

Scrutiny Sub-Committee for the Development of Lifelong Learning

26 September 2005



Modern Foreign Languages in County Durham

Report of Head of Overview and Scrutiny

Purpose of Report

1. To provide an up-date about the continuing decline in the study of Modern Foreign Languages at GCSE level and to suggest ways in which this might be addressed. It is opportune that 26th September is the 'European Day of Languages'.

Background

2. The Sub-Committee is aware of the rapid decline in the number of secondary pupils studying modern foreign languages as a result of changes in the National Curriculum. The number of entries for GCSE examinations for French, German and Spanish in County Durham schools has been projected to reduce from 4,400 in 2002 to approximately 2,500 in 2006.
3. One aspect of this development which has been raised by the Sub-Committee is whether this rapid change is in the interests of the economy of County Durham. A particular concern was the global market place in which industry now operates where language skills particularly in relation to exports are increasingly important - *We buy in our language but we sell in the language of our customers*. Language skills could also assist in our aims to increase the tourism industry.
4. On the 1st September 2005, a meeting took place between Scrutiny members, key Cabinet members, County Council officers, a representative of the LSC and a representative of the Regional Language Network. There was general agreement that there was a need for a new approach in this area. A copy of the notes of the meeting are attached.
5. A draft strategic plan for modern foreign languages for 14-19 year olds was tabled at the meeting. In summary, this plan suggests a more flexible approach to language teaching (as an addition to formal study at GCSE level). This accessible framework would seek to demonstrate the relevance of languages to the future careers of young people in the County. The aim is also to stimulate more employer engagement to ensure that the needs of the business community can be delivered in a more focused way. A copy of the draft Strategic Plan together with an indicative action plan is attached.

6. The strategy involves creating a network of excellence in language teaching and a programme of targeted accreditation. This strategy would be complementary to the Government's National Languages Strategy and a new initiative which has recently been introduced called Asset Languages. Basically, this is a new scheme to provide accreditation for competence in languages using the Languages Ladder. The Languages Ladder defines competences in foreign languages. It is designed to measure proficiency. There are a number of stages which are individually assessed. It's main aim is to boost motivation and enthusiasm by providing more flexibility. This facility is available for schools but also adults.
7. This would represent a significant move away from traditional languages learning and provides the opportunity for language skills to be seen as more relevant to pupils' careers as an addition to skills required in particular business sectors. There is an important role, however, in ensuring that this new approach is sold to schools, teachers and pupils.
8. There is also a wider issue in relation to a deeper understanding of the needs of the various business sectors and then seeking to deliver language skills which will be helpful to enable businesses to prosper.

Recommendation

9. It is recommended that this new direction to encourage more focused language learning should be recommended to the Council's Cabinet for more detailed consideration.

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