



Parent Focus Group: Banded funding

17 March 2015, 10am-12pm, St Mary's

Participants

The meeting was attended by Alasdair Duerden, Programme Manager Special Educational Needs Reforms, and seven parents of children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in years 4 to 10, whose experience covered mainstream schools, special schools (including out of city provision), Integrated Resources (IRs) and split mainstream/special school placements; support via statements and School Action Plus with banded funding; and going through the EHC needs assessment.

Background

Alasdair explained the reasons for the review of SEN funding.

SEN reforms:

The SEN funding system now needs to work across the 0-15 age range, and cover early years settings and colleges as well as schools. It needs to support the increased focus on outcomes. The DfE is currently undertaking a review of SEN funding.

Funding pressures:

There is significant local pressure on high needs funding, with Sheffield City Council heading for a £2m-£4m overspend from the high needs budget. This includes £700,000 for banded funding for mainstream pupils.

To alleviate pressures in the short term, the council has reduced the banded funding available for **new** applicants, depending on the size of schools' delegated SEN budgets. Schools have been allocated to four quartiles, depending on the amount of delegated SEN funding per pupil they receive. Those in the highest quartile get 25% of the banded funding, while those in the lowest get 100%. This means that 75% of schools will get less additional money through the banded funding system. The reduction has saved approximately £250,000 over the year. This interim arrangement only applies to new applications for banded funding considered by the panel in February and March 2015. Funding for these cases will be allocated on this basis for the spring and summer terms. Decisions about additional funding for the autumn (2015) and spring (2016) terms will be taken in the light of the recommendations made by the Schools Forum SEN Funding Task & Finish Group in June this year.

Alasdair said that some children currently attending special schools would have been far better off in mainstream schools with the right support. Their support needs are lower than you would normally expect to provide for in specialist provision. These children might benefit from split placements, where the funding is split between special and mainstream schools. He acknowledged

that placement decisions should not be based on academic ability alone; some children may be able to cope with a mainstream curriculum, but not with the sensory overload or social complexity of a mainstream school.

The council is looking to reduce inappropriate out-of-city placements. In order to create the necessary space in local special schools, the council needs those pupils with lower levels of need to move out of special schools and into mainstream with appropriate, quality support.

Special schools have raised concerns that there are a number of unfunded places.

Problems with banded funding system:

Applications to the Banded Funding Panel vary widely, with some schools having done a lot before applying, and others having done very little. 90% of requests for banded funding are for Teaching Assistant time. Schools tend to focus on demonstrating expenditure, instead of interventions and outcomes. In the current academic year, the Council approved 150 out of 240 applications.

Around 50% of children on bands A and B do not have statements. The Council has no way of checking how the money is being spent. Once banded funding has been granted, the funding stays with the child throughout their school career, i.e. schools don't have to re-apply.

Alasdaire disputed the assertion (previously made by Council officers) that statements and banded funding are not linked in any way. He said that schools should fund the first 15 hours of TA support (which costs approximately £6,000 per year) from their notional SEN budgets, and the LA should fund anything above this level, if prescribed in the statement.

Banded funding is not used for special schools. Alasdaire felt that the cost of making provision for a child with a particular level of need should be the same, regardless of whether they attend a specialist or a mainstream setting.

When pupils move between settings, it is not possible to move all of the money.

Data:

There is increasing demand for special school placements, partially because some mainstream schools are not very inclusive. 44% of statemented children in Sheffield attend special schools, compared to 36% nationally. Parents asked whether there was a drift from mainstream to special schools in Y6/Y7. **Action:** Alasdaire to request data.

Sheffield issues more statements than other core cities, but fewer than the national average. There has been a downward trend over the past few years, but an increase last year, possibly due to concerns about the eligibility criteria for EHC plans. Sheffield has the highest use of School Action Plus in the country.

Distribution of notional SEN funding

The factors used by local authorities to distribute SEN funding to schools are dictated by the Education Funding Agency – these are primarily based on economic deprivation and low previous

attainment. The use of deprivation/attainment factors means that the average amount per pupil varies widely between schools in Sheffield – from just £154 up to £1,279.

Evidence shows that these factors are linked to SEN; however, only 1/3 of children with SEN qualify for Free School Meals. Local authorities are not allowed to distribute funding on the basis of the number of children on the SEN register, as that would create a perverse incentive for schools to over-identify children.

Schools in Sheffield receive a total of £44.4m in delegated SEN budgets, but there is no accountability as to how this money is being spent.

The City-Wide Learning Body is due to reconstitute as a Schools Company. This company may take over services from the LA. Some of the special schools are looking at forming a trust.

Issues raised by parents:

- **Communication:** Parents said that schools were not telling parents if they were applying for banded funding, whether an application had been successful, and how the money was being spent.
- **Lack of input from specialist services.** E.g. Speech and Language Therapy - many children are just seen once a year, and there is not enough capacity to train school staff. Some schools buy in extra SLT, some parents go private – there is no equity of provision. Same with the Autism Team, Occupational Therapy, Dyslexia support ...
- **Lack of training:** School staff lack understanding of complex communication disorders, and there is too little expertise in behaviour management. Teaching Assistants (including those who work in special schools) don't always have sufficient training in relation to specific needs.
- **Overcrowding:** Many schools – including secondary special schools and IRs - are overcrowded. This leads to schools becoming more noisy and busy, which causes problems for children with sensory issues.
- **Lack of flexibility:** Provision is often about what the already school has, not what the child needs.
- **Lack of accountability:** Schools are getting away with not implementing a statement or EHCP. There should be a well-publicised process that parents can use if this is happening.
- **Schools are not incentivised to be inclusive:** The focus on league tables means children with SEND are seen as a hindrance.

Options being considered

Alasdaire outlined a number of ideas currently being considered by the Schools Forum, and parents debated the pros and cons:

1) Give an EHC plan to all pupils in receipt of banded funding (i.e. those who require SEN provision in excess of £6,000 per year). This would affect over 300 children and young people who receive banded funding at the SA/SA+ (SEN Support) stage, i.e. without a statement or an EHC plan.

Pros: Schools should not be spending £6,000+ on SEN provision without a thorough assessment of the pupil's needs, a clear focus on outcomes and without proper monitoring. The annual review would provide a monitoring system.

Cons: Services would have to do more assessments, which could divert resources away from early intervention. There might be a rush for EHC plans as schools would see it as a way of getting more money. The annual review process doesn't work, as the LA tends to file amendments and only deals with them at transition.

2) Give an EHC plan to all pupils on band C and above, and introduce a "My Plan" (non-statutory plan) as a prerequisite for allocating funding at bands A and B.

Pros: The "My Plan" would be helpful if it had some teeth, and if there was a requirement that it is signed off and reviewed regularly in partnership with parents.

Cons: Families would have no redress if funding/provision was reduced. Schools would be able to spend a lot of money on SEN provision (up to 10,000) without having to properly assess the child's needs. IEPs did nothing to increase accountability, so why would a "My Plan" be any different? This would only work if the plans were being reviewed by someone outside the school, e.g. Educational Psychologist, panel. What would happen if the outcomes were not being achieved?

There is a risk that this approach could create more inequalities:

- Even though LAs are not allowed to use funding bands as a threshold for EHC plans, it is likely that funding band C would become the *unofficial* threshold for EHC plans for new entrants; however, *existing* statements would need to be converted regardless of whether the child received any banded funding at all
- Giving only pupils on bands A and B a "My Plan" would disadvantage pupils on SEN Support who don't receive top-up funding. We need more accountability for ALL children on SEN Support.

3) Give an EHC plan to all pupils on band C and above, and distribute the equivalent of band A and B funding to families of schools (based on a formula).

Pros: Would encourage schools to share resources and workforce development. Smaller families of schools could manage funding more responsively than the LA panel. The formula may be more accurate than the proxy indicators used to distribute delegated SEN funding.

Cons: Same as for proposal 2. In addition, this would create another layer of bureaucracy, add confusion and dilute accountability. Contracting out leads to a time lag, which would make the system less responsive. Not all head teachers are skilled at negotiating budgets. Some schools found working together on the Additional Needs pilot very challenging. There can be vested interests and empire building. Families would have no redress if funding/provision was reduced.

Ideas proposed by parents:

- More funding should be retained centrally and used to fund vital support services like Educational Psychology, Autism Team, Speech and Language Therapy, instead of being delegated to schools. The lack of capacity of these services is a major barrier to mainstream inclusion and to improving outcomes for children with SEND.
- Support services should see themselves as providing a service to the child, not the school. Some do (e.g. SLT), but others don't (e.g. Educational Psychology, Autism Team). Schools shouldn't be allowed to act as gatekeepers - parents should be able to refer their children into these services themselves.
- Make it mandatory for schools to involve parents in spending decisions
- The funding should follow the child

Next steps:

Alasdair will share parents' feedback with the Schools Forum, then meet again with the parents after Easter to give an update (**UPDATE:** meeting arranged for 8 June, 12.30-2pm, at St Mary's).

Proposals will be debated at a joint meeting of the Schools Forum and CWLB in June. A consultation with all stakeholders will take place over the summer. There is a possibility that the Council might not go for wholesale change in September.