Response to Request from the Local Government and Regeneration Committee for further information on The School as The Hub for Community Regeneration

Children in Scotland is grateful for the opportunity to provide more detail of our proposal for working with school communities to provide a focus for regeneration. If regeneration is about local communities leading action to transform their vulnerable communities, then where better to locate action than around the community asset of the school community (its people) and its physical infrastructure, which serves a significant proportion of the local population. Furthermore, it is an asset, which is universal, non-stigmatising and rich in resources.

Background

Our original evidence stated:

It is vital that regeneration is viewed, not just in term of the physical improvement of an area but in terms of expanded opportunities and improved life quality and chances for those living there. A good childhood for every child depends, first and foremost, on what happens in each child’s family and community. Properly supporting them is the way to help all children thrive.

Our proposal is that expanded childcare and out of school play and learning and provision would provide a valuable and effective framework and focus for regeneration and community engagement, underpinned by the national strategies outlined above. Strong communities are built around “social hubs” bringing a range of people and support services together often around recreational as well more formal services. They play a crucial role in promoting social cohesion, breaking the cycle of deprivation and preventing poverty.

There is still a legacy in some schools of the New Community Schools programme, which enabled integrated provision of school and education, family support, health services and promotion by using the existing school estate as wider community assets. However, the approach largely disappeared once the funding ended.

Introduction

It is our contention that the impact of a significant number of national and community planning partnership level strategies and policies, could benefit from, and be strengthened by, a school community perspective.

1 http://www.infed.org/schooling/s-newcs.htm
If we consider just a selection of the Scottish Government’s aims for Scotland, we argue that they cannot be achieved without placing school communities and the role of learning within these communities, to the fore:

- Making Scotland the best place in the world to grow up in.
- Moving from a good to great education system.
- A Scotland where our most disadvantaged communities are supported and where all places are sustainable and promote well-being.
- Strengthening Scotland’s economy by developing a highly skilled workforce - our young people but also the learning workforce.
- Focussing government and public services on creating a more successful country, with opportunities for all of Scotland to flourish, through increasing sustainable economic growth.
- Making Social Justice real through tackling poverty and deprivation.

The Scottish Government’s vision for its regeneration strategy

The vision requires “a coordinated approach across the public, private and third sectors, alongside community led action. In particular, to achieve these outcomes in vulnerable and fragile communities, a concerted effort is needed across government and all mainstream services to deliver the required results. Successful and sustainable communities should therefore be at the heart of delivery of services at national and local level.”

The strategy itself does not mention “schools” or “early years provision”. Education is mentioned seven times as an example of a public service. At one level, this omission is surprising. However, the strategy seeks to avoid pre-determined solutions and emphasises flexibility and being led by community priorities. Our proposal will build on the untapped potential for schools and early years providers to provide a hub for “a coordinated approach alongside community led action” and therefore fits well with the underlying principles of the strategy.

The School as The Hub for Community Regeneration

The illustration below shows our understanding of the strategic and policy landscape and the relevant and potential impact these have for a school community. For the avoidance of doubt, by school community, we mean the children, young people, parents, school staff and the local community served by the school.

This diagram illustrates the school community and the connections at CPP and national levels:
Our proposal is that school communities know all too well the problems they face and they can identify the potential and sustainable solutions. There are funding implications but we do not believe these are necessarily insurmountable if we ensure that funding is aligned at school, CPP and national levels, together with using other funders to lever in additional funding.

Our work with schools serving our most deprived communities aims to get additional support from other partners, including local community groups, to provide the additional care and learning opportunities which will enable the school community to improve outcomes.

Such schools are serving populations where the causes of deprivation are complex and systemic. Alone, with the right leadership, they can make a significant difference for many of their pupils but we believe they can make a sustained and transformational difference to their school communities as the hub for regeneration if their role and contribution in the wider community planning partnership landscape is recognized and developed.

Our specific methodology would be:
1. To identify the strengths within the school community which support it to tackle the impact of deprivation. This would include, leadership, culture, specific provision for children with
additional support needs; childcare, adult learning opportunities, the involvement of parents and wider community.

2. To identify the potential for learning and development opportunities beyond the school timetable for pupils, parents and other local residents.

3. To chart the resources available to support the school. This would include those parental, community and third sector resources which are either working in the school or might be available. Crucially, it would include resources all community planning partners. (Predicated on no additional resources being available but an emphasis on maximizing existing resources.)

4. To work with the school community to enable it to identify what would make the most impact on, children’s learning and wider skill development; reducing the attainment gap, supporting childcare arrangements, learning and support opportunities, advice services, etc. for parents.

5. To establish a small set of key priorities and a funding strategy for these, predicated on maximizing existing resources and identifying funding opportunities available for community-led work where possible in conjunction with community education and other services.

As mentioned above, community schools are not a new concept and many of our schools have dynamic and thriving community-based features. However, we believe that schools serving the most disadvantaged communities will not be able to address the challenges of narrowing the attainment gap between the most and least disadvantaged of our children without a renewed focus on the community strengths and how these can be used to support the school and its efforts and, in turn, we believe this process, will be a powerful focus for regeneration.

Equally, as we have argued, the success of wider regeneration strategy and our wider social justice goals, can only be properly realised through full engagement of the asset which is the school and school community utilising its position as a social hub.

As we acknowledged in our original submission, our proposal is not without financial implications, however these are ultimately issues of choices and priorities. Additionally, a large part of what is being proposed is greater and better alignment of existing assets while the longer term return on any investment in both socially and financially would be much greater.

As underlined by national and local governance and accountability arrangements, where financial restraints require that priorities are made, local communities should be involved in identifying what they are, the potential funding streams and how the support can be sustained. We know the community can support the school through its people resources but also its potential to apply and secure funds from a range of funding opportunities.

“What would help me most is someone in the school for part of the day to support parents so I can concentrate on my children”

Head teacher, Primary School where 53% of children are on free school meals
However, this cannot move beyond a handful of small-scale projects unless we have a clear line of sight from the school community-based priorities and subsequent action, through to alignment (including of funding) at CPP-level and at SG level.

**Conclusion**

We agree fully with the statement in the Scottish Government Regeneration strategy that regeneration is about people and their communities. It is our contention that there are few community assets which do, or have the potential to, galvanise, motivate and inspire, a community in the way a school can and that therefore the development of schools as the hub for local regeneration should be a focus for all our communities but with particular priority on our most deprived communities, where they should be a focal point for the area’s social, economic as well as physical reinvigoration.

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