

Appendix 1

Managing the pressure on the High Needs Block - Working Group

Terms of Reference

1. Background

As reported to Schools Forum on 7th February 2024 we are now forecasting an overspend of approximately £2.5m on the High Needs Block (HNB) of the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) for 2024/25 with further pressures identified in 2025-26. The shortfall was a result of a projected budget requirement for 2024-25 of £40.0m compared to income of £37.6m.

The reasons for the projected deficit and ongoing pressure on the HNB can be summarised as follows:

- Significant increase in requests for Education, Health and Care Needs Assessments (EHCNAs) and associated growth in the number of EHC Plans (noting the largest increase for requests was for 3 to 4 year old children)
- Increasing complexity of need.

Whilst we have a DSG carry forward which can cover the pressure in 2024-25 and are not in the position of many other Local Authorities who are carrying significant deficits (and as a result are in the Safety Value and Delivering Better Value programmes); the implications of the level of growth predicted for 2024-25 will translate to full year impacts in 2025-26 and beyond which will potentially put the DSG into a deficit by 2026-27.

2. Purpose

At the meeting on 7th February 2024, Schools Forum members endorsed the proposal to establish a working group to agree how best to manage the pressure on the HNB and as part of that work agree short, medium and long term actions setting out what we can afford going forward and what actions we will need to make in order to avoid a future deficit position. An outcome of this will be a 5-year DSG management plan which will be reviewed annually.

The work will reference the previous work that has already been undertaken including the work of the SMiLE (Supporting Mainstream Inclusion in Local Education) Group and the Early Years transition meetings.

The work is also inextricably linked to two other important pieces of work:

- EHCN assessment recovery plan
- SENDAP Change Programme for which Portsmouth is the lead for the South East.

3. Scope of work

The scope of work is broad and will include a focus on the following key areas (by phase and type of provision):

- A. Early Years
- B. Mainstream schools Year R to 11
- C. Special Schools
- D. Inclusion Centres within mainstream schools
- E. Alternative Provision (Tier 4)
- F. Further Education
- G. Out of city placements

A draft action plan has been prepared which sets out all of the key strands of work and associated actions that will need to be undertaken including a range of short-term actions between April and August 2024 and medium and long term actions beyond this period.

Examples of good practice from other Local Authority (LA) areas should be explored including the work that has come of those LAs that are in the Safety Valve and Delivering Better Value programmes.

4. Membership

Membership of the Working Group will initially comprise of:

- Sarah Daly, Director of Children, Families and Education
- Chris Ward, Director of Finance and Resources (Richard Webb to deputise)
- Hayden Ginns, Assistant Director, CFE
- Mike Stoneman, Deputy Director, Education
- Cate Mullen, Interim Head of Inclusion
- Alison Critchley, Head of Sufficiency and Resources
- Debbie Anderson, Head of School Improvement and Early Years
- Angela Mann, Finance Manager
- Alison Egerton, Group Accountant, Finance
- Robert Healey, Accountant, Finance
- Maria Smith, Group Accountant, Finance
- Kimberley Stroud, Trainee Accountant, Finance
- Mindy Butler, Early Years and Childcare Manager
- Jo Hill, Sufficiency and Capital Strategy Manager
- Sharon Willis, SEN Service Manager
- Nikki Ledwidge, Project Co-ordinator, SENDAP Change Programme

It is proposed that Schools Forum Members will be invited to participate in this work. This will be done by using Schools Forum as a Reference Group and consulting Members on the action plan and the proposals that come from this.

Task and finish groups / workstreams will be agreed as appropriate and will report into the working group.

5. How the Working Group will operate

The Working Group will operate on the following basis:

- Meetings will be held every month until the end of the summer term 2024 (this will be reviewed and a decision will be made as to whether to continue with the working group beyond this period)
- The agenda will be sent out with papers at least five working days before the meeting
- Members will commit to reading all reports in advance of the meetings to ensure sufficient time during the meetings to discuss issues and engage in problem solving activity
- Brief notes and actions of the meeting will be recorded and sent to members within two weeks of the meeting.
- Meetings will normally be held in person.

Nikki Ledwidge, SENDAP Project Co-ordinator, will be responsible for monitoring the action plan and making sure that the plan is on track.

Working Group meeting dates have so far been set as follows (based on key themes):

22 April - determining priorities for summer term / themed meetings

13 May - specialist provision

7 June - early years provision

26 June - mainstream provision including schools and post-16

8 July - forecasting pupil numbers

24 July - finance

6. Accountability

The Working Group will report on its work to Schools Forum with the aim of presenting a report in the Autumn Term 2024 where it will seek its endorsement for the recommendations and ongoing work. The final decision on the recommendations will be taken by the Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Education.