

Schools Forum Matters Arising – High Needs Information

The minutes of 16 September 2020 meeting record a discussion, between the Authority and Forum members, on the appropriateness of the presentation to the Schools Forum of detailed occupancy data relating to high needs places and of other information relating to high needs strategy and operational delivery. These discussions touched on the remit and role of the Schools Forum in relation to high needs matters. No resolutions were reached in the meeting. It was recognised that further discussion is needed and would be helpful, including with reference to the DfE's guidance on the remit of the Schools Forum in relation to high needs funding.

The DfE's 'roles and responsibilities' table is provided for members' reference. This was last presented to the Forum in January 2020.

The Authority met with the Chair and Vice Chair of the Forum on 2 October and agreed the following principles and outline information schedule.

Principles behind the presentation of high needs information

- The Authority will present key information to the Forum using a planned schedule, which will be published as part of the annual work programme at the start of the academic year. This should give Forum members the confidence that key information will be presented in a planned way.
- This information will be presented in written reports in advance of the meeting (as other reports are). This should remove any frustration currently felt that updates that have previously been provided verbally have been difficult to track.
- This information will be presented when the Forum is asked for its view on the Authority's proposals as an item for consultation i.e. reports will not typically just be presented 'for information' except for on e.g. DSG settlements and HNB related national reviews and funding system changes. This will support the Forum's meetings to remain focused whilst also continuing to assert the Forum's important role as a consultative body.
- The Authority will continue to follow our general long-standing approach that we will always seek where possible to present proposals indicatively at least one meeting before we ask the Forum to give its final views. This approach enables close consideration and helps to avoid surprises.
- Although this information will include descriptions of the Authority's strategic intent and rationale for the proposals – the why the Authority proposing this - the information will mostly be financial (regarding the management of the HNB and financial pressures) and will not cover operational delivery matters, with relevant strategic / rationale information presented at a high level rather than at individual setting level. This will support the Forum's meetings to remain focused, whilst also ensuring that the Forum is aware of the Authority's wider strategic intent. The Authority will provide school high needs places sufficiency information in the form of an annual report. This will fulfil clearly the Regulatory requirement for the Authority to consult annually with the Forum on planned places commissioning.
- Forum members will be expected to access 'outside of the Forum meetings' wider SEND information that is presented to other groups and that is already published, including information presented to the SEND Partnership. The Authority will signpost this information (webpage links) for Forum members at the bottom of agendas. This will again support the Forum's meetings to remain focused on financial matters, whilst still enabling Forum members to access wider information. We will also use this approach to signpost other wider

reports as these become available in the annual cycle e.g. the School Organisation Plan, the LAC Virtual School Head's annual report, relevant Children's Services Scrutiny Committee reports.

- Where the Forum wishes in more detail to explore high needs matters that are presented by the Authority for consultation, this will be done using a sub-group, which will meet for a specific timeframe. The Authority would anticipate that the sub group would meet typically in the early to mid autumn term when the Authority is developing its formula funding proposals. This approach will again support the Forum's meetings to remain focused (so that other important DSG matters are given appropriate time for consideration) whilst enable Forum members to discuss the Authority's proposals in more detail. This is an approach that the Authority already uses for Schools Block and Early Years Block formula funding matters.
- The Authority thinks it will be helpful for the wording of the Forum's recommendations (made in January each year) to be adjusted to ensure that it is clear that the Authority is the decision maker in respect of the High Needs Block. Rather than recording the planned High Needs Block budget as 'recommended' by the Schools Forum, wording along the lines of 'the Schools Forum supports the Authority....in the planned distribution of High Needs Block funding / the planned places to be commissioned / the planned arrangements for top-up funding etc etc' would be used. In reporting this to the Executive and then Council, at the budget setting stage in February, the Authority will then also be able to summarise the Forum's key agreed feedback on the planned use of the HNB. This change would ensure that respective roles are clear and that the formal view of the Forum as a consultative body is reported.
- An important point to note here is that the Authority needs to explore and consider further how the DfE's brand new HNB 'management tool' should come into the Forum's work programme. This tool may be a suitable vehicle for combining the presentation of both strategic planning and current / forecasted future year financial information.

Schedule of High Needs Information

- September and October
 - Summary and explanation of the DfE's summer announcements on DSG / HNB settlements.
 - Draft principles and proposals for top-up funding for the next financial year. Consideration of whether these need a working group to review.
 - Formal consultation document on our high needs funding model for the next financial year. The consultation document includes a list of commissioned places by setting.
- December
 - Responses to the HNB consultation document.
 - Indicative DSG / HNB planned budget for the next financial year at summary level.
 - The forecasted DSG / HNB spending position for the current year and block balances to be carried forward with outline proposals for the use or retention of these balances.
 - Consideration of the 2019-20 Exclusions Report.
 - Consideration of the annual report on school high needs places sufficiency.
- January
 - Full detail of the Authority's planned DSG and HNB allocation, including high needs block funding model / top up values and indicative setting-level allocations on which the planned HNB distribution is based.
 - HNB future years forecast.

- July
 - Summary statement on incremental developments in the Authority's HNB planning, including highlight of any significant changes from the basis used to establish the planned HNB budget for the current year and description of any emerging issues.

- As and when (next available meeting):
 - Where the DfE announces significant changes to HNB arrangements or other wider changes to the SEND / AP system that will have financial implications for the DSG. Consideration of whether these need a working group to review.