



Please reply to: Rachael Williams
Head of Learning, Education and Skills
2nd Floor North, Tor Hill House, Torbay Council,
Castle Circus, Torquay. TQ1 3DR

Telephone: 01803 208743
E-mail: rachael.williams@torbay.gov.uk
Website: www.torbay.gov.uk
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Dear Colleague,

I am writing to you to inform you of decisions that School Forum have been required to take to deal with a budget deficit. These difficult decisions have been taken without the need to impact on individual schools budgets.

As you will be aware, School Forum proactively work to manage the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) on behalf of the education sector. In 2016/2017 the budget was £90 million of which £53 million was dedicated to fund the Academy Schools, leaving £37 million for Maintained Schools and Education Services.

At the forum meeting on 29th June 2017, School Forum received the final outturn position statement for the 2016/2017 DSG. For the first time since the inception of DSG the budget has resulted in an overspend of £834,597. There were two significant factors impacting on the outturn position. The first being the demand on the higher needs block for children with Special Educational Needs and the second being the number of children taking up a statutory offer for both universal and targeted nursery placements.

The higher needs pressures have been well reported to forum; this is due to the rise in the numbers of pupils with Education Health and Care Plans and a greater amount of funding required per pupil to meet the increasing complexity of need within each plan. The second area of pressure within the early years block had not been reported to forum and could not have been foreseen ahead of the summer term headcount process. The driving factors underpinning this spend are driven by the increased number of children eligible for a nursery placement above that of those assessed through the DFE allocation process. This has resulted in the local area being required to fund an additional 211 children for the 3 and 4 year old entitlement and 182 eligible children for 2 year old funding. No actions could have been taken to mitigate against this spend as there are no discretionary factors applied within the statutory criteria. Whilst we anticipate a small funding adjustment may be received from the DFE as a result of us communicating our concerns, it is likely to be substantially less than the funding required to provide the statutory places.

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To deal with the funding pressures and shortfall, School Forum were required to explore all options available, these included;

- Claw back money from schools during this financial year
- Deal with the overspend through a top slice against the per pupil funding allocation next year
- Revisit the DSG funding previously allocated to the Vulnerable Pupils Projects and cease some activity

To protect the central schools budgets, the third option was agreed unanimously by Forum and the group delegated the task of reviewing the longevity of all the projects to Rachael Williams, Mike Lock, Adam Morris and Mark Eager.

As members of the Vulnerable Pupils Steering Group, these representatives were well placed to understand the work of each of the project areas and the attached commitments. After very detailed analysis and careful consideration the group took the decisions listed below. All decisions taken were in the context of the budget available, with a focus on maximising the impact on the most vulnerable pupils for the benefit of the local area.

Torbay Education Safeguarding Service (TESS)

The service is well regarded by schools and provides a good platform for shared work in relation to improving the dialogue and practice standards between statutory social care and schools. Due to additional investment by Torbay Children's Services, there will be no change to the TESS Service. This service will continue to be offered until August 2018 when the original funding was due to cease.

The investment provided by Children's services will continue to ensure there is capacity to drive forward the improvement work being monitored by John Coughlan as our Commissioner on behalf of the Department for Education.

Autism Champions

The work of the group was predominantly focussed on improving the practitioner knowledge of Autism within the education sector. The aim of this project has been met through the upskilling of staff and training. In order to maximise the impact of the work to date, the decision taken is:

- The 1st Cohort of Autism Champions will continue to receive their TLR payments until 31st December 2017
- The TLR offered to the 2nd Cohort of Champions will no longer be available. Schools affected by this decision will need to take the necessary actions to mitigate against internal issues i.e. timetabling and cover arrangements.

The local authority will also work in partnership with Brixham College to ensure a regular networking opportunity remains for the trained champions to ensure the newly gained knowledge is not lost.

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Challenging Behaviour – Intensive Outreach Support Service

Through my representation to the Director of Children's Services it has been agreed by Andy Dempsey that the Intensive Outreach Support Service will be continued until August 2019. This service will be secured by the use of investment from the Troubled Families Programme, with the staffing being sustained at two full time workers. The workers will need to work with families that are aligned to the troubled family programme; to ensure that the investment from Children's services is valid.

School Forum recognises that the investment in intensive outreach support can have a positive impact on reducing the spend on expensive alternative packages. For this reason, forum need to continue to review the evidence of this service with the view that a 'spend to save' option could be achievable through the higher needs block in the future.

Family Support Network

The Family Support Network is valued by schools and has been well facilitated through a joint approach from South West Family Values and Public Health. The Local Authority will continue to work with these partners to ensure a sustainable network is provided.

Signs of Safety

The Signs of Safety training commissioned for all education providers will continue and the costs will be absorbed by the Local Authority school improvement budget.

STITCH

Unfortunately a difficult decision was taken to withdraw the funding allocated to STITCH. This project although considered to be highly worthwhile could not be prioritised above the services listed above. We will continue to work with Debbie Pritchard as the project lead and the identified partner agencies to explore all options for an alternative funding method.

Central Co-Ordination

During the implementation of the vulnerable pupil's projects, the local area has benefitted from the external consultancy support of Debbie Pritchard. Debbie has worked with the sector to identify the priorities. Due to the budget savings required it is felt that we cannot continue to engage consultancy support from Debbie. We hold the work that Debbie has achieved in high regard and we will ensure that sufficient notice is provided to ensure that all work can be concluded to a satisfactory level. I am sure you would wish to join me in thanking Debbie for the expertise she has provided.

The services that are remaining are well established and have governing arrangements within existing organised groups/meetings that will enable sustainability without the need for external consultation support.

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The prioritisation of resources is not a reflection that the group underestimates the significant value and benefit of all other work areas. The work achieved to date has been achieved through the hard work, dedication and often “goodwill” of a number of headteachers, senior leaders, teachers and officers. The legacy of this group is the continuation of the vast majority of services for the benefit of pupils. I know you would want to join me in thanking all contributors.

The description above represents a difficult and complex set of decisions that have been carefully considered. The additional inward investment from Children’s Services has resulted in the majority of face to face services being retained. The allocation of resource by the Director of Children’s Services, has been carefully aligned to the wider improvement journey of the department and has been provided in recognition of the additional capacity required within the education sector to manage an increasing complex group of pupils.

In taking these decisions on behalf of School Forum, the group were mindful of the continuing pressure that exists within this year’s DSG budget. The projected outturn of the higher needs block continues to demonstrate that there will be a significant overspend. Early projections indicate that the pressure in higher needs could be in excess of £400k. The pressure on the number of early years’ pupils requiring a provision is not yet understood and could add risk to the budget.

The decisions taken by the group, although challenging, have resulted in no legacy issues being passed to the following year. The Forum will be challenged to take equally hard decisions on behalf of all schools, with no ability to manage through a reserve fund. It is only through the pooling of expertise and the creation of a proactive preventative approach that we will be able to begin to address the needs within the local area.

Kindest regards

Rachael Williams (On behalf of School Forum)



Head of Education, Learning and Skills

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