

Schools Finance Group: Notes of meeting on Wednesday 5 January 2022

Items for DEF to note:

- **Item 3 – DSG Management Action Plan**
DEF to note that Devon to be included in Wave 2 of DfE Safety Valve Intervention funding.
- **Item 4 – Education Other than at School (EOTAS)**
DEF to note use of EOTAS packages where the LA is unable to secure education in a school setting for children with an EHCP. Schools and families to be supported and challenged through SEN projects to ensure that pupils with EHCPs can remain in school.
- **Item 6 – Mutual Fund Board**
Premium fees for mutual fund to be increased by 5% in the light of ongoing claims for staff absence linked to Covid.
- **Item 7 – School Balances**
DEF to note Scrutiny request for information on schools' balances, including academies, in the context of the current high needs block position within the DSG.

ATTENDANCE

DCC

Mat Thorpe (chair)

Adrian Fox

Dawn Stabb

Heidi Watson-Jones (notes)

Senior Assistant County Treasurer

Head Accountant (Education & Learning)

Head of Education & Learning

Service Support Officer (E&L)

Devon Schools Leadership Services

Primary:

Alun Dobson

Jamie Stone (**apologies**)

Penny Hammett

Paul Walker

Marwood Primary

Denbury Primary

Fort Federation

First Federation Trust

Secondary:

Sammy Crook (**apologies**)

Andrew Davis

Lorraine Heath

Rob Gammon

Tiverton Federation

Exmouth Community College

Uffculme Academy

The King's School

Alternative Provision:

Rob Gasson (part)

Wave Multi Academy Trust

Special Schools

Keith Bennett

Sarah Pickering

Marland School

Mill Water School

DAG

Faith Butler

Alex Walmsley

Adrian Hines

Special School Governors

Secondary Governors

Primary Governors

Early Years Providers

Other DCC Officers

Julia Foster

Katrina Harverson

Richard Curtis

Hannah Smart

Tracey Jones (item 3)

vacancy

Senior Manager SEND

Senior Accountant (Education)

Senior Accountant (Schools)

ACE Tiverton Special School (observing)

SEND 100 Project Lead

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1. Minutes of Previous Meeting – 3 November 2021

- Proactive approach for SEN helpline to make direct contact with targeted schools: **Julia Foster** to pick up further consideration of a targeted approach through data consideration through One Devon and SEND Spotlight processes. Heads were keen to ensure that SEND 100 investment in the helpline must be appropriately used to fullest effect
- All other actions complete. Minutes agreed as an accurate record.

2. DSG Month 8 Report 2021-22

- Month 8 outturn forecast has risen to £3.1m, with movement mainly within High Needs Block; SEND mainstream (plus packages), independent special school placements and uplift funding to maintained special schools.
- Noted that this uplift does not include residential provision, which will be considered separately for the two schools.
- £700k savings achieved from joint funded residential placements and management action agreed for 2021/22. 2022/23 agreement for £1.4m contribution from social care for jointly funded placements.
- Cost of EHCPs rising above projected budget; mindful that providing incentive through plus packages for mainstream schools to keep children on roll may result in longer term savings as placements in independent specialist sector are avoided.
- Considered resource base application process focus on schools judged by Ofsted as at least 'good'. Noted that a proactive approach in Phase 2 targeted schools with appropriate expertise and location. RSC colleagues to be involved earlier in the process in future to mitigate against refusal to approve proposals for academy schools and unintended delay.
- Recognise that the number of resource bases in Devon is lower than in other authorities; the LA will be exploring options for establishing new bases with capital investment.
- Recognise that risk mitigation and reporting around the High Needs Block requires strengthening, with further support through corporate processes.
- Considered whether the involvement of SFG in the monitoring and challenge process is likely to be considered by DfE during deep dive investigations.

ACTION:

- **JF / PW** to consider resource base criteria.

3. DSG Management Action Plan

Safety Valve Intervention

- LA senior officers met with DfE on 14 December. Devon has been included in second wave of intervention funding. Noted that DfE approach to date has been bespoke to each individual LA's position.
- Further meeting on 5 January with Finance representatives and 7 January with SEND Advisor to deep dive into DSG management action plan position which will be re-worked and submitted to DfE in February.
- Additional engagement and support from SFG, stakeholders and other officers may be required throughout the process. SFG members confirmed that they would be happy to be approached regarding further involvement.
- Expecting some clarity prior to the beginning of the next financial year.
- DSG and SEND Governance oversight framework to be shared at DEF.

SEND 100

- **Special Schools Outreach projects** launched in November 2021 with positive involvement from schools and SENDCos. Ongoing scope continues

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to be reviewed strategically at school level with broader impact than with individual pupil approach.

- Staff recruitment continues to be challenging, particularly for TAs, and is impacting on school involvement. Impact continues to be proportionate to involvement in the projects.
- Currently main involvement seems to be from outward-facing, more positive schools. A wider, strategic approach to selecting settings with specific need for support to be considered in future.
- **Babcock Outreach projects** being impacted by recruitment difficulties and impact on school capacity to participate. 26 pupils have been supported to date by the 8 Specialist Support Assistants in post (original plan was an annual target of 80 pupils supported by 22 SSAs).
- Increased emphasis proposed to advertise support available to those settings not yet receiving information through Babcock and DCC comms.
- A time-limited grant funding arrangement is planned be rolled out for school-based, staffed initiatives focused on meeting pupil needs within school SEN support. This will be funded by the underspend resulting from the partial recruitment of SSA team.
- Considered the current project timescale is until July 2022; implications for funding of first full 12 months of the project to be confirmed, which will enable assessment of achievable savings. Ongoing project delivery following Babcock in-housing in August to be considered.
- **DCC SEN Support** – revised proposals now agreed by SEND100 Steering group; costs and achievable savings to be reworked.
- Officer recruitment planned to build capacity to provide DCC support and challenge role to settings, targeting children at transition EHCP review stages at year 6 and year 11. This will enable appropriate provision is in place for the next stage of their education, and potential cost savings linked to transition difficulties.
- **Babcock SEN Helpline** – noted calls are increasing, and currently relating largely to clarification of the statutory assessment process, communication with other professionals and managing parental anxiety.
- Considered targeted support for North Devon area (due to SSA recruitment difficulties). Alternative support approaches currently being considered including SEN advisers working with groups of schools.
- SFG confirmed that access to the detailed report was helpful, with a verbal highlight overview available at the meeting.

- Discussed request for DEF assurance that projected savings for the new financial year continue to be at an appropriate level, and whether approaches in other LAs to mitigate high needs pressures are successful.
- Longer-term consideration of budget impact to be introduced by Finance.
- SEND Transformation programme is based on knowledge gained from other LAs. Mindful of lack of evidence to support increased levels of EHCPs in Devon. Draft report on SEND Transformation delivery to be considered at Cabinet on 12 January.

ACTION:

- **DS** to share DSG and SEND governance oversight framework at DEF

4. EOTAS funding

- Following request at last SFG, the group considered parental preference for placement of children with EHCPs. Education Other than at School is not a category of parental preference or choice – it is a measure available to the LA when education cannot be secured in any school.

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- Considered how schools and families can be supported and challenged through SEN projects to ensure that pupils with EHCPs remain in school.
- Noted that the number of children in this type of arrangement has remained stable, however the cost of packages being put in place has increased. Mindful that EOTAS arrangements mitigate the increased cost of an independent placement.
- Children with EHCPs should not be taken off a school roll without discussion with the SEN team to ensure that delivery support detailed within the Plan is fully considered.
- Noted that AWPU is recoverable from school where a child is removed from roll as is the case for a permanent exclusion. Heads shared concerns around impact of AWPU funding being removed if a child is placed in a school following the census date but later removed from school roll to an EOTAS arrangement.
- SFG requested data on number of children leaving a mainstream school setting and moving to an EOTAS arrangement.
- **SFG endorsed that schools to be encouraged and supported to keep young people with EHCPs in school.**

ACTION:

- **JF** to provide data on the number of children moving to an EOTAS arrangement from mainstream schools.

5. Financial Planning 2022-23

- SFG considered key national funding changes for the new financial year.
- Any additional funding to be allocated through AEN factors as previously agreed at DEF.
- Inclusion of the full funding of the Termination of Employment Costs budget still to be confirmed by DfE in line with disapplication request made last year.
- £12.5m uplift in High Needs Block insufficient to cover current position, and will be considered with DfE as part of Safety Valve discussions.
- Noted increase in places in maintained special schools, and funding for outreach support from special schools to mainstream to further improve capacity.
- In-year reduction in number of EHCPs offset by increase in cost of plus packages.

6. Mutual Fund Board and Appeals

- Year-end surplus projected at month 8 of £388k, following increase in claims linked to Covid absence.
- Noted that 4 schools have left, and 11 have joined between 2021/22 and 2022/23.
- Mutual Fund Board considered options for future premium costs, with a proposed increase in premium of 5%, linked to ongoing uncertainties and claims linked to the Pandemic.
- Noted that rebates will not be paid out if balance falls below £400k.
- Thanks were extended to Richard and team for the work in running and maintaining the fund.
- Considered the position of external insurance providers increasing premium rates.
- Confirmed AD, PH and JS eligible to vote. PW supporting school currently in Mutual Fund.

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- Members confirmed they were happy to endorse proposals as per Option 2.

7. Any Other Business

- **School Improvement Consultation**- closed before December and feedback awaited by DfE
- **School Balances** – DCC Scrutiny requesting LA collate information at financial period end. DCC able to access figures for maintained schools, but requested support on obtaining information from academies, and MATs.
- Mindful that some Trusts may be reluctant to share detail directly with the LA, but public accounts will be published in January but these may not be published on a school-level basis.
- DfE could consider the current financial position in the context of £20m maintained school balances.
- Noted that academies are expected to maintain a certain level of financial reserves, as per Academies Benchmark report.

Items for DEF on 19 January

Finance update report to include:

- Month 8 position
- DSG Management Plan
- SEND 100 Projects
- Safety Valve

Next meetings:

- **Wednesday 2 March 2022** (09.15 – 12.00 – venue TBC)
- **Monday 6 June 2022** (14.00 – 16.50 – venue TBC)
- **Monday 11 July 2022** (15.00 – 17.50 – venue TBC)
- **Wednesday 14 September 2022** (09.15 – 12.00 – venue TBC)
- **Wednesday 9 November 2022** (09.15 – 12.00 – venue TBC)
- **Friday 6 January 2023** (09.15 – 12.00 – venue TBC)
- **Wednesday 8 March 2023** (09.15 – 12.00 – venue TBC)