

A comparison between the lower-ranked schools in Cheltenham and Gloucester

In a discussion and correspondence with Councillor Charmian Sheppard (the County Council's Portfolio Holder for Education for Children and Young People), she has expressed the opinion (which I take to be a Cabinet view, rather than just a personal one) that Cheltenham has good comprehensive schools, and that Kingsmead and Pittville are special cases, because they are situated in socially-deprived areas, and do a good job with the children they get. They also benefit from a project called 'GAP', apparently aimed at potential truants, and which the County Council is aiming to introduce throughout the county. From the truancy figures, it looks as if this is achieving considerable success in these Cheltenham schools.

However, there is also social deprivation in Gloucester; indeed there is probably more, as Gloucester has the highest level of unemployment in the county. It is, therefore, fair to say that Gloucester should have, if anything, a higher percentage of schools which take a large number of pupils from socially-deprived areas (as is the case with both Central and Oxstalls, both labelled in the review as under-performing), but can similarly do well for pupils, even if actual results are not very good.

The table gives a comparison between the relevant schools in Cheltenham and Gloucester. Although it is not highlighted in the review as being under-performing, I have included Barnwood Park in the figures for Gloucester, partly because it is the girls' equivalent to Central, and is placed in the same cluster in the review, and partly because it comes marginally below Pittville in the results' table at GCSE.

There are two main factors to be considered: the performance at Key Stage 3 and GCSE, both in terms of results and value added; and the number of pupils in these schools compared with the total number in each area. For the total number of pupils, I have provided two sets of figures, one for just Gloucester City and Cheltenham Borough, the other for the Gloucester area under review and an enlarged Cheltenham area to include Cleeve and Winchcombe schools, which, apparently, will both be considered in the Cheltenham area when it is deemed in need of review.

When comparing schools at this level, the new value-added figures make interesting comparison with actual results, stressing the importance of considering all aspects of performance before trying to draw any firm conclusions from this sort of data.

The value added (the amount pupils improve compared with what would be expected) is significantly better in all the Gloucester schools at Key Stage 3 (the 11 to 14 age bracket; the first three years at secondary school). At GCSE level (14 to 16), the figures more or less even themselves out, with the two Cheltenham schools coming top and bottom (Kingsmead at the top). In fact, the Cheltenham schools record the lowest totals in the whole county at each level: Kingsmead at

Key Stage 3; Pittville at GCSE. Overall, in terms of value added, the Gloucester schools can be said to be performing somewhat better.

As far as actual results are concerned, at Key Stage 3, a reasonable way to compare the figures is to add up the percentage totals for each of the three subjects to get an overall figure for each school. This shows that again the Cheltenham schools come top and bottom, this time with Pittville at the top. When these figures are compared with just Central and Oxstalls, the combined results are exactly equal. Adding in Barnwood Park tips the balance slightly in favour of the Gloucester schools, as it is only two points below Pittville.

At GCSE, the Cheltenham schools perform rather better (particularly if Barnwood Park is discounted), with Pittville coming top, and Kingsmead fourth of the five, leaving Central at the bottom. So, conversely, the Cheltenham schools overall can be said to have somewhat better results.

Considering the two sets of figures (value added and results) together, it would be reasonable to say that the schools in Cheltenham and Gloucester are more or less equal in performance and achievement: at Key Stage 3 the Gloucester schools are ahead on value added, and the two areas more or less equal on results; at GCSE the Cheltenham schools are ahead on results, and the two areas more or less equal on value added. Or, to put it another way, the Gloucester schools do better overall on value added, and the Cheltenham schools do better overall on results.

Yet the Cheltenham schools are said to be doing a good job with the pupils they have, whilst the two Gloucester schools are deemed to be under-performing. This evidence suggests that such double standards are indefensible. The credibility of these findings is enhanced when it is remembered that what little evidence is given in the review to support its conclusions relies heavily on these same results from last year.

Moreover, the Cheltenham schools have the benefit of the 'GAP' project, which so far is not available to Gloucester schools. Yet there is no mention of this in the review, nor suggestion that it could be introduced to help the Gloucester schools improve their provision for pupils. If the Gloucester schools are disadvantaged by not having access to this facility, it is not the fault of the schools themselves, and it is certainly not the fault of the schools' system in Gloucester, it is the fault of the County Council in not yet providing it to these schools. It also begs the question as to why the Cheltenham schools are so favoured, when there is greater social deprivation in Gloucester.

Further proof of the overall quality of Gloucester's schools appears when the pupil numbers in these schools is taken as a percentage of the total number in the area. Comparing the extended areas, the two schools in Cheltenham take 18.9% of the total number of pupils, whereas the three in Gloucester take just 15.5% (if the two criticized schools only are considered, it is just 10%, little more than half the amount for the Cheltenham schools). There is a similar differential when comparing just the schools in Cheltenham Borough and Gloucester City.

Therefore, the greater social deprivation in Gloucester implies that a significant number of children from these backgrounds must attend other schools in the area, schools for which the review

concludes that there is no need to 'address performance issues'. This again suggests that Gloucester schools also do a good job with such pupils.

This is yet more evidence that Gloucester schools are performing well overall, particularly when compared with Cheltenham, which the County Council appears to think of as having a good set-up for its schools. These conclusions clearly contradict many of the findings contained in the review.

	Pupil nos	KS3 v a	Eng	Maths	Sci	Total	GCSE v a	GCSE A*-C	GCSE points
Cheltenham									
Kingsmead	730	97.1	43	52	50	145	101.9	24	28.4
Pittville	754	99.0	60	66	58	184	94.5	32	30.0
Total	1484								
Gloucester									
Central	535	101.0	56	63	58	177	94.7	21	20.8
Oxstalls	679	99.7	52	46	54	152	98.5	28	24.2
Barnwood Park	663	100.3	55	62	65	182	96.1	32	29.9
Total	1877								
Central/Oxstalls only	1214								

KEY: The second column gives the total number of pupils in each school (including sixth forms at Kingsmead and Central). The third column is the value added at Key Stage 3. The next three columns give the percentage of pupils achieving level 5 or above in English, Maths and Science, followed by the total of these three figures added together. The last three columns give the value added at GCSE level, the percentage of pupils gaining 5 or more grades A*-C, and the average point score per pupil.

Total numbers of pupils	Percentage of pupils in schools listed above				
Cheltenham (6 schools)	5921		25.1%		
Cheltenham plus Cleeve and Winchcombe (8)	7862		18.9%		
Gloucester City (10)	8563		21.9%	14.2%	
Gloucester area (13)	12120		15.5%	10.0%	
					Central/Oxstalls only