

COUNTY COUNCILLOR'S REPORT
TO CAMPSEA ASHE, MELTON, PETTISTREE, RENDLESHAM;
UFFORD, AND WICKHAM MARKET PARISH COUNCILS
AUGUST 2013

PLUS DISTRICT COUNCILLOR'S NOTES
(FOR MELTON; PETTISTREE AUND UFFORD)

EDUCATION

At the last meeting of Campsea Ashe Parish Council, I was asked some questions about education in Suffolk.

I was asked if it were true that London spent twice as much on each child as SCC spent. Well, although I am certain that this is not true, it certainly is true that spending per child does vary across the country. But county councils do not determine who gets how much. On the contrary, the amount is determined by the Government. And Suffolk is near the bottom of the rank order of £/pupil. There is a national long term education funding reform programme underway to correct matters, but this work will not be ready until 2016. Anyway, in Suffolk approximately £2500 is spent on each primary school child, and £4500 on each secondary school child. (Some schools get a little more , some a little less.)

I was asked why Suffolk did so badly. Actually Suffolk does not really do "badly" if Ofsted inspections are anything to go by. Of our 337 schools, 70% are assessed by Ofsted as good or outstanding. Norfolk has 58% by comparison. Of the 337, four or five of our schools have been placed into "special measures". On our own doorstep, Farlingaye was recently assessed as outstanding for the second time in a row, and after the Ofsted standards had been recast to a higher level. Not only does Farlingaye regularly send children on to Oxbridge, the school really does devote itself to ensuring that each and every child attains the optimum qualifications.

But performance at "Key Stage 2" – which crudely covers the bracket of children that earlier would have sat the old "eleven plus", is well below the national average. And even though Suffolk's performance has increased recently, other counties' performances have also increased, and so Suffolk continues to bump along near the bottom. Why should we make such a fuss about "Key Stage 2" anyway? The reason is that performance at this level is a reliable guide to performance later in life.

Of course money is a very important factor. But much more important, indeed the most important factor of all, is the quality of the leadership and teaching, as Farlingaye vividly illustrates. Also more important than money in itself, is the organizational structure. I am often asked, if all this is true, what is SCC doing about it?

SCC made a start by looking at the mixed bag of the two tier and the three tier system that we had. All the evidence pointed to a deleterious effect on children's learning brought about by the emotional impact of having two moves under the latter. Whether such schools were in "deprived" or "affluent" areas made no difference. SCC therefore decided to standardize on the two school system across the county, and this measure is still underway, known as the Schools Organization Review. This standardization incidentally can be seen in almost all of England, and indeed many councils moved to a two tier system years ago.

The quality of leadership and of teaching is at the very core of the matter, but here the County Council's power to act decisively was almost snuffed out by the then Government in the 1988 Education Reform Act, which removed responsibility for teaching standards (and for financial administration) from county councils and placed it with governing bodies instead. Only a few residual powers remain with the county councils, and these can only be exercised after a school has already seriously deteriorated. (By way of example, a county council cannot fire a headmaster because a county council is not these days the employer; the employer is the board of governors.) We can send advisors; we can take steps to appoint additional governors; we can take back financial control, we can remove the board of governors and finally we can issue a final warning and inform the Secretary of State.

But all this still means that SCC does not run the maintained schools in Suffolk. They are largely autonomous.

Recruitment of first class staff is an obvious requirement, but curiously, although there is much more turnover in other areas of the country, teachers seem reluctant to move to Suffolk. Conversely, those that are here are reluctant to leave the county, which we can all understand. But the upshot is a stagnation, and there is a wide-spread view that this stagnation has contributed to a generally lack-lustre school performance.

Although SCC operates under enormous legislative handicaps, there is a fierce determination among the councillors to improve performance, which has led directly to the "Raising the Bar" programme, of which you have all

probably heard. The Council invited the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA) to conduct an independent inquiry with a view getting a proper improvement in attainment, The University Campus Suffolk (UCS) made a big contribution and 20 recommendations were made, which are now being evaluated.

The RSA and UCS reports can be dug out with Google easily enough. See also:
<http://www.suffolk.gov.uk/your-council/plans-and-policies/raising-the-bar-briefing/>

The picture has been muddled by the advent of academies and free schools, which are effectively a variant. Academies are of two sorts: “converter academies” which have a fine record of achievement, and “sponsored academies”, which paradoxically have the very reverse, in many cases with a record of under-performance. All these schools now fall outside county council control completely. Two happen to be in “special measures”, as I write. Of the secondary schools in Suffolk, 70% are academies, but of the primary schools, only 3 are academies. Nationally there has been far less take up of the academy option amongst primary schools with the national figure standing at only 8%.

I have tried to summarise in three pages the shape of the education establishment in Suffolk. It is of course an enormous enterprise; we have 17 000 teachers to start with. There is though an excellent SCC cabinet paper that sets out the background in much more detail (26 Feb 13 agenda item 6.) This can be seen easily through the SCC website (meeting agendas and minutes).

The future is difficult to predict because the whole country is undergoing change in the education field. It is possible that county councils will gradually be stripped of their remaining roles, for all I know. But here in Suffolk there is an excellent rapport between schools and SCC regardless of legal status, which means that schools do get access to first class professional support. Most importantly though, SCC is resolved to exert pressure within and among boards of governors and schools to secure a much more collective determination to do better

Michael Bond