-agency work.
- 6.2 **There seems to be an overall consensus that Academic Councils (preferably under a different name) are a huge asset to Devon and their role and responsibilities could be extended. This was the single largest response on collaboration across schools.**
- 6.3 Main points on value of ACs:
- there is potential for ACs to make best use of resources by
 - sharing specialist teachers;
 - pooling administrative and support staff;
 - appointing joint business managers or bursars;
 - benefiting from outreach from secondary and special schools.
 - a community of schools could be powerful in
 - publishing achievement across a wider area, so taking the heat off individual schools in particularly challenging circumstances;
 - (a related point) taking collective responsibility for the achievement of all local learners;
 - sharing and supporting good practice; including sharing of what has been tried and failed;
 - supporting transition (the original role of ACs);
 - piloting innovative practice;
 - acting as a 'brokering' agent between schools.
- 6.4 Some cautionary comments were included
- the LEA will need to take ACs seriously (and there are funding issues);

- heads will need time to participate;
- primaries want to be equal partners (not feel "done to");
- they mustn't be "forums for moaning";
- they will need to put behind them a competitive era: need to support each other and agree that ideally local schools are for local children;
- they will need the confidence to innovate;
- some ACs are currently stronger than others.

6.5 Other collaborative approaches were also highlighted as desirable

- need to work with other schools
 - grouped by interest (e.g. special schools);
 - grouped by size (e.g. small schools, or small primaries with a larger primary);
 - successful schools as mentors/models;
 - using outreach from specialist colleges;
 - need to work with 'like-minded colleagues from other ACs.
- strong links must be made to develop young people's skills base
 - stronger 14-19 links with FE;
 - LSC;
 - Employers and industry.
- much stronger HE links needed
 - research programmes ;
 - influence on initial teacher training;
 - links to continuing professional development.
- links with special schools important
 - look at clusters;
 - look at where integrated campus developments possible.
- exploit technology
 - websites for sharing best practice;
 - develop e-learning.
- need to work with other professionals (these points are picked up under "multi-agency").
- harness the support of the voluntary sector
 - links to parental support;
 - promotes community liaison;
 - governors are volunteers too.

7.0

SMALL SCHOOLS

"we need a clear directive on the role of the small village school"

7.1 51 points were made concerning small schools.

7.2 The majority view from these returns is that Devon should stiffen its sinews in addressing the difficulties:

- that small schools see themselves:
 - small funding fluctuations can have dire effects;
 - they can have key roles in local communities, being key agents, and with the potential to develop this role (13 responses);
 - under-resourcing affects premises and facilities;
 - benchmarking is a difficulty in small year groups.
- that a number of schools (of all sizes) see as a current issue or a time-bomb:
 - if small schools issue not resolved innovations could 'implode';
 - their high (political?) visibility detracts from urban schools 'dealing with the bottom 40%';
 - heads will find it difficult to find time to implement any 'vision' (although the support articulated from small schools is very strong);
 - long-serving staff need specific development opportunities.

7.3 There is strong feedback on the need to stop procrastinating and to publish a clear policy and strategy. The language anticipates challenging outcomes:

- 'bite the bullet'; 'grasp the nettle';
- the 'LEA must take the tough decisions';
- 'merge or close'.

7.4 The potential opportunities offered through federation received very positive support in all but one response, which said that federation which results in one non-

teaching head would not be a good way forward. Other points (amongst 24 which suggest that federation should be explored) include:

- 'federation should be made attractive';
- we need 'more direction' on federation;
- groups of schools may be the funding solution;
- 'the option of federation to keep the small school in the community was well received by the small school leaders in this group';
- 'an exciting possibility'.

8.0

THE ROLE OF THE LEA

"vision goes hand in hand with leadership"

8.1 Much of what you think about the part your LEA can play is embedded in the previous sections and has been included in those responses.

8.2 Many responders are looking for leadership:

- the quality of leadership is key;
- the LEA should be explicit in defining, and supporting what is needed;
- be proactive in leadership;
- lead on wider indicators of success;
- promote flexibility;
- provide clarity;
- give clear messages;
- give leadership on the difficult issues.

8.3 Others ask us to 'value achievements', to 'be brave', to 'hold faith with the vision'.

8.4 A significant number would like us to know our schools better, seeking more frequent contact. Comments include

- 'one visit a year is not enough';
- 'a named contact for each Academic Council' would be good;
- don't just talk to us about SATs.

8.5 And reasonably enough, having talked the talk, to walk the walk.