
SUBJECT: Dingley's Promise, Cluster Funding, Special Schools bandings

DATE: 25th September 2024

RECIPIENT: Schools' Forum

SUMMARY:

The Schools' Forum is asked to note:

1. The exemption to procurement for Dingley's Promise contract extension
2. Progress on the mainstream cluster funding programme
3. Update on the special schools banding review

Dingley's Promise

Dingley's Promise is a specialist early years intervention and setting for children with SEND.

The benefit to the High Needs Block of an intervention such as Dingley's is that it provides specialist and targeted early intervention that enables children to experience the benefits of a specialist setting but also transition effectively to a mainstream provision without, necessarily, the need for an EHCP. If children can thrive in mainstream then the cost to the High Needs Block is substantially reduced.

The service commenced in Southampton in March 2023 and was initially contracted for a period of two years.

Owing to a slow start related to the vacation of the premises by the original leaseholder, and the transfer of staff, the setting didn't start to operate to capacity until September 2023.

There has only been one full academic year to-date and we are only just beginning to see children transition back into a mainstream setting through the Entry Exit Pathway (EEP) which is a feature of this provision.

As a result we will be applying for an extension to summer 2027 to enable cohorts of children to transition and to see how effective the pathway back into mainstream has been. In addition this will give us a chance to review the summer and outreach activity which is also a key part of the delivery.

The total cost of the exemption would be for £747,419 from March 2025 to August 2027. The aim is for Dingley's to support 50 children in the course of a year. If only 5 of these were able to transition to mainstream successfully each year instead of requiring specialist independent provision then the potential saving (after the full annual cost of Dingley's and based on c£85k per place for an independent specialist provision) is c£222k p.a.

In reality this will be a mixed economy as some will transition and be fine, some may still require interventions later, some may still require an EHCP. Some may be able to

access city specialist or resourced provisions but, overall, the trajectory is a positive one for the High Needs Block.

It's worth noting that the EEP is a bespoke feature of the Dingley's Promise offer and is not able to be replicated by another provider as it is protected as intellectual property.

Mainstream Cluster Funding programme

Following the update given to Schools Forum in July, we have now appointed Amanda Talbot-Jones to support further exploration of the cluster funding model in the autumn and spring terms.

Amanda will specifically focus on communication with schools regarding their views on the concept, the proposed construct of the clusters and the consideration of re-aligning these with existing schools' clusters.

Amanda will also review the results of the SENDCo capacity audit to see what issues may be being flagged there in terms of the deliverability of the proposed model.

Depending on Amanda's findings, a decision will need to be taken with a view to either rolling out a pilot phase of a cluster funding model or accepting that this model is not one that is right for Southampton at this current time in which case progress will be suspended and new approaches considered to improving outcomes for children with SEND in the city.

We are currently exploring the potential for an interim grant opportunity for schools to apply for the funding that would otherwise have been used for the cluster programme this financial year. We are currently at the point of consulting with other LAs who have undertaken this approach to see if it is worth exploring further.

Special Schools banding review

A review and update of the top-up bandings for special schools was commenced in Southampton a couple of years ago but was suspended owing to the announcement within the Government's SEND and AP Improvement Plan that there would be a national funding formula (NFF).

Our special schools are struggling with out-dated bandings that do not reflect current need and this is getting worse over time.

We sought advice from our DfE adviser, Mark McCurrie, who suggested that we go ahead as it was unlikely that the NFF would see any significant progress in the next 12 months and it was important that we met need locally.

To this end Dawn Slattery (EP Service), Kirsty Relton (Strategic Lead for SEND) and Juno Hollyhock (Interim Head of SEND) will be working with the special school heads to review progress made so far and test the original proposed models in the two schools that had not done this previously by October half term, alongside testing the financial modelling and impact of the changes.

One key aspect of the financial modelling will be ensuring that schools do not lose out on the Minimum Funding Guarantee. As the financial envelope has not increased,

any school dropping in funding is still entitled to the MFG for next financial year and so we will have to be mindful of this.

The new proposals offer six different bands not three which gives more scope to respond to individual need. In addition the band follows the child rather than being assigned to a school which is a more child-centred approach.

One issue which is currently out with the special heads for consultation is how we adopt the final score for a child once they have been assessed across the six domains – the proposal is that we adopt a modal approach to this.

Once the first phase is complete, we would look to see how this work might impact mainstream schools, resourced provisions and alternative provisions.

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