



Parent Focus Group: SEN funding

8 June 2015, 12.30-3pm, St Mary's

Participants

The meeting was attended by Alasdair Duerden, Programme Manager Special Educational Needs Reforms at Sheffield City Council, and five parents of children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

Background

Most of the parents present had attended the previous meeting with Alasdair on 17 March 2015 (notes available on www.sheffieldparentcarerforum.org.uk/page/meeting-notes), so only a brief recap was given.

Alasdair explained that the Schools Forum needs to make a decision what will happen with new applications for banded funding and the quartile cap which was applied to recent banding allocations, after September 2015.

A new Inclusion Strategy is being developed by Tim Bowman, which aims to reduce the number of out-of-city placements by enabling more pupils with very complex needs to access special schools in Sheffield, and bring the number of children in special schools in line with the agreed capacity of those schools (i.e. the number of places funded by the Education Funding Agency) by supporting mainstream schools to be more inclusive. It is anticipated that the strategy is likely to take 2-3 years to have an effect on the ground.

Barriers to inclusion

Parents highlighted the following barriers to inclusion:

- Special school populations have been changing, with new entrants having more severe needs than their peers further up in the school. These younger pupils are less likely to be able to cope in a mainstream setting.
- A child who is performing well in a special school environment would not necessarily be able to cope in a mainstream school.
- Parents often receive conflicting advice from professionals (e.g. SENCOs or Educational Psychologists) who do not have a good understanding of what is available in special schools. -> Special schools need to clearly set out in the local offer which groups of children they cater for, and what they can provide. Mainstream schools (particularly secondary schools) should develop a prospectus explaining the SEND provision available in their setting.

- For children with very exceptional needs, creating local provision will never be cost-effective.
-> LAs should look into agreeing regional provision.
- Returners from out-of-city placements need appropriate social care provision; potential cuts to respite could impact on the success of the inclusion strategy. Some students are staying in residential placements for longer than they should do as there is no supported housing available locally.
-> Alasdair explained that short breaks/respite and transport have been brought into the SEND programme, to ensure a holistic approach. The Care Act should help more young people to be supported in their local communities.
- There is an urgent need for more staff training, particularly in mainstream schools. This particularly concerns behaviour management, understanding the concept of outcomes, and ensuring that TAS have the skills to increase children's independence and inclusion, instead of "babysitting" them.
- As a result of population growth (due to rising birth rates and new arrivals to the city) schools are becoming more crowded, which makes them harder to tolerate for many children with SEND. As pupil rolls go up, schools are running out of breakout spaces. The LA appears to be reluctant to build new schools or additional classrooms.
- Rising birth rates are also impacting on support services, e.g. Educational Psychology, Autism Team, Speech and Language Therapy, CAMHS, etc., which are already overstretched. Parents questioned whether these services will have capacity to support mainstream inclusion in the future.
-> Alasdair said savings might be achieved through the planned review of SEN transport. Special schools could provide more outreach to mainstream schools.
- The Speech and Language Therapy Service does not have sufficient expertise in working with non-verbal children.
-> Alasdair said that including this kind of expertise in descriptors of provision would help to drive commissioning.
- Behaviour policies in mainstream schools can be too rigid and do not take sufficient account of SEND.
- Some schools use "B coding" (registering children as "educated off-site") when children are not accessing school at all.
- Children with significant communication impairments (e.g. hearing impairment, non-verbal children) can become extremely isolated in mainstream settings and need access to peers who function at a similar level.
-> Alasdair said that dual placements could be one solution to helping create these social contacts.
- Students with SEN can take longer to achieve qualifications. For some, continuing at school to achieve a small number of GCSEs would be preferable to moving on to college, where a foundation learning course may be the only option open to them. Secondary schools need to be able to offer a reduced/differentiated curriculum for these learners, but many do not

understand what they can do.

-> Schools need guidance on how to use the greater flexibility in post-16 provision, e.g. spreading GCSEs over 3 years.

The local authority cannot dictate how schools should operate, but it can employ the levers it has at its disposal - primarily Ofsted inspections and funding. The LA wants to create a funding incentive with built-in checks and balances to incentivise schools to be more inclusive.

Localities model:

Alasdaire explained that the local authority is working with schools to consider how SEND provision and funding could be delivered via a localities model. There are currently seven localities, each consisting of around 15-20 schools (i.e. with more than one secondary school) but careful consideration needs to be given as to whether the current localities would form the basis of the new model. Each locality would have a strategic approach to SEN. Special schools would provide support to mainstream schools in their locality in relation to ASD and severe learning difficulties. The SEN Team has been reshaped and each SEN officer now has responsibility for one locality. The three MAST areas do not align with the locality boundaries and this needs taking into account. Each locality would have an area SENCO.

Action: Alasdaire to send map of localities.

Parents pointed out that the localities model is a historic model which is no longer functional. LA staff supporting localities have become so depleted that more and more responsibilities have been transferred to head teachers. Schools have forged new links which no longer reflect the old localities. Parents expressed concerns that there could be an imbalance of power between strong (secondary) academies and maintained (primary) mainstream schools, which could affect the allocation of funding to schools.

Funding: SEND funding for localities might include a number of factors – for example, the current allocations for banded funding, a percentage of notional SEN funding etc. This block of funding would then be managed by the locality to deliver a strategic approach to meeting the local need for SEND support and provision. It would be underpinned by the use of non-statutory My Plans and EHC Plans alongside clear descriptors of need, provision and associated levels of funding that would ensure consistent support was delivered across the city, regardless of which education setting a child or young person attends. The LA would retain a Complex Cases fund (mainly for pupils at funding band I), and manage post-16 funding as a city-wide “locality”. Understanding how special schools and other forms of alternative and specialist provision fit within a localities model is being considered as part of the work.

Alasdaire said that the intention was to create a more fluid model, which would encompass satellite hubs (due to be trialled by Bents Green / Westfield), dual placements and the new bespoke provision at Kenwood House.

Parents said that the model failed to address the imbalance between IRs, which would still get £10k per pupil, and similar provision (e.g. learning support bases, nurture groups) which does not attract the same level of funding. Parents highlighted the need for true inclusion which is flexible enough to adapt to individual needs.

Parents also said that the localities model would not help inclusive schools who attract children with SEN from other catchment areas, as no additional funding would be available for children with low level, high incidence needs.

Level descriptors: Alasdair explained that the LA intends to develop a set of level descriptors based on a model developed by Wakefield. Funding decisions would be driven by descriptors of provision, which would be linked to levels of need. Each level of provision would be costed, and within each locality this could be provided to schools either as additional funding or as a resource (e.g. shared TAs).

The descriptors would be broad enough to allow them to be individualised. Parents pointed out that descriptors of provision needed to be specific enough to avoid schools paying lip service, and that parental agreement should be sought as part of the checks and balances. Alasdair said that the appropriateness of provision would be reviewed annually with parents, via the annual review of the EHC plan / statement, or My Plan (non-statutory plan, similar to an IEP). If a child was not making expected progress on a My Plan, then this would be a reason to carry out an EHC needs assessment. For children with very severe needs, the LA could still go straight to assessment without trying a My Plan first. If parents were unhappy with the provision made, they would be able to challenge the EHC plan through the tribunal route. Those without an EHC plan would need to complain to their area SENCO, and could request an EHC needs assessment if the issue was not resolved to their satisfaction.

Strategic planning of specialist placements: Alasdair said that in the past, the “easiest” pupils had been placed first, and the most complex ones last. This meant that sometimes classes were too full and complex children had to go out of city. Going forward, the intention is to deal with the most complex cases first.

Next steps

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 year. 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 (see notes from previous meeting).

The Schools Forum now needs to decide whether to continue this arrangement for the rest of the financial year (September 2015 – April 2016). Alasdair talked parents through a range of interim options which the school funding working group had considered. Subject to further discussion, the option under consideration at present would give schools a choice between:

- A reduction in banded funding across the board, either just for bands A and B, or for all bands, and putting a cap on the number of new applications;
- OR
- No reduction in banded funding PROVIDED schools in a locality agree to pool their budgets and re-assess all banded pupils against a new set of descriptors currently being developed.

There would be no impact on special schools and IRs. For mainstream schools, the average impact would be approximately a £2,000 budget reduction.

Parents asked who would re-assess pupils. Alasdair suggested that localities may be given additional funding to release a SENCO to take on this extra work, with central support from the SEND team and the Educational Psychology Service. These and other questions need to be considered and answered before any final decisions are made.

The proposal will be taken to the joint City-Wide Learning Body/School Forum meeting on 2 July. The meeting will need to agree the interim proposals and that the locality model is the right approach for how the system should work from April 2016. Details will then be worked out over the summer, and any consultation on the April 2016 proposals would take place over the autumn term.