

LANGUAGE LEARNING TASK AND FINISH REVIEW GROUP

6th November, 2009

PRESENT – Councillor Hughes (in the Chair); and Councillor Long, Mr. K. Roberts, Advanced Skills Teacher, Northwood Primary School, Ms. G. Wade, Advanced Skills Teacher, Education Village, Mr. P. Howarth, Head teacher, Hummersknott School and Language College, Ms. D. Wells, Language College Director and Ms. M. Vallet, Subject Leader for MFL.

APOLOGIES – Councillor Richmond, Ms. H. Long and Ms. V. Stewart.

OFFICERS – Rob Thompson, Lead Officer Transition and Transformations and Karen Graves, Democratic Support Officer.

The Chair welcomed and introduced everyone to the meeting, gave an outline of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee, its Members and remit. She also advised that the main focus of this meeting was to discover the level and areas of need in regard to language learning as this was a priority for children, parents and the community as a whole.

With this in mind, the following points were discussed and considered :-

- Rob Thompson referred to issues regarding the transition of Y6 to Y7 pupils and advised the Group that the Consultancy Team was no longer operating within the Local Authority and that the Team would reduce further. Views were sought on population changes and also primary to secondary transition.
- It was stated that schools were now paying for a consultancy service from their own budget and there was a need to undertake capacity building and not just teaching of languages. It was stated that the younger the child the better the chance of learning a language however it was recognised that transition from Y6 to Y7 was crucial.
- Mr. Howarth advised the Group that there was a great spread of ability amongst pupils in Y7 and it was important to know that a variety of skills were required for languages i.e. writing, speaking, and listening. Hummersknott offered a rotation of languages although parents were not always happy with this approach and it was difficult to get the correct balance.
- The Group were advised that all Secondary School language teachers had been to primary schools to ascertain the level of languages taught, there was no budget this year but there was a need to get children to the same point in languages, however, primary teachers were unwilling to teach languages in greater depth. Some Y7 students had excellent language skills whilst others had non – There was a need to undertake an assessment of pupils to determine individual level of languages so that Secondary Teachers knew what to expect in terms of language knowledge of new students. Language teachers also found the pronunciation of languages very poor which could be frustrating – Hummersknott language teachers suggested they needed a measure of what training had been given and offered to train primary teachers.

- The Chair queried funding options available and made reference to funding availability through Brian Stobie of the European Union, based at Durham County Council. Ken Roberts advised the Group that he was liaising with schools in Poland, France and Spain to ensure languages were taught correctly and that he was aware of the funding opportunities through the European Union.
- Councillor Long asked if there were opportunities to draw on people within the community who were unable to work but could speak another language, foreign speaking parents do not want their children to only read the English language and they do not want to lose their native written or oral skills.
- Mr. Howarth stated that teachers still need to do training in schools to be able to teach and that Hummersknott would support this – It was possible to do via a Teaching Training Programme. Primary pupils needed support and a network of primary schools for teacher training was needed. The skills and expertise were available but there were limited resources, however Mr. Howarth was willing to investigate further.
- Members advised the Group that there was a regional support group for teachers of language and the primary curriculum was currently under review and English was now to become part of other languages.
- The importance of languages skills needed to be conveyed to pupils/students as it helps to gain employment, it was felt it should be a compulsory subject although there was a shortage of language teachers. It was felt that it Level 2 languages were required in order to gain a University place there would be more demand. Reference was also made to the Leonardo Programme which funded a variety of projects and offered a range of different opportunities to organisations in the UK to get involved in European Working.
- The Group were advised that as languages were now optional community language was not being taught, it was always European languages, there a need to promote other community languages. There was a request for the Group to be made aware of the Queen Elizabeth statistics on language knowledge of students to determine the scope of the problem
- Mr. Howarth stated that Mandarin was offered but the Chinese found it too easy as it was simplified for the English students which brought about the question ‘Where is the progression route for students wishing to study languages? He also stated funding was achieved to teach Russian and Chinese and that Hummersknott teachers were willing to support other schools in language learning.
- The Group were also made aware that there were sometimes timetabling issues which made it difficult if there was a language class which clashed with a maths class – Pupils would always attend maths as this was felt the subject which would be most beneficial. Hummersknott were also intending to offer mandarin across all schools and a lot of work had been undertaken with the Chinese community on many occasions. It was also stated that suitable qualified staff were required to undertake community learning.
- French and Russian were taught at Cummins Engineering until a fee was incurred.

- The Chair stated that there was a role for language learning and cultural language to ensure community cohesion.
- Intercultural Understanding and not citizenship was now part of the curriculum as it was acknowledged that there was a need to learn the culture of other countries. German and Chinese children had undertaken exchange visits and it was fascinating to see the children interact with each other – the only restriction was potential affordability although funding events were undertaken to assist.
- Parents needed to be made aware of languages and their role in child development and with this in mind it was suggested that Hummersknott School organise a session for parents to assist with their children on language learning.
- The Group were invited to attend Hummersknott School to observe language learning.

IT WAS AGREED – (a) That the thanks of this Group be extended to all attendees for their informative and interesting debate.

(b) The Group felt that there was a need for children to be encouraged to learn languages in order to provide further career opportunities.

(c) That further funding options for the provision of languages be researched.