

MEETING	SCHOOLS FINANCE FORUM
DATE	26 February 2015
TITLE	Cognition and Learning Service
PURPOSE	Report on the consultation process
RECOMMENDATION	Approve the reversal of delegation
AUTHOR	Arwyn Thomas, Head of Education
CABINET MEMBER FOR EDUCATION	Councillor Gareth Thomas

Background

The Council is conducting a Strategic Review of Additional Learning Needs (ALN), as well as preparing for legislative changes in the near future. In order to plan and prepare for this during 2015/16, the Education Department is submitting to this meeting of the Schools' Budget Forum our intention as an Authority not to devolve 'Cognition and Learning Service' finance to our schools from April 2015.

Rationale

During 2015/16, it is intended to review the Service while continuing to support schools, but without the bureaucracy attached to the current SLA.

The current arrangement:

- The Cognition and Learning Team was established following the restructuring of the service to support schools in the cognition and learning field.
- The budget has been devolved to primary schools and the Authority offers the provision to every school through the Service Level Agreement (SLA).
- In the last two years, a number of schools have opted not to purchase this service through the SLA and provide the service themselves – for a number of reasons.

The case for change:

- The new ALN strategy together with new legislative requirements places specific responsibilities on the local authority to monitor and review the service and provision in greater detail.
- The ALN review was an opportunity to review the entire provision in order to ensure the outcome "That children with ALN receive a service of quality from multi-agency and integrated teams across Gwynedd, who share information, plan collaboratively, and provide parents with clear advice and information".
- To fulfil this, it is necessary to:

- Simplify the method of presenting the service
- Ensure consistency, quality and provision across the county
- Collaborate better with the various agencies
- Realise the potential of special schools

Consultation

A consultation was held on this proposal, with an invitation for schools to submit comments on the intention by the end of the day, Wednesday, 11 February 2015.

One relevant comment was received:

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the consultation on the Gwynedd Cognition and Learning Service provision. As the Head Teacher of one of the schools that chose not to commit to the Cognition and Learning SLA in April 2014, I am very concerned at the proposal to take this choice away from us as schools.

Without elaborating too much, the basis for the school Governing Body's original decision not to sign can be summarised into two considerations:

(1) No service was received for a period during the 2013/14 financial year, and none at all from 1/4/14. With the school's draft budget arriving at the beginning of June 2014 and not having received any 'Cognition and Learning' provision from 1/4/14 (regardless of the reasons for this), it would have been irresponsible of the Governing Body to sign the SLA.

(2) The Quality of Provision – During the brief time that we received the service, I felt that the school could provide a higher quality of the same service internally. Following a discussion with the Governing Body, this principle was agreed and especially when (1) was taken into consideration.

To respond specifically to the case for change in your letter -

- The new ALN strategy together with new legislative requirements places specific responsibilities on the local authority to monitor and review the service and provision in greater detail.

This is not a case for change. Every Head Teacher accepts that the LEA needs to monitor in detail – this has already taken place in relation to the Cognition and Learning Service. The informal comments provided by the officer who visited us here were extremely positive. There was an acknowledgement (again informal) that the school provided the service to a good standard, but more than this, was able to use its knowledge of children and families and its close working relationship with other members of staff to extend the provision further and to ensure better value for money.

- The ALN review was an opportunity to review the entire provision in order to ensure the outcome "That children with ALN receive a service of quality from multi-agency and integrated teams across Gwynedd, who share information, plan collaboratively, and provide parents with clear advice and information".

Again, it is difficult for me to accept that this is a case for change. Instead, here is a perfect opportunity to upskill schools' frontline staff.

- To fulfil this, it is necessary to:
 - Simplify the method of presenting the service

Surely the simplest service possible would be to delegate the responsibility to schools and for the LEA Officer to monitor the quality.

- Ensure consistency, quality and provision across the county
- Collaborate better with the various agencies
- Realise the potential of special schools

Again, I feel that there is nothing here that could not be better provided by upskilling members of our schools' internal staff. The culture of school-to-school working has started to take root, and in accordance with this new culture, it would be very straightforward to include aspects of 'Cognition and Learning'.

In addition, I feel that the main case for change has not been included, namely the financial savings that face the LEA and Council. With schools having planned their internal Cognition and Learning provision carefully including staff contracts and investment in training and resources, retracting the service to the centre would be an additional financial cut. Here at the school, it will lead to cutting back part of a teacher's job. It would be more frustrating still to have to accept that the job cut and central provision would lead to a service of a reduced quality. This, of course, is not in any way the fault of any Cognition and Learning teacher – it would be totally impossible for any individual travelling from one school to the next from day to day to ensure as good an acquaintance with children and families and to develop as effective a working relationship with members of our workforce. This is one of the main principles of the Assembly's current direction – i.e. the principle that allocating an increasing percentage of the education settlement to schools is the most productive and expected approach – without a doubt, the implications of withdrawing this money from the funds of schools similar to ours would go against the nature of these principles, and the side-effect of having a reduced quality of provision would be a perfect reflection of the basis for the principle.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to contribute to the consultation. I look forward to receiving your comments.

Conclusions/resolution

On the basis of the fact that one comment (opposing the plan) was received, the Education Department is not of the opinion that there is a need to deviate from the original intention. As a consequence, the Education Department will continue with the intention not to devolve 'Cognition and Learning Service' finance to our schools from April 2015.