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**Report to: Schools Forum**

**Date 11th March 2021**

**Report of: John Betts, Interim Finance Business Partner (Education & Skills)**

**Title: Update from the High Needs Block Sub Group**

**Status For information**

The High Needs Block Sub Group met for the first time on 24 February.

The following members were in attendance: S Hughes, D Fountain, N Redhead, S Howell, M White. The meeting was supported by the following officers: J Betts, Y O’Brien, P Harvey, D Holmes.

The following items were discussed:

* Purpose and Terms of Reference
* Benchmarking Options for Exploration
* Proposed Response to DfE Consultation on High Needs
* High Needs budget 2019/20 and 2020/21

The final, agreed Purpose and Terms of Reference is attached. What follows is a summary of the discussions around the agenda topics listed above, but please note that this summary remains provisional, as formal minutes of the meeting have not been finalised or agreed by the members of the group.

**Benchmarking Options for Exploration**

We were agreed that any benchmarking information should only be used to support decision making, not to replace it. We also thought that the statistical comparators put forward by DfE in their SEND Benchmarking Tool may not always be suitable for Birmingham.

The comparator authorities used by DfE are as follows: Luton, Sandwell, Nottingham, Wolverhampton, Enfield, Waltham Forest, Slough, Manchester, Walsall, Derby.

We thought exploring comparisons with the other Core Cities may make more sense. The Core Cities are as follows: Birmingham, Bristol, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham, Sheffield.

To test whether these Authorities were comparable, we could try to identify levels of free school meals eligibility, deprivation, access to Disability Living Allowance etc. We could also seek the following information from the Core Cities:

* How many schools they have (categorised by phase etc)
* The level of funding received
* How they allocate their funding (particularly around High Needs)

J Betts would follow up with representatives at the Core Cities education finance group.

We would always need to bear in mind that there may be factors for Birmingham (for example, the Orthopaedic Hospital, the Children’s Hospital) that generate additional need for SEND services for children / young people – we may be able to test this against further information from the Core Cities. Steve Hughes volunteered to go through any additional information we may be able to obtain.

Overall, we wanted to start using benchmarking data to start to identify areas that may warrant further attention, especially where we may be an obvious outlier – we would then want to understand why we were deviating from the norm (for example, where that maybe a deliberate decision to invest in a particular area).

**Year on Year Spend**

An analysis of High Needs block budgets for 2019/20 and 2020/21 was shared (and is attached to this paper for information). There was a concern expressed that the breakdown of spending categories was insufficient. However, a greater breakdown would not allow for benchmarking comparisons, because that required categorising spend on a consistent basis set by the DfE to collect the same spending data from all authorities.

Nonetheless, it was agreed that this sort of analysis is required for the Forum to make meaningful comment on budget proposals put forward by the Authority. It will require some further narrative so that the plans and reasons for any changes in spending levels (either investments or reductions) is understood. This should help inform decisions going forward (particularly insofar as it supports meaningful consultation).

**DfE Consultation on High Needs**

The DfE’s consultation on high needs was discussed. Overall there was disappointment that DfE seemed to be just tinkering around the edges of the system ,rather than undertaking a fundamental review that reflected the need to spend on children with SEND. There was a tension between pragmatically supporting DfE’s short term solution (to use updated historic spend) and an acknowledgement that historic spend doesn’t necessarily properly reflect current SEND need. The details of the consultation (ad proposed response) is elsewhere on today’s agenda.

**BIRMINGHAM SCHOOLS FORUM – HIGH NEEDS SUB BLOCK GROUP**

**24th Feb 2021**

**PURPOSE AND TERMS OF REFERENCE**

**Purpose**

The purpose of the group is to improve the quality of understanding of the uses of High Needs Block funding, so that the Schools Forum can make informed comments and suggestions regarding the prioritisation and use of scarce resources, including both supporting and challenging proposals put forward by the Local Authority (recognising where the ultimate decision making lies).

In discharging this responsibility, the Sub Group will consider:

* What service areas the total high needs block budget is spent on
* What limitations, restrictions and responsibilities are imposed by Department for Education on this use (on the Forum and on the Local Authority)
* How valid comparisons and benchmarking can inform spending decisions
* How best to identify data (financial and non-financial) and other information to support the Forum’s deliberations
* Assessment of outcomes, impact and value for money of allocations

The overall aim is to arrive at a consensus to feed back into deliberations at the Forum; or where consensus cannot be reached, an agreement on how to articulate different perspectives. In doing so, verifiable data will be used wherever possible.

Copy of a spreadsheet for the High Needs Block Funding Analysis with budgets for 2019-20 and 2020-21