

Agenda Item 8

Report to: Schools' Forum

Date: 22nd November 2019

Title of Report: Briefing on place commissioning

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Purpose of Report: To update on the process of commissioning places in special schools and facilities to maximise occupancy and ensure efficient use of the High Needs Block funding stream

1. Background

- 1.1 In 2018 we were able to report on impact achieved through revision of the place commissioning process in special schools and special facilities in mainstream schools. The report detailed significant increase over the previous 2 years, in the occupancy of placements as a result of improved identification of need, early consultation on prospective numbers and an agreed set of principles through which funding would be recouped should places remain unfilled. <https://democracy.eastsussex.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=496&MId=3737&Ver=4>
- 1.2 In real terms these improvements meant that £300k of high needs funding that had been allocated to placements which, prior to 2016 were not taken up, was being efficiently utilised to pay for the support of pupils with SEND in specialist provision.
- 1.3 Adjustments made to commissioned numbers since 2017 have been sustained, lending weight to the accuracy of the process and indicating a more productive consultative relationship between the LA and its special schools. The exception to this has been in 2 primary special facilities for speech, language and communication need. These remain below numbers despite counter-indicative joint intelligence, shared by health service CITES (Children's integrated Therapy Services Speech and Language service), the Educational Psychology service and CLASS (Communication, Language and Autism Service). To address the anomalous position whereby there remain vacant spaces despite prevalence of need, a task and finish group is convening in December 2019 to draw up resources and strategy to ensure SENCOs have the confidence and competence to identify and assess pupil's need early, so that a timely referral for specialist language support can be made. The work is supported by the respective head teachers who have been instrumental in bringing to light the issues behind under-identification of need. There is also 1 Special School that has been consistently under occupied despite receiving referrals. Therefore the school will see a reduction in place numbers for 2020/21 and the Local Authority will continue to liaise with to find an appropriate solution that might lead to places increase in the future.

2. Further improvements in 2018-19

2.1 The trend toward full occupancy in special schools and special facilities in mainstream schools has continued into 2018-19. In addition to strategies deployed to realise the initial turnaround in achieving more effective and targeted use of high needs funding, further areas of efficiency have been identified:

- Investment in creating improved synergy between ISEND and SLES has resulted in systems that enable regular dialogue between senior managers to share intelligence and understanding about place planning for existing and future provision.
- Greater join up with the Assessment and Planning (SEN) team means that current pressures for special placements are taken into account during the commissioning process and children are identified earlier for placements.
- The Special Facility in Mainstream Governance Group, now in its second annual cycle provides a platform for dialogue between the LA and inclusion/facility leads and head teachers about current and predicted growth in provision need. This has led to a shared understanding across all providers around the role of specialist facilities in supporting the wider agenda in both improving local provision and the importance of maximising capacity in managing overall costs to the HNB.
- Development of the new matrix for special schools is well underway, and its early work has helped to shape an understanding about the thresholds of need for our highest cost placements so that these are used by those pupils with the highest needs. An early draft will be available for consultation with Mainstream and Special School Head Teachers during its pilot phase in 2020. This matrix will safeguard the additional specialist placement capacity that East Sussex will see coming on line as new special facility secondary placements and new free school places from 2020.

2.2 The improved occupancy position in 9 out of 10 special schools over 2018-19, has resulted in the decision to formalise the increase in commissioned placements for these schools for 2019-20. Where previously, numbers over those reported to the DfE were agreed informally and paid for from the high needs block, confidence in the system from sustained high occupancy means that a higher proportion of these over number places are now reported to the EFSA to draw down place funding on a permanent basis.

3. Evidence of improvement

3.1 The below table summarises the total under/over occupancy in Special Schools / Special Academies for academic years 2016/2017 to 2018/2019. Appendix 1 shows the over / under occupancy for Special Schools / Academies, and Appendix 2 for Special Facilities.

| | Special Facilities | | | Special Schools | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------------|-----------|-----------|
| | 2016/2017 | 2017/2018 | 2018/2019 | 2016/2017 | 2017/2018 | 2018/2019 |
| Agreed Places | 143 | 144 | 128 | 943 | 948 | 980 |
| Occupied Places | 113 | 125 | 134 | 943 | 976 | 1,030 |
| (Under) / Over Occupancy | (30) | (19) | 6 | *0 | 28 | 50 |

*For individual schools, under-occupancy varied from 1 to 12 places which is masked by significant over occupancy in a number of schools.

4. Conclusion

- 4.1 The Local Authority, schools and academies will continue to build on the success seen through the implementation of these changes. There remain challenges with regard to ensuring the right pupils are in the right school places; the next focus will be on low rates of transition from special school to mainstream, particularly from key stage 2 to 3. The new Special School Matrix will assist not only in decision making about new placements, but also in the review of existing placements, to help families recognise and celebrate where pupils have achieved their outcomes and have the potential to be reintegrated into their local mainstream school. This will be key to managing spend and pressures within the High Needs Block and ensuring sufficient resources are available for additional / new placements at Free Schools and Facilities.