



Kent study tour Swedish Education system 2-4 February 2010

1. Purpose of visit

The study tour was commissioned by the Leader of Kent County Council, to look at the Swedish educational system and independent schools, as there has been considerable national interest and discussion on the model.

We chose to visit the city of Solna, just north of, and connected to, Stockholm the Swedish capital. Solna has a high proportion of independent schools and has been a keen advocate of the “free school” movement since 1998.

The Kent delegation consisted of Paul Carter, Leader of KCC, Sarah Hohler (Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Education), Rosalind Turner (Managing Director for Children, Families and Education), and three headteachers: Sue Nicholson of Brent Primary School, Alan Brookes of Fulston Manor Foundation High School and Pam Jones of Ifield Special School, who represented the Kent headteacher forums.

We asked our hosts in Solna to outline for us the way the national system works, the impact it has had on education in Solna, any reflections they have on how the system works, and then for us to be able to visit some “free”, or independent, schools to see how it works in practice. We also had the chance to discuss the Swedish system with the former Minister of Education, and current County Governor of Stockholm, who had overseen the initial educational reforms.

Our itinerary is attached, along with web-links to Solna city and other relevant articles and features on the Swedish education system.

What follows is an overview of the Swedish system, as described by our hosts, a synopsis of our visits and a combined reflection on what we saw. Individual contributions are attached.

We really appreciated the hospitality, openness and enthusiasm from Solna City Council and all the settings we visited. We crammed a great deal into a very short time, so what follows is necessarily impressionistic, but we hope it is useful in stimulating debate within Kent.

We have invited our hosts for a return visit which we hope they will take up so we can continue the debate with a wider audience, and gain their perceptions on our own educational system in Kent.

2. The Swedish system

Swedish children can attend pre-school from the age of 1 until they are 5. Pre-schools provide full-day care, as an integral part of early learning, from 6.30am to 6pm for those who want or need it. It would seem most children attend pre-schools, which are staffed by highly qualified (usually at masters level) early years teachers and support staff. The places are funded and approved by the local authority.

Children enter a reception class when they are 6, and then compulsory schooling from 7-16 years. All schools are mixed sex. There is no selection by ability, and entrance seemed to be on a first come, first served basis. A local school place is guaranteed by the local authority, and then parents and children can choose an independent school if they wish. We were told there is no school exclusion.

There is teacher assessment of progress and attainment until standard national tests at ages 10, 12 and 16 in Swedish, English and Maths, graded as pass, pass with distinction or pass with special distinction. We were told 75% of 16 year olds pass the national tests, with retakes possible for those who hadn't passed first time.

Most of the schools seem to provide after-school care and some also provide holiday activities.

Young people can leave school at 16, but most go on to an upper secondary between 16 and 20 years, followed by university or work. Upper secondaries have different specialisms from 17 national programmes in addition to base subjects. 60% of the Upper Secondary curriculum is specialist and 40% base or core subjects. The 17 specialist programmes are about 60:40 academic to vocational.

Special Schools are also provided for children with additional needs, as is specific support, for example, for children without Swedish as a first language.

Pupils throughout the school system are funded by the local authority. Municipalities fund school places at different per capita rates. We were told Solna funds at a high rate: about 190,000 kroner for pre-school (11,000 Euro), 96,000 kroner for reception age 5/6, and 80,000 Kroner for compulsory school age (8,000 Euro). Home to school travel is mostly free, using the local transport systems, as are school meals, funded at 26 kroner per meal, (approximately £2.60).

All three phases of schools used to be provided by the local authorities, and many still are. However, Swedish municipalities started to open up their educational system to competition from independent companies, trusts and parent groups from about 1998, Solna being one of the first. The aim was to introduce some competition and choice into the system, and to raise standards across the system including within the municipal schools.

The system has developed in fits and starts since then with an emerging national framework. The National Board of Education accredits any potential providers of education against certain standards. The independent provider can then open a school wherever they think there is a demand, as long as they have at least 20 pupils to start with. There are no set up costs from the state. The provider can rent existing school buildings, open in other buildings or build a new school themselves.

Teachers in all schools must be qualified, but the independent schools are free to pay different rates, and can make a profit if they are able to do so within the per capita fee.

The local authority, or municipality does not have to approve the start-up of a new school, nor does it have to provide premises. The municipality funds the pupils according to whatever is the per capita funding rate for the municipality. The funding follows the child, so if they choose to go to a different school the funding goes with them.

Independent schools have to follow the national curriculum, but are responsible for their own standards. There is a national inspection system which applies to all schools. Each school is inspected currently every 6 years, but this is moving to every 3 years. Inspection outcomes and school results in the national tests are published on a national website, and can be compared.

The local authority has no role in monitoring standards in the independent schools, but they licence, and can de-register, pre-schools. They are accountable for standards in the municipal schools, and run development or subject specific programmes which are open to all schools. They monitor results across the local schools, but are not held accountable for them.

Schools therefore open, and close, according to demand and pupil numbers. Solna currently has 6,000 compulsory school age students (7-16) served by 8 municipal schools and 5 independent schools. During the last few years 3 municipal schools have closed through lack of numbers and demand, as have 2 independent schools.

There are 4,000 pre-school children in Solna, served by 35 municipal and 22 independent pre-schools.

3. Visits

3.1 Pyssling Kadetten Pre-school

We visited an independent pre-school for 1-5 year olds in a residential area run by a company called Pyssling, who also ran the neighbouring school for 7-16 year olds, Alfaskolan, which we visited for lunch.

Pyssling has a very clear educational philosophy and child-centred ethos. It provides well qualified staff and has high staffing ratios. It also funds advisory teachers who spread good practice, help to monitor and improve standards, and assist in the overall development of the company, which operates across Sweden.

Pyssling has recently been bought by a Danish company, and the staff were uncertain whether this would mean a change of direction, but hoped the education standards and commitment to good practice would be maintained.

We were very impressed by the standard of accommodation and facilities, by the evident best practice of child development and early learning, and by the confidence

and assurance of the children, both at the pre-school and the adjoining school where we had lunch.

The food was healthy and plentiful, organic and local, with no desserts. The children helped themselves to food and sat with their friends or their teachers. They were curious about us and even the very small children were sufficiently self-assured to come up to us to find out who we were and why we were in their school.

It was delightful to see the children and their teachers making the most of the very heavy snow, with toboggan trips to the local parks, a lot of outdoor play and learning, and using the snow, and the weather, as a learning resource.

We were told that Pyslingen has a strong reputation and people come to the pre-school from right across Stockholm, particularly as they are then guaranteed a place in Alfaskolan. Apparently this does sometimes lead to problems for people in the surrounding neighbourhood who may have to travel elsewhere for a good pre-school, although there were a number not too far away.

3.2 Svedenskolan special school

Svendenskolan is an independent 7-16 compulsory school for children with autism and aspergers. It provides after school care and is a partner in an EU funded project "Hands" which includes the independent special school, Helen Allison, in Kent.

We split into two groups and sat in on classes, talked to the young people and teachers, and then had a discussion with the Principal and her staff.

The accommodation was good, being based in a former municipal special school. The teachers and support staff seemed very committed and enthusiastic, and there was a high ratio to the young people.

The students came from across the city, most travelling by taxi. Some had come from mainstream schools where they hadn't thrived. We were told that some would be reintegrated if possible. Some older pupils had learnt to travel independently.

The class had four students who had individual workstations with their daily schedules displayed on their desks. Students were encouraged to complete their own schedules. The classroom had a quiet room adjoining and this was used for students who needed time out. There was one PC in the classroom and one student had a Smart phone for their schedule although it was not working at the time. We spoke to one student who conversed confidently in English. The class were preparing to go to another lesson and were at various stages; students appeared independent and went to the next lessons without support.

The next lesson was a practical session with woodwork and textiles in adjoining rooms. Students were working on individual programmes including making a scarf on a loom. In both rooms tools were readily accessible for students but would not meet the Health and Safety requirements in the UK.

Another class were playing cards with a TA as part of a Maths lesson and two students were working individually on set tasks.

We saw several areas that were used for Life skills, including small kitchens and dining tables as well as areas with sofas for relaxing. The reception area was also used as “a coffee shop” where students could practise ordering coffee and cake.

Alan and I sat in on an English class and were impressed by the quality of comprehension and pronunciation. There were also good examples of practical learning, music and drama. However, overall, we were disappointed, from what we observed, of the level of expectations and standards for the young people. There were some students who we thought could have functioned well in a Kent mainstream school with additional support, and interestingly, we did not see any children and young people with evident additional needs in the schools we visited, while acknowledging we had a very limited schedule.

Pam’s observations from the group she attended with Sarah at Svedenskolan, was that most of the staff were the equivalent of teaching assistants, and one group had had the same tutor (a TA) for five years. She felt there was little, if any, multi-agency support including no speech and language therapy.

It also seemed an expensive system, costing up to 50,000 kroner (about £5,000 per student (we believe this was additional to the 80,000 kroner for each compulsory school age student.)

3.3 Vittra School

Vittra is an educational company operating across Sweden, again with a very clear educational philosophy. The school we visited in Solna had a pre-school, reception class and then 7-16 year old students.

The school was in a new building specially commissioned by Vittra, with lots of open space, group learning areas, with small teaching areas or classroom. The building was modern, light and flexible. Although much smaller, it reminded us of the vision behind many of our new BSF schools.

The school does not have much outdoor space and travels to other schools, or the local park for sports activities. They also make use of local museums and other resources nearby. There were adjacent to the Alfaskolen we had already visited, but did not share resources or have much contact with them.

There are 300 7-16 year olds in the school, and we were shown around the school by two 15 year olds, who spoke excellent English, and spoke openly, and enthusiastically, about their school experience.

In Vittra, each student sets their own curriculum or social goals, advised and supported by their tutor. They record their goals and timetables in a notebook, along with reflections on how they are doing, what more they want to achieve, and evaluation of lessons and other school activities. The system of record keeping by

students put them in control of their own learning and attainment, making them responsible and able to make decisions, and becoming very self-reliant.

Parents are encouraged to read these notebooks, and record their own observations. They attend the school twice a year to hear about their child's progress and agree goals with the staff and young people.

There seemed to be a great deal of freedom in the curriculum and organisation of the school day, with a lot of independent learning, group activities, and independent mobility in and out of school. Although the school day finished at 3pm, most of the students stayed on until about 6pm.

The children seemed happy and motivated, although our young guides told us that some less motivated or self-disciplined children could get lost. We were assured by the headteacher and her deputy that this would get picked up and more support would be given.

The students told us that they had both moved into the school from other schools as the freedom and learning ethos suited them better. The young man was critical about the lack of specialist language teachers, and a prolonged absence of the music teacher which meant classes were cancelled, although the students could continue to work on their projects or practice their chosen instruments.

We ate lunch in the canteen and were overwhelmed by the interest shown in us by the students who came up and chatted to us. We were also very impressed by the way they responded to an accident with broken crockery, which they cleaned up themselves without any adult prompting or assistance.

The headteacher and her deputy gave a very coherent and interesting explanation of the Vittra philosophy, and there were a number of aspects which we wanted to adopt for Kent!

However, when we looked at the school results across Solna with our city hosts, it was clear that 16 year olds in Vittra were not doing so well in the national tests. The city leaders told us this was improving under the new headteacher.

3.4 PEAB upper secondary school

PEAB is a large Swedish building contractor, with business throughout Europe. They are a family owned business with a strong sense of social responsibility, and have invested in a small number of post-16 skill centres.

They provide construction, carpentry, metal work and plumbing tuition, alongside basic skills, language and literature studies. Their students have usually not done well at school and are attracted by the high level of vocational training and qualifications, as well as the actual working experience on real construction sites provided by the company. There would seem to be strong pastoral care and support alongside the tuition.

Each student rotates around the different skills until they decide which one they want to major on. We met with some of the students, who were all very appreciative of the opportunities they were being given. They were less keen on the broader, non-vocational studies, but PEAB were insistent that they needed these skills, and to know how to manage their money and tax when entering employment.

All the students we spoke to were keen on moving into employment with the company but all had aspirations to eventually work in the United States.

The staff were evidently committed to the students, some of whom still had social or home difficulties, but were doing well in this environment. There was a very high success record in students completing the course and going on to work.

The practice, and trades based learning with industry standard tutors was similar to the best practice in our Kent vocational centres, but with the added dimension of it being operated by a company which could offer the young people real work experience and the possibility of real jobs, rather like the apprenticeship programme.

4 Reflections

We saw some good practice in the schools we visited in Solna, although we were disappointed by the special school provision. We were very impressed by the pre-school system and the investment in very young children. The confidence and openness of the children and young people of all ages was impressive, as well as their language skills. The children, educational staff and leaders of the schools were all very enthusiastic about the provision, and had a clear sense of mission, ethos and educational philosophy.

Our city council hosts, and the former minister of education, were confident that opening up the system to new providers had helped to drive up school improvement for the municipal schools. They reported high levels of parental satisfaction in the choice offered.

They did admit that there was a difficulty in strategic planning for education, as the local authority had to ensure there were sufficient school places but had no role in decision making on which schools would open and where.

As we heard, there had been a number of schools opening with others closing as a result. We asked questions about how this was managed, and what impact it had on the closing school, but it really seemed to be a market driven process.

There was also a lot of movement between schools, with the funding following the child. It would appear this is based on direct application to the school, with no other admissions criteria other than if there were places available. We did wonder if there was a tracking issue, and indeed of safeguarding in knowing which students were at which school. We wondered how quickly the funding changes could be made and whether there were issues of additional costs as one school opened and another wound down.

We also considered the system of choice and mobility favoured middle class children with motivated parents, as this did seem to be the case. There seemed to be little, if any, multi-agency working and no evident focus on vulnerable children, or groups

whose background or family circumstance might lead them to do less well. There seemed to be little, if any, cooperation between schools, unless it was vertical, all-through continuity in schools operated by the same company.

There seemed to be no indication that independent schools per se, or the competition within the system, was driving up school attainment. Our hosts felt convinced standards had been raised and that education is a slow market so it is difficult to get instant improvement. They were concerned by the stubborn 25% of students not getting the national tests at age 16, and declining results across Sweden in Maths.

So, not much difference to our own national and local figures, but with a lot less national testing. The system was very much based on teacher assessment, with the first assessment at age 7 when the child enters compulsory school, and a progress check at age 9. We have been informed subsequently that there are national tests at age 10, 12 and 16. There is ongoing student and parental evaluation and feedback on satisfaction with what is being provided by the school. The national inspection system and local support seemed not to concentrate on measures of achievement of the children, but the standards of what was being delivered.

There were some questions being raised about the validation of teacher assessments and the municipality was beginning to challenge schools on this. There seemed to be a lot less pressure on schools and the local authorities from the national government to be accountable for results, which caused a great deal of debate amongst us!

The overall conclusion from our delegation, and indeed our City hosts, resonates in the 2007 McKinsey report on "How the world's best performing systems come out on top": Education is not about structures it is about good teachers and high quality relationships with children and young people.

Our Solna hosts had visited London and were very impressed by the return to the classroom ethos of City Challenge, of ensuring headteachers were not business managers but educationalists.

We felt that overall Kent already provides a great deal of diversity and choice for students and parents within the state funded education system, particularly since the introduction of academies. However, we were all attracted by the self-reliance and confidence generated by the child/young person centred philosophy of the free schools we saw. We were also very envious of the investment in pre-school education, childcare and after school activities, free school meals and transport.

Due to time pressures we were not able to visit any of the municipal schools in Solna, so we were not able to make any direct comparisons. We are aware of different models run by other companies such as Kunskapskollen and IES, both of which are entering the English education system through the academy programme.

We did think that taking out the local authority role in strategic planning and support for schools made it difficult to manage and regulate education, and had some concerns about the market led approach: what happens to education of children left

in schools winding down, and how do you ensure the well-being of all children if you are not sure which school they are attending?

We felt that our own focus on high attainment for all, while attending to narrowing the gap for children and young people doing less well, was missing in the conversations during our short visit to Sweden. We would also have liked to explore efforts to join up between schools and with other agencies, which again was not evident, and which is now well developed in Kent, although there is still more to do.

Since our return, there have been a number of announcements of national policy direction in the run up to the general election, and a television feature on the Swedish school system, which broadly confirms our own findings.

We thought the study tour was very worthwhile, not least for the opportunity for discussion between ourselves on our hopes and aspirations for education in Kent. We hope this report will help to stimulate further debate within the county.

We look forward to continuing the discussion with our generous hosts from Solna on a return visit, and their own reflections on our educational system.

Rosalind Turner 24 February 2010
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For further details and supporting documents, please go to the following link on Kent Trust Web: <http://www.kenttrustweb.org.uk/Communication/conference.cfm>