

# ***Report to the Council***

**Subject: Leader's Portfolio**

**Date: 25 September 2008**

**Portfolio Holder: Councillor Diana Collins**

**Item: 7(a)**

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**Recommending:**

**That the report of the Leader be noted.**

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## **Secondary School Education**

In response to concerns raised last year regarding the average level of educational attainment at GCSE level, in comparison to other authorities results across the County, I met with the Cabinet Member for Schools, Children and Families at Essex County Council, the Epping Forest Secondary School Heads and the then Principal of Epping Forest College.

As part of the ongoing dialogue that has developed from this initial meeting, I was pleased to accept an invitation to visit all of our Secondary Schools in order to gain a greater level of understanding as to the particular issues that each school faces and hear of their future plans. I was accompanied on the visits by the Deputy Leader of Council and the Deputy Chief Executive.

### **(a) St John's Church of England School**

Our first visit was on the 16 June 2008 to St John's Church of England School in Epping, where we met with the Headteacher, Mr George Yerosimou. Reflecting the Christian Foundation of the school, we learned the ethos of the school is to try and develop the whole person by encouraging social responsibility and by providing a foundation from which students could grow morally, socially, spiritually, academically and culturally.

At the time of our visit the school had some 777 students enrolled. In 2006 the school had achieved Specialist Engineering College Status, and as such has been developing a number of engineering related initiatives, with the profession being reflected in many parts of the curriculum offered.

After a difficult period including a spell in special measures, Ofsted reported in June 2006 that the school had achieved 'good' status. This was because of the progress made by students in both Key Stages and improvements in teaching and the high quality of leadership. Despite this endorsement, the Headteacher felt that there was still progress to be made in gaining confidence amongst local parents and overcoming some negative perceptions of the quality of education offered by the school.

We spoke about progress towards the development of the new school since the project gained consent from the Secretary of State and outline planning consent. We were advised that a local company Higgins Construction PLC had been appointed the preferred contractor, and it was still hoped that the target of September 2010 for the opening of the new school was achievable, although the detailed planning application was yet to be submitted. We discussed the availability of Sixth Form options for St John's students and were advised that many students tended to look to schools/colleges outside of the District. The fact that so many young people living in Epping had elected not to study at St John's, but to travel outside Epping was recognised as a significant issue, which the school was trying to address through improvement and liaison with local parents and primary schools.

### **(b) King Harold School**

From St. John's we travelled on to King Harold School in Waltham Abbey, where we met with the Headteacher, Mr Mike Feehan.

To start our visit we were shown around the school, taking the opportunity to talk to teachers and pupils in food technology, art and design technology. We were impressed by the enthusiasm and standard of the work we saw.

We learned that the school had very much a community ethos, with a day nursery and crèche on site as well as a business centre used by local companies for training purposes. The school had approximately 770 pupils on its roll, who live almost exclusively in Waltham Abbey. Whilst parental involvement is actively encouraged and regular feedback is given, the school have identified a problem with regard to raising the aspirations of some pupils, which can restrict the achievement of their full potential.

The school buildings themselves are dated and difficult to maintain due to their design and construction. Similarly, the layout does not lend itself well to efficient management and supervision. As such, the school have submitted a bid to the "Building Schools for the Future" programme which if successful would lead to wholesale redevelopment and re-provision of much of the school, to deliver modern facilities more fit for purpose. Despite the limitations of the building we could see that Information and Communications Technology resources are well provided with the use of electronic white board, computers etc. Pupils can also access their work from their home computers. Again we heard how many of the students travel to Ware or Harlow College for Further Education Opportunities.

### **(c) Debden Park High School**

On the 23 June we visited Debden Park High School where we met with the Headteacher, Mr Chris Cavanagh and the Chairman of Governors. We were greeted by the Headboy and Headgirl who accompanied us on a tour of the school. They explained what it was like to be a student and the opportunities available to take part in the range of activities the school offered.

We were informed that the school is a Specialist Performing Arts College which occupies new purpose-built accommodation provided as part of the Private Finance Initiative. Although in the first year of operation in 2004, the school's results were slightly above the national average, in January 2007 the school failed its Ofsted Inspection and was placed in Special Measures. As a result, the Education Authority appointed the Principal of Kennel Technology College in Bromley, Kent to support the school's recovery. A new behaviour policy was implemented, attendance improved

and new monitoring and evaluation procedures were put in place. The Headteacher explained how staff are now able to solely focus on teaching and learning and how pupils are now very aware of their individual progress in subjects. We saw how this was done by the use of progress reports displayed on notice boards distributed around the school. This was improving motivation and performance.

At the time of our visit, the school had been listed as one of the 300 schools in the Country facing potential closure if it did not improve its exam results. However, it was explained that the improvement plan was already in place and that they were optimistic about the 2008 GCSE results. This optimism has subsequently been confirmed as the school have seen a major improvement this year. The school are seeking to join with Kemnel College under a Trust Status initiative. This will secure their ongoing support. The school has aspirations to provide its own Sixth Form in future despite the proximity of Epping Forest College.

#### **(d) Davenent Foundation School**

The Deputy Leader and I visited Davenant Foundation School in Loughton on the 23 June, where we had an appointment with the Headteacher, Mr Chris Seward. We learned about the origins of the school which was originally located in Whitechapel, London. The school has a strong Christian ethos and the admission policy gives priority to children of parents committed to the Christian or Jewish Faith determined by attendance at a place of worship. As such, the school draws pupils from outside of its immediate catchment.

The school had some 1160 students enrolled and has achieved Specialist Sports and Language College Status and is also a Training School. The specialist college status afforded to the school requires them to engage actively with their local community and the local primary schools. The school achieves high attainment levels at GCSE and has been ranked amongst the top 150 Secondary Schools in the Country. The school has a Sixth Form. We explored the possibility of the school offering teacher training opportunities in Maths and English to other schools in the District to increase attainment in these two core subjects.

#### **(e) Roding Valley High School**

On the 7 July we visited Roding Valley High School in Loughton and met with the Headteacher Mr Geoff Mangan. Roding Valley is one of the largest schools in the District with some 1233 pupils located on a large split site. We had the opportunity to tour the school with Mr Mangan and spoke with pupils and teachers. The visit was at lunchtime and on visiting the school dining hall, were pleased to see the high numbers of students enjoying a healthy lunch. We also visited the special facility where pupils who are having difficulty coping with the demands of school life have individual or small group support provided. Despite the age of the majority of the school buildings, the Headteacher was enthusiastic about the traditional teaching environment.

The Headteacher expanded upon some of the difficulties in recruiting suitably experienced and qualified staff, particularly given the school's proximity to the London Boroughs, who were able to offer higher levels of remuneration. However, overall the Headteacher was pleased with the improvements being made by pupils and it was clear that the individual welfare of pupils was paramount in the ethos of the school. Links with parents and feeder primary schools was also considered to be good. Again, the school did not have a Sixth Form and whilst there was some joint working with Epping Forest College, the feeling was that this could be improved further.

## **(f) West Hatch High School**

After our visit to Roding Valley we moved on to the West Hatch High School in Chigwell. We were greeted by the Headboy and Headgirl and introduced to the Headteacher, Mrs Frances Howarth. We spent some time alone with the head pupils who told us of their experience of the school and their future aspirations. The Headboy is in fact one of the District Youth Council Members.

Again West Hatch is one of the largest schools in the District with a roll of nearly 1600 including its Sixth Form. The school's admission policy gives priority to pupils living within a geographical catchment which, extends into the London Boroughs of Redbridge and Waltham Forest.

Whilst the Headteacher accepted that this has been a source of contention with District residents, she advised that the Governing Body were keen for all pupils to live within a reasonable walking distance from the school.

The school has Business and Enterprise School Status and was also awarded a second specialist status in Humanities in 2006.

We were advised that the staff have high expectations of pupils and that standards are set high. The school motto is "The Best that I can be". Pupils at the school are encouraged to participate in the wide range of extra-curriculum activities on offer and the school has a strong reputation for sport.

## **(g) In Conclusion**

The visits to the five Secondary Schools were very informative and the level of commitment to provide the best opportunities possible for our young people was very evident. However, there are considerable challenges for our schools. We asked how the District Council could assist, although accepting that we are not the Education Authority and have no statutory responsibility for Education.

1. Teaching Staff Recruitment and Retention is difficult given our proximity to London. Whilst there appeared not to be a demand for Key Worker Housing, (teachers wished to get on the housing ladder, where possible) there may be a requirement for temporary accommodation until new teachers to the area, get settled.
2. Schools are always looking for vocational training opportunities and would welcome the District Council's further involvement in offering work experience either directly or through businesses we come in contact with, in our economic development role.
3. The issue of Sixth Form provision in the District is of concern to all schools and given the significant new investment at Epping Forest College, it is clearly desirable that the College becomes the one of first choice for school leavers in Epping Forest. I am due to meet the new Principal of the College prior to Full Council and will be able to give an update. In addition the new Principal is due to give a presentation of his vision for the College at Overview and Scrutiny in December 2008.
4. Generally all the schools would welcome ongoing dialogue on perhaps a twice-annual basis to discuss issues of mutual concern.