

Committee	MAYOR AND CABINET	Item no	7
Title	Response to Review of the Schools Forum and Dedicated Schools Grant by the Public Accounts Committee		
Wards	All wards		
Contributors	Executive Director for Children and Young People		
Class	Part 1	Date	14 April 2010

Summary

1.1 The Public Accounts Committee produced a report following their review of the Schools Forum and Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG). The report was received by Mayor and Cabinet on 20th January 2010. The Mayor requested the Executive Director respond to the recommendations in the report.

1.2 Each recommendation is reproduced below in paragraphs 5.1 to 5.13 with officer responses following each.

2. Purpose

2.1 This report provides a response to the matters arising from the Public Accounts Committee.

3. Recommendation

The Mayor is recommended to

3.1 Agree the responses to the recommendations set out in paragraphs below and that they be sent to the Public Accounts Committee .

4. Policy Context

4.1 Schools Forums were established by the Schools Forums (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2008 and 2005 and the Schools Forums (England) Regulations 2002. The Forum is made up of representatives from Schools, Early Years Settings and the 14 -19 consortium. The Forum has a consultative and advisory role in school funding and financial matters. It does not hold a budget. The Forum must be consulted and agree if the proposed percentage increase to the centrally managed share of the Designated Schools Grant (DSG) is greater than the overall DSG settlement. If the Forum does not agree, the Authority can appeal to the DCSF.

4.2 The Public Accounts Committee decided to undertake this review because it was interested in how the Schools Forum, which is responsible for the allocation of Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG), was held accountable. In 2008/09 Lewisham was allocated £172.4m in DSG and the Schools Forum was responsible for allocating £145.4m of this funding to schools and agreeing what the remaining £27m of centrally managed expenditure would be spent on. The Committee was aware that, although it received information on the DSG via its regular budget monitoring work, the decisions made by the Schools Forum received no regular scrutiny from either the Public Accounts or the Children and Young People Select Committee; and Members were, generally, poorly informed about how the Forum operates. The Committee therefore felt it should investigate how greater transparency and accountability could be achieved; and value for money ensured.

5. Response to recommendations

The Public Accounts Committee made the following recommendations designed to increase transparency, accountability and value for money in respect of the Schools Forum and DSG:

5.1. Recommendation: More information on the Schools Forum, its role, current work and the work of its sub-groups should be included in the Governors termly information pack.

Response: It is accepted that further work should be done to ensure the work of the Forum is communicated effectively in the termly information pack to governors. The pack has always contained some details of the work of the Forum particularly when significant alterations were being made to the funding arrangements for schools. The provision of information has been strengthened in the Spring newsletter and more detailed reports provided. Officers will ensure that this practice continues.

5.2 Recommendation: The Governors' termly information pack should list all sub-groups currently operating on which there are Governor nominees, together with details of how to contact those groups.

Response: It is accepted that this would be a helpful action and the sub-group list will be included in the information pack.

5.3. Recommendation: Minutes of the Schools Forum should be published on the Lewisham website and on each school's internal website; and provided to Governors by email or post. (Any confidential matters can be recorded in separate confidential minutes if required).

Response: The minutes are currently published on the intranet which limits access purely to schools rather than Governors and the general public. It would also seem appropriate to publish the reports at the same time, which will provide context to the minutes. If the documents were published on the Borough's public website the duplication of effort and cost for schools of publishing then on their own website would not necessarily be proportional to

the benefits. It would be possible for schools to provide a link to the Council's website. Due to the numbers of governors it would seem more appropriate to send to Governors a copy on a request basis only, rather than as standard practice. The link to the reports and minutes can be included in the Governors termly information pack and also will continue to be included in the relevant school mailing to Headteachers.

- 5.4. **Recommendation:** The Forum's annual work programme should be sent to all Headteachers and Chairs of Governors in the borough at the start of each academic year, requesting input and inviting suggestions.

Response: The work programme can be sent out. However to ensure that suggestions are consistent with the responsibilities of the Forum the contents can be discussed at the relevant consultative groups together with the Governors Management Committee rather than requesting input and suggestions from all governors.

- 5.5. **Recommendation:** A standing item on feedback from the Schools Forum should appear on every agenda of the Governors Management Committee.

Response: Agreed.

- 5.6. **Recommendation:** Each Governing Body should be advised to have a standing item on the Schools Forum at each meeting.

Response: It is up to each governing body to decide on their own agenda. The work of the Forum could overlap and take away attention from the main purpose of the governing body of raising standards in schools. Given the increased communications through the Governing Management Committee, termly information pack and the distribution of the annual work programme, this would seem sufficient. However where the Schools Forum is considering issues with a potential impact on all Governing Bodies they could be advised to include the item on the agenda of the appropriate meeting of the Governing Body.

- 5.7. **Recommendation:** Headteachers should be reminded of their responsibility to keep their governors informed about the work and role of the Schools Forum.

Response: Agreed

- 5.8 **Recommendation:** The Schools Forum terms of reference should be expanded to include mention of accountability (e.g. To ensure that all Members of the Forum provide adequate feedback to their constituents in order that all Headteachers and Governors in the borough are well-informed about the Forum's role and work).

Response: This will be taken to Forum in the Summer Term.

- 5.9. **Recommendation:** Further consideration should be given to the level and intensity of finance training for governors, to enable them to fulfil their role in the stewardship of public funds and in ensuring value for money, in view of the limited assurance levels awarded to schools by internal audit.

Response: The assurance levels for audits in 2009/10 has significantly improved over the previous year. A round of Governors' training took place on 24 February and consideration is already being given to the content of future programmes so that they are more challenging for Governors and will in particular look at the Value for Money agenda.

5. 10. **Recommendation:** Consideration should be given to expanding the role of Governing Body Clerk to incorporate a research and analysis element, in order to enhance the support available for Governors to enable them to better carry out their 'critical friend' role.

Response: The role of the clerk is based on clerking the meeting and the pay levels set reflect this task under the Job Evaluation Scheme currently being adopted . Hence any extra responsibilities may result in a revaluation of the posts and extra costs being borne by schools. It would seem that with enhanced information being provided in the newsletter, better publication of reports and minutes, Headteacher feedback and challenging training this need will be met anyway. Any decision on expanding the clerking service a Governing Body receives is a matter for that Governing Body.

5. 11. **Recommendation:** Members of the Public Accounts and Children and Young People Select Committee should be kept updated on (a) the action being taken to address the limited assurance reports on schools in the borough; and (b) the findings of the Audit Panel once they have reviewed this issue.

Response: The findings are already presented to the Audit Panel and the Public Accounts Committee, so there is already close scrutiny. When a school receives an audit report with "Limited Assurance" the Audit Panel challenges officers on the progress being made and support being offered to the school to ensure that they reach a standard whereby it is possible to issue a report showing "Substantial Assurance". Those schools receiving "Limited Assurance have been reduced and of the audits in 2009/10 that are complete 13 out of 16 are at Adequate or Substantial Assurance.

- 5.12. **Recommendation:** The Children and Young People Select Committee should receive a six monthly information report on the activities of the Schools Forum.

Response: It is for the Children and Young People Select Committee to decide on their annual work programme. Where there are significant issues or proposed policy changes, officers will always alert the chair of the committee so she / he can consider the matter. The annual work programme of the School Forum will be shown to the Chair of the select Committee so that reports can be asked for on any matter or on the work of the Forum overall.

5.13. **Recommendation:** The financial reporting information on the DSG provided to the Public Accounts Select Committee should be expanded to allow better scrutiny.

Response: The reports can be expanded to show the current financial situation of the Dedicated Schools Grant and the likely outturn position of the central services met from the grant.

6. Conclusion

The recommendations in the Public Accounts Report around improving the communication links between the Forum, Individual Schools and Governors are welcome and will aid openness and transparency. However there does need to be a balance between timely and relevant information and the overload of information. This is particular true for Governors who willingly give up their valuable free time to volunteer to help and challenge schools.