

Visit to Special Schools in Essex 31st March 2009

At the NEEC in 2009 at Wirral / Chester there were discussions between Cllr Tom Harney and EdisonLearning. EdisonLearning is a consultancy company presently working in many parts of the country giving support to Local Authorities on the Building Schools for the Future programme.

EdisonLearning are at present working with special schools in Essex and offered to show some of this work to a party from Wirral. This was organised for 31st March 2009. Those who attended from Wirral were Cllr Sheila Clarke, Cllr Tony Smith, Cllr Tom Harney and Peter Edmondson, Head of Branch, Participation and Inclusion.

The visit started in the morning when the group met representatives of EdisonLearning at breakfast. They were then shown two schools where EdisonLearning were working. In each case two existing schools had amalgamated and new building was taking place.

The first school was in Chelmsford where the group were shown the new unit for younger children at Columbus School and College. This is a 2 – 19 school. They were shown the new unit for younger children – the first stage in replacing existing buildings. The headteacher showed them around, explained the history of the amalgamation and answered questions.

The second school, Pioneer School in Basildon, was in a building which had been completed in January 2009. Again this was a 2–19 school which had also been formed by the amalgamation of two existing schools. The school had been built as three 'schools within a school'. Again the group were shown around by the Headteacher who described the project and answered questions. Finally, after a lunch at Pioneer School, the representatives of EdisonLearning described their role in the ongoing developments in Essex.

Inevitably the most vivid impression was of the new buildings and the equipment in them. It is interesting to look at the experience in Essex and see what lessons might be learned for Wirral.

The present situation is the culmination of a number of years work by Headteachers and governors, facilitated by Essex County Council. A great deal of stress has been placed upon the development of a vision. This has been incorporated in the idea of 'New Model Special Schools.' A booklet on this is available.

It was also stressed that parents were involved throughout – there was pride in the lack of opposition when statutory consultation took place to achieve the amalgamations. It did help that there were no compulsory redundancies and even the governors were able to stay on the new governing bodies.

After the vision had been worked at, the schools who took part in the development programme were those who were keen to do so.

The involvement of other agencies in the work of the school was stressed – as was the need for flexible working to maximise the effect of input from people like occupational therapists. The headteacher needed to be able to write a timetable which was not subject to the needs of other agencies. One solution is for the school to have the resources to buy in the professional help needed. There was an obvious need to work towards the maximum of team working so that the staff in the classroom understood the needs of the child and were able to continue the programme designed by the occupational therapist, speech and language therapist and so on.

It was obvious that EdisonLearning contributed to the process because they provided people with an understanding of the work of the schools, and provided the extra capacity needed to actually organise the programme of meetings, staff development sessions and so on. The staff of the schools would have found it very difficult to make the same progress when there were the inevitable day to day problems to deal with.

EdisonLearning were asked to give their take on the day, and this is available.

Tom Harney
September 2009