MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
SCHOOLS FORUM
HELD ON 11 DECEMBER 2020 FROM 12.00 PM TO 1.56 PM

Schools Representatives

Sara Attra	Special School Head - Addington School
Shirley Austin	Academy Head - Forest School
Jay Blundell	Pupil Referral Unit Head - Foundry College
Ali Brown	Primary Head - Nine Mile Ride Primary
Corrina Gillard	Primary Head - Emmbrook Infant
Ben Godber	Academy Head - Bohunt School
Derren Gray	Academy Head - Piggott School
Sian Lehrter	School Business Director - The Holt School
Nick McSweeney	Headteacher - The Emmbrook School Secondary
Julia Mead	School Business Manager - St Sebastian's CE Primary
Paul Miller	Governor - St Crispins - Chairman
Brian Prebble	Primary Head - Rivermead Primary - Vice Chairman
Ginny Rhodes	Academy Head - St Crispins School
Carol Simpson	School Business Manager - Colleton Primary
Liz Woodards	School Business Manager - Hawkedon Primary

Non School Representatives

Graham Howe	Wokingham Borough Council
Sal Thirlway	Assistant Director Learning Achievement and Partnerships

Also Present
Sonia Aulak, SEN Project Manager
Matthew Booth, SEN Consultant
Luciane Bowker, Democratic & Electoral Services Specialist
Carol Cammiss, Director of Children's Services
Daniel Robinson, SEN Consultant
Lynne Samuel, Senior Finance Specialist
Richard Tipping, Category Manager Adult and Children’s Social Care
Katherine Vernon, Schools Finance Manager

27 APOLOGIES
No apologies for absence were received.

28 DECLARATION OF INTEREST
There were no declaration of interest.

29 HNB FINANCIAL PLAN AND OUTLOOK - INTRODUCTION
The Chairman stated that this extraordinary meeting had been organised to discuss issues around the High Needs Block (HNB) and the Special Educational Needs and Disability Strategy (SEND) which was being developed by the Council.

The Chairman stated that several years ago the funding for schools was divided into blocks: Early Years, Schools and HNB. The income that came into each block was ring-fenced and could not be transferred from one block to the other.

The Chairman stated that over the last few years the income received for the HNB has been insufficient to cover the expenditure in that block. The HNB deficit was approaching £6m at the end of this financial year, causing significant concern. Unfortunately, this situation had been anticipated at the beginning of the year.

It was recognised that some of the mitigation programmes had been delayed as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

There had been growing concern and a desire to gain a better understanding of the issues around SEND funding and strategy amongst school leaders, parents and other stakeholders.

The Chairman stated that questions arising from this meeting could be forwarded to Ginny Rhodes (secondary schools), Brian Prebble (primary schools), Sara Attra and Jay Blundell (special schools and PRU). Questions would be then be passed to the local authority who would be able to provide answers.

Carol Cammiss, Director of Children's Services stated that once feedback from this meeting had been received, a meeting would be set up to draw up a timeline of work.

29.1 Current Status of HNB resources referencing the SEND Improvement Programme and Written Statement of Action

Sal Thirlway, Assistant Director for Learning Achievement and Partnerships addressed the meeting.

During his presentation, Sal Thirlway highlighted the following points:

- The response to the HNB pressures included the development of the SEND Strategy, the Written Statement of Action and other actions;
- There were six key areas in relation to the Written Statement of Action;
- A SEND Improvement Board and Task and Finish Groups had been set up to identify areas of improvement and develop activities;
- One of the key areas of improvement was the timeliness of Education Health and Care Plans (EHCP) which had been underperforming for a few months. There had also been concerns over the quality of plans. This had now been much improved, with 64% of EHCP being completed within the 20 week target, this was above the national average;
- The quality of EHCPs had not been compromised in order to improve timeliness, there was better engagement with partners involved in completing plans;
- There was a better understanding of EHCPs for parents, carers and SEND officers who were not medical officers;
- The service was working towards achieving 100% completion within the target over the next 12 months;
- A SEND Strategy had been published, however there was recognition that this needed to be re-designed to include more co-production and challenge;
- A draft strategy was being developed and it was hoped this would be signed off in January;

- Multiagency working arrangements had been progressed with colleagues across Berkshire;
- Demand planning assessments were taking place;
- There were improvements in the arrangements for the transition into adulthood plans;
- The service was now moving towards the next phase, the implementation of the strategy.

Carol Cammiss stated that this had been a challenging year for everyone, and she had had to make a decision in March as to how best to progress this improvement plan in the context of the current pandemic. She had decided to commission Matthew Booth and Daniel Robinson, SEND Consultants to help with the development of the SEND Strategy and the arrangements for SEND home to school transport.

Carol Cammiss stated that she would be shortly writing to headteachers to give them an update on SEND related matters.

Ginny Rhodes acknowledged that there had been some improvements, however she expressed concern that the language used in the report was overly positive.

Sal Thirlway stated that the starting position 12 months ago was very low. He believed that there had been a significant improvement in the system, which was what the report was illustrating. This did not mean that the 'job was done' as the service continued to seek more improvements.

Carol Cammiss stated that it was important to recognise the achievements and work that had already been undertaken, for example going from 0% of EHCPs being completed on time to 64% EHCPs now being completed on time. She also stated that it was important to continue to work in partnership in order to achieve solutions to the challenges being faced in the HNB.

29.2 Presentation of the latest draft of the SEN Strategic Plan

Matthew Booth, SEND Consultant addressed the meeting and during his presentation he made the following points:

- Partners from Education, Social Care, Health and SEND Team had been working together to develop the SEND Strategy;
- Initially, a needs analysis had been undertaken, which showed an increase in demand and complexity of needs. The details of this analysis was in the report;
- The needs analysis showed a disproportionate increased in EHCPs demand in relation to the increase in population levels;
- The needs analysis included trends for future years and pressures in particular groups;
- The strategy considered the nature of needs, for example trends for SCMH, ASD, speech and language disorders and moderate learning difficulties (not an exclusive list);
- The strategy considered the broader challenges in relation to SEND support around inclusion in mainstream settings in different key stages;
- The strategy looked at the use of Out of Borough and independent settings and their financial implications;
- The views of stakeholders in deciding what the priorities were had been taken into account;
- There some really good services already in place for children in Wokingham, the aspiration of this strategy was to make it better for SEND children;

- The four strategic priorities were:
  - Build local provision to better meet local needs
  - Delivered through an efficient, effective, well managed system
  - With real coproduction embedded at all levels of planning and delivery
  - Enabled through information intelligence and strategic commissioning
- The proposed outcome measures to evaluate the success of the strategy were included in the report. These were still being finalised with stakeholders at focus groups. It was necessary to reduce their number and include some key performance indicators for Early Years, for example;
- The report contained the action plan;
- It was now important to think about how to implement the strategy and manage its delivery;
- The latest working draft would go out to consultation the following week.

29.3 Areas of the latest draft of the SEN Strategic Plan that are still being developed/evaluated

Lynne Samuel, Senior Finance Specialist continued the presentation and some of the points made by her are listed below:

- Officers were aware that conversations at Schools Forum were always at very high level and there had not been activity detail in previous presentations;
- The information that was being gathered including the trends, as previously described by Matthew Booth, and was being used to link with finance issues;
- A lot of the SEND information, for financial planning purposes, was based on the annual January census;
- The data from the January 2020 census had changed during the year, impacting on the current financial forecast;
- The figures in the report contained data from the last three years and a snapshot of the current situation, in an effort to give a flavour of the current financial position, and in advance of consultation with Schools Forum on the 201/22 HNB Budget submission;
- There was a challenge in linking data from EHCPs (which were collated in a different system) into finance systems, this created difficulties in analysing data;
- Not all EHCP's drew resources from the HNB, the report contained a breakdown;
- The report contained information about funding, including how top-ups were calculated;
- Top-up funding for mainstream schools had not been reviewed for a number of years, its revision was part of the improvement programme;
- A review of the National SEN factor in the Schools Block Funding Formula had been identified as a recommendation for the Task and Finish Group for the 2022/23 financial year.

Resource Bases

- The report contained detailed information about resource bases in the Borough;
- Richard Tipping, Category Manager Adult and Children's Social Care stated that schools had been engaged in the initial review process of resource bases, but had not been kept as informed they should have been. This was due to issues with staff leaving and Covid-19. There were significant differences as to how resource base places were funded, there was an intention to move towards a smaller number of categories and the affected schools were being involved in discussions;

- Richard Tipping stated that it was recognised that a review of resource bases funding had not taken place for a long time, and this was a significant piece of work which was now being undertaken. There was an interim arrangement in place until the end of this financial year. It was hoped that by the end of the financial year the review would have been completed and new funding arrangements would be implemented. He stated that Schools Forum would be kept informed of the outcome of this exercise.

Special Schools

- Lynne Samuel stated that the report contained financial information in relation to the special schools in the Borough and also independent and Out of Borough placements;
- The report contained a breakdown of EHCP numbers per placement and Key Stage;
- The most expensive placements accounted for a disproportionate amount of the HNB overspend. It was important to understand the cause for this, whether it was because of previous practices or other reasons and how to move forward;
- The report explained how the funding contribution from Health and Social Care was used to fund placements.

Post-16

- There was a breakdown of Post-16 placements in the report;
- The report contained detail of top up funding from the HNB to Post-16 placements;
- The report covered the commissioning arrangements and explained the increase in demand from legislative changes;
- The Chairman asked if the local authority had the expertise to deal with the increase in demand due to legislative changes in Post-16 legislation ;
- Sonia Aulak, SEND Project Manager stated that there were colleagues in the local authority with Post-16 expertise who were already working towards planning and understanding the demands of Post-16 SEND.

PRU

- There was a programme of work to review the PRU funding arrangements which was being developed with Jay Blundell;
- Schools Forum would be updated on the outcome of this improvement programme;
- A meeting with Jay Blundell and officers had already taken place to start the improvement programme;
- Jay Blundell asked for clarification on the £64k for Outreach Service (page 20). She believed that this was funding which Sal Thirlway had allocated to Foundry College last year to deal with a particular crisis in the primary sector. She was under the impression that this was a one off;
- Jay Blundell stated that all the objectives listed in the 5 year vision plan had arisen as a result of areas of support and referral that had come up during her last four years as head, for which there was no other support available. She would like to find out if there was a need for those services and to formalise their funding;
- Lynne Samuel agreed to discuss the detail of the £64k with Jay Blundell outside of the meeting.

Therapy

- Richard Tipping stated that almost all schools received support through the Civic contract, which had been extended for a further year. Over the next year there would be ongoing work with partners across Berkshire to try and achieve a joined up approach to this service, Wokingham was leading this joint approach. As part of this

work, schools would be consulted in regards to their needs and if any changes were required.

SEND Sufficiency Project

- Richard Tipping stated that this was currently under discussion for approval. This project would be developed in the first six months of next year. It was hoped that very detailed proposals for the next five years, to ensure sufficiency of places in the Borough, would be produced. It would include plans to deal with the issue of the expensive Out of Borough placements.

Lynne Samuel stated that it was very complex to try and analyse the whole system, and it had been an important exercise for the finance team to put together this report. The report tried to set out all factors that were going to be taken into account in setting up the 2021/22 Budget. The there was a desire to be transparent and improve understanding of the figures.

29.4 Impact of the SEN programme on children and their families
This was not considered as a separate item, it formed part of previous discussions.

29.5 High level financial plan for the SEN Strategic Plan
Sal Thirlway stated that the Written Statement of Action contained the plan which was submitted to the DfE. This paper formed part of ongoing review of the improvement work.

Sal Thirlway encouraged Schools Forum members to send questions/comments to his team on any issues that needed further clarification. *(The Chairman has asked that questions be channelled through Schools Forum members and collated before they are passed on to Sal and his team.)*

29.6 Next steps
The Chairman stated that Schools Forum and other school leaders would have an opportunity to comment on the SEND Strategy during the consultation period.

Sal Thirlway stated that the formal consultation period would finish by the end of January, and the implementation phase would start after that.

The Chairman thanked officers for their work in putting together the report.

Carol Cammiss stated that there was real commitment from the senior leadership team and officers to improve the services offered to the children in the Borough. As such, support and challenge from school colleagues was welcome.

29.7 Other issues
There were no other issues discussed.