

DRAFT

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SCHOOLS FORUM

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON WEDNESDAY, 8 MAY 2024

Present: Reverend Mark Bennet (Church of England Diocese), Nicolle Browning (Maintained Secondary School Headteacher), Councillor Heather Codling (Executive Portfolio Holder: Children and Family Services), Councillor Iain Cottingham (Executive Portfolio Holder: Finance and Resources), Paul Davey (Maintained Primary School Governor), Jackie Davies (Pupil Referral Unit Headteacher), Richard Hand (Trade Union), Keith Harvey (Maintained Primary School Headteacher), Jon Hewitt (Maintained Special School Headteacher), Trevor Keable (Academy School Governor), Maria Morgan (Maintained Nursery School Headteacher), Gemma Piper (Academy School Headteacher), Chris Prosser (Maintained Secondary School Headteacher), Campbell Smith (Academy School Governor), Graham Spellman (Roman Catholic Diocese) and Phil Spray (Maintained Primary School Governor)

Also Present: Rose Carberry (Principal Adviser for School Improvement), AnnMarie Dodds (Executive Director - Children and Family Services), Melanie Ellis (Acting Head of Finance and Property), Jane Seymour (Service Manager, SEN & Disabled Children's Team) and Jessica Bailiss (Democratic Services Officer)

Apologies for inability to attend the meeting: Michelle Harrison (Maintained Primary School Business Manager), Richard Hawthorne (Academy School Headteacher), Jo Lagares (Maintained Primary School Headteacher), Julie Lewry (Academy School Headteacher), Nicola Ponton (Acting Service Manager for SEMH) David Ramsden (Maintained Secondary School Headteacher), Lesley Roberts (Maintained Primary School Headteacher) and Charlotte Wilson (Academy School Headteacher)

PART I

1 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest received.

2 **Update on the Delivering Better Value Programme (Hester Collicut)**

Hester Collicut introduced the item and reported that she was the Project Manager for the Delivering Better Value (DBV) Programme and also introduced Susan Tanner who was the new Service Director for DBV. Hester Collicut drew attention to the report on page one of the agenda pack. Hester Collicut reported that they were at the beginning of the implementation stage for DBV and she briefly took the Schools' Forum through the detail of the report. The key points were:

- West Berkshire had been successful in obtaining a grant from the Department for Education (DfE) to implement a programme of improvement for Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) over one year.
- The grant amount was one million pounds and there were specific requirements around the delivery of the programme. The aim was to look at high impact areas which could deliver improvements quickly for children and families in West Berkshire.

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- The programme would need to reduce the pressure on the High Needs Block (HNB) through improving service delivery. The DBV Programme identified how this would be done.
- 55 Local Authorities (LAs) were part of the DBV, which was made up of three tranches. Those LAs with the highest level of deficit in their HNB had started the process two years ago. West Berkshire had formed part of the final tranche as its deficit was lower in comparison. As part of this West Berkshire had received the grant money to delivery a transformation programme for children with SEND.
- The programme had been supported by a consultant called Newton Europe, which had been brought in by the DfE to deliver the programme. This support had enabled detailed data analysis. West Berkshire had submitted data in June 2023 and following this trends had been identified, which had been looked into in more detail through consultation and case reviews with families and partner agencies. From this work, key areas of focus for areas of improvement had been identified.
- Work undertaken as part of the DBV was standalone and would be monitored by the DfE. West Berkshire was however now developing its SEND Strategy in light of the DBV Programme to inform strategic SEND work over the next three to five years.
- DBV would reduce statutory spend through earlier identification of need and targeted intervention. Requirements for Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) assessments would be reduced because needs would be addressed earlier. The aim would be to increase the capacity and support for mainstream schools, alternative provision and maintained special schools. This would reduce the use of independent non-maintained special schools where there were high costs.
- Four work streams had been identified as part of the DBV and detail was provided on each of these within the presentation provided. These would be delivered in coproduction with families, educational partners and local area partners including health and social care.

Hester Collicut moved on to provide a detailed presentation about the DBV application and how DBV would be delivered. It was reported that it was expected that about £8m (at full run rate) of savings could be delivered each year once the work streams had been implemented. Impact from the DBV would begin from 2025 however, the programme would take about five years to implement in full.

Keith Harvey noted that a saving of £5.5k per child was expected for those receiving SEND support and he queried if this meant there would be no funding going to these children. Hester Collicut confirmed this was not the case and the aim would be to support early intervention through the training of staff and an access fund. It needed to be identified if a need was long term or short to medium term. If needs were long term, an EHCP might still be required but if targeting could be carried out earlier this might not be necessary. Keith Harvey stated that currently the £5.5k referred to would go towards an adult to provide support. He queried who the staff training would be for if the adults could not be afforded. Hester Collicut explained that it was about early intervention. One to one TA support was not always effective and the new approach would be about evidence based interventions that worked for young people. It would be using resources in a targeted way to meet needs earlier.

Paul Davey asked if the impact costs had been calculated for taking the newly trained staff away from other mainstream pupils. Hester Collicut reported that training for supporting transitions was one area of focus. Children requiring additional support to facilitate a better transition would be identified early and support programmes would be

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built around these young people, with staff being upskilled if necessary. Resources would be put in place to help children successfully transition.

Paul Davey further asked what the downside cost consequences were in relation to staff that did not have spare capacity and also on other pupils at a school. Hester Collicut reported it was about meeting the needs of the whole school community. All children would benefit from certain techniques used to support children with SEND. It was not about stretching resources but was about enabling staff to meet more diverse needs. Paul Davey felt this was a critical observation of teaching provided in the classroom at the current time. Hester Collicut disagreed and felt it was about identifying training opportunities and how this could be supported to allow staff to develop this capacity if required. Training needs across schools were currently being audited.

Paul Davey queried if additional resources would be provided or if it was about retraining existing resource. AnnMarie Dodds reported that at the current stage they were concentrating on the HNB and the allocation of resource that was attached to children with additional needs rather than the general education of all children in the classroom. There was limited HNB resource that needed to be targeted in the correct way whilst achieving the most value.

Reverend Mark Bennet referred to current challenges with staff recruitment and was concerned it would not be possible to train staff that were not there. He hoped the plan set out where the people were going to come from. Regarding the example of transitions provided, Reverend Bennet referred to his experience as a governor at numerous settings and felt much of what had been referred to about transitions was known and there was a desire to do it well however, this was not able to happen due to capacity. It was an area that required more resource and this would either need to be taken from somewhere else or would be extra resource. Reverend Bennet was concerned using existing resources would stretch resources more thinly in mainstream. Hester Collicut acknowledged the concern raised and it was understood that support for transitions was a pinch point. Hester Collicut explained that through the DBV grant money it would be possible to look at how the area was currently being resourced, what was working and what additional resource was needed. Resources from the grant could then be targeted to support the area. The aim moving forward was to create a sustainable programme across all areas of DBV work.

Trevor Keable noted the financial evaluation however queried what academic and social evaluation had been carried out on the new programme. Hester Collicut reported that the programme of work had been through stringent scrutiny by the identified agencies. There was a great deal of detailed data analysis and time had been spent looking at the impact of activity over the last few years. It was a DfE Programme that involved participation by 55 LAs and aimed to reduce pressure on the HNB by improving outcomes and supporting transformation across SEND. If the programme was not undertaken there would be an increase in pressure on the HNB, which in turn would reduce resources going into schools.

AnnMarie Dodds reaffirmed the points raised and highlighted that DBV was essentially a government intervention. Evidence from West Berkshire had been viewed by Newton Europe, which was a well-established consultancy appointed by the DfE and they had set out the areas that needed to be focused on. These were the areas set out in the information provided by Hester Collicut. It was a transformation programme about sustainability for children across West Berkshire with a focus on children with additional needs, which were those supported by the HNB.

Hester Collicut continued with her presentation, which provided detailed information on confidence weightings against DBV opportunities. Data was also provided showing the impact if DBV work was not undertaken and if pressures were not addressed. The

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number of children in independent non-maintained provision would increase substantially by 2026, when the average costs of these placements was significant. Further data showed how numbers would be positively impacted through DBV mitigation work. Information was provided on how figures had been identified through looking at cases and the detailed analysis on what was driving trends, for example for increased numbers of EHCPs. Hester Collicut provided detailed information on the four DBV workstreams that would deliver to the programme.

Trevor Keable asked for clarification on some of the figures provided in the presentation. It appeared there was an increase from 1200 children requiring support in 2024 to 1600 requiring support in 2028, which was an increase of about 25 percent. Hester Collicut reported that this reflected the national trend of increasing demand for statutory assessments. West Berkshire's percentage increase was less than many other LA areas however, significant increases in requests for assessments were still being seen. It was clarified that this increase was expected to continue despite the number of pupils going through school reducing.

Phil Spray reflected on the challenge facing the HNB, which had been discussed fully at previous meetings. He was mindful that there was a balance to be struck between addressing the HNB and the wider impact the programme could have on schools across the district. Phil Spray asked for clarification on how many school representatives had been consulted and how this had been offset against their work in the classroom, as it was well recognised that teachers were overstretched. Phil Spray recognised that co-design was not something that could happen quickly and required a significant time commitment. It was therefore further queried if there was a plan in place for resourcing this approach. Hester Collicut reported that the programme was being delivered through four workstream groups, which met monthly. Each of these groups reported into the DBV Task Group, which in turn informed the SEND Transformation Board. There were school representatives on each of the workstreams and there was a desire to widen the headteacher representation on these groups. An idea of backfilling positions in schools had been suggested to enable teacher representatives to contribute. Hester Collicut reported that they were very mindful of the pressures however, it was important this was balanced to ensure the process was consultative.

Reverend Bennet observed from the report that preventative work invested in over the last few years was having an impact and West Berkshire had relatively fewer EHCPs than other LA areas. He queried if some of the increased unit costs were to do with economies of scale. Reverend Bennet referred to the number of small schools in the district and raised concern about these schools being expected to find management time, as this was a particularly scarce resource. This was a feature of West Berkshire as an authority that needed to be incorporated. Hester Collicut agreed and reported that this matter would be incorporated into a wider SEND Strategy, which the DBV programme was part of. The wider SEND Strategy would look at how schools were being supported to access services dependant on size. Hester Collicut reported they were only at the start of the DBV programme and how it was developed was up to schools. Input would be required to ensure the views of different types of schools were reflected. It was acknowledged however, that there were constraints around the capacity of staff.

Reverend Bennet noted that the largest savings seemed to be around the commissioning of non-maintained special schools and avoiding placements, which presented other challenges. He asked how it was known if there was enough money currently available to meet statutory requirements and obligations. It was felt that this was a piece of strategic work that was missing.

Reverend Bennet further commented that working in multiagency partnerships was something schools were already involved in and did not always work well, particularly if

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some agencies failed to attend. Hester Collicut clarified that by using the term multiagency she had meant that they would be working collaboratively with partners.

Reverend Bennet further queried that the assurance efficiency language seemed to imply that surplus places would be funded to ensure places were available when needs arose. Hester Collicut confirmed that this was not the case and the sufficiency strategy would ensure there was capacity available to meet needs. It was a very granular approach and the aim was to identify children early. The sufficiency strategy would enable gaps in provision to be identified and systems needed to be put in place to ensure demand could be responded to quickly, which was not something that had been possible in the past for a variety of different reasons.

Keith Harvey understood that the aim was to save money however, he was concerned about the reality of life in mainstream schools where there was increasing staff turnover due to staff finding the reality of school life very difficult. Keith Harvey was concerned that increased cuts would drive out good people and leave the area with a weaker education system. Hester Collicut agreed that recruitment and retention was critical to delivery and this was an area that required focus. Hester Collicut stressed that DBV was not a cutting programme and it was about aligning services, identifying opportunities and targeting resources at a more appropriate time. It was inevitable that spending would need to be reduced but the aim was to do it in an effective way so children were not penalised.

AnnMarie Dodds responded to some of the points raised by Reverend Bennet. In terms of expectations on schools, it was not about the LA making demands of schools. A collaborative approach was being taken because this was the best approach for children. It was appreciated that not all school leaders/representatives could attend all sessions and AnnMarie Dodds stated that this was where she would appeal to schools to ensure as a sector there was communication and support between leaders, to ensure all were kept informed.

AnnMarie Dodds reminded the Forum that the LA was commissioning places on behalf of schools for children that schools were unable to cater for and it was acknowledged that some children needed something different. There would be much more robust commissioning practises in place in West Berkshire compared to what there had been previously.

AnnMarie Dodds reported that they knew the cost of statutory intervention and disagreed that statutory costs were not known. The amount that was being spent against the HNB year on year was known and most of this was assigned to statutory interventions. AnnMarie Dodds reminded the Forum that it was about a budget that had been overspent over a number of years.

AnnMarie Dodds agreed with Hester Collicut's comments in relation to surplus placements and confirmed they would not be commissioning surplus placements. Early identification of need and the sufficiency strategy was essential and all decisions would be evidence based.

In response to the point raised by Keith Harvey, AnnMarie Dodds reported that there was a limited budget but it was up to them how it was used. There was a National Funding Formula and rules that governed where money could be spent and how money could be transferred between the funding blocks. The only freedom available was within this formula. The risk to not influencing financially sustainable change across the next 12 months was that control would be lost of the DSG. AnnMarie Dodds commented on other LA areas that had lost control and where there had been larger transfers from the Schools' Block to the HNB. The situation in every school would become more difficult if they did not get a hold on the challenge.

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Susan Tanner added to the points made about smaller schools. It was recognised not all schools would be able to engage in the DBV programme and it was reported that a DBV communication strategy was being developed to sit alongside engagement work. This would ensure schools would be engaged with directly regarding progress and would be provided with opportunities outside of meetings to feedback. Susan Tanner reported that herself or Hester Collicut would be happy to attend the primary or secondary heads forums when required, to talk to headteachers about the programme. Susan Tanner invited other suggestions and ideas on how to engage with schools.

In response to Ketih Harvey's concern about the programme being a cost cutting exercise, Susan Tanner felt it was important to shape language around improving outcomes for children and intervening earlier. It was important to ensure that every pound spent going forward on the HNB was a pound that ought to have been spent. Susan Tanner was not confident they were in that position yet. In some cases, needs were not being met early enough which was causing unavoidable cost. This cost was what needed to reduce whilst improving outcomes for children and as a consequence the aim was to make it easier for schools.

Councillor Iain Cottingham referred to comments about reducing costs and stated that that this was not how he viewed the programme. Over the next financial year, the Finance Service were focusing on the concept of activity based costing, which looked at the unit costs of service delivery. Councillor Cottingham would be liaising with the Finance Team to introduce activity based benchmarking to ensure financial efficiencies were being maximised to deliver the best quality services at the lowest unit cost. West Berkshire was ahead of the game regarding the unit cost of delivery and in his view it was about doing more with what was available rather than reducing costs.

The Chair commented on the range of views that had been raised through the discussion and the importance of AnnMarie Dodd's comment regarding the current freedoms that would be lost if the programme of work was not successful.

Richard Hand noted discussions and that it was a compulsory process that needed to be progressed. He referred to Keith Harvey's point about the staff and felt that there was no doubt that the programme would increase workload for staff. His members were already under the cosh with case work about workload and demands. He acknowledged the work had to be done however, stated it was important to recognise there would be impact on workload.

Phil Spray stated he fully recognised the scale of the challenge facing the HNB however, in his view, the view of the Forum was to ensure a balance was struck between looking at costs whilst not losing sight of the education outcomes for children. If they did not get it right it would have real consequences on children.

Hester Collicut thanked the Forum for all the points raised. As mentioned a communication strategy was being developed and as part of this schools would receive key updates through a variety of different avenues over the coming months.

The Chair wished Officers well with the project and acknowledged the scale of the challenge. He welcomed the consultation proposed, which would help deliver success.

RESOLVED that the Schools' Forum noted the information presented.

3 Letter to West Berkshire Members of Parliament

The Chair drew attention to the letter that had been sent from the Deputy Leader of the Council, Councillor Jeff Brooks, to West Berkshire Members of Parliament (MP) regarding High Needs Block (HNB) funding.

The Chair reported that he had also sent a letter to Laura Farris MP regarding pressure facing the HNB. At the last Forum meeting in March, it had been requested it be looked

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into whether MPs could be invited to attend meetings of the Forum. Having checked the Schools' Forum Regulations it had been agreed that a letter would be a more appropriate approach. Thoughts had been made very clear in the letter to Laura Farris regarding the level of funding for the HNB and a copy of the relevant section of minutes from the last meeting where the HNB was discussed was included. No response had yet been received.

Councillor Heather Codling referred to the letter to MPs from the Deputy Leader of the Council, which had been a result of an action from the last Forum meeting on 11th March, where it had been requested that Councillors write to local MPs emphasising the matter of low funding for high needs. It had been felt that a letter from the Deputy Leader would be the best approach. Councillor Codling believed Alok Sharma MP had responded but only to state that he would pass the matter onto colleagues. No response had yet been received from the other two West Berkshire MPs.

Trevor Keable reported that Denefield School had also written to the local MP Alok Sharma, who had subsequently responded to say he was leaving office and suggested that Ross Mackinnon be contacted who would be standing. The Labour representative who would be standing for Reading West had also been contacted. Trevor Keable reported that both had agreed to come and speak to Denefield School and talk through issues in July and other schools were welcome to attend if they wished. Trevor Keable felt that effort should be made to push political avenues in a clear, organised way that emphasised that education needed to be a priority in the new parliament.

The Chairman hoped that a response would be received from Laura Farris and other MPs prior to the next election. High Needs provision was a serious issue and he commended efforts made to push this forward.

RESOLVED that the Schools' Forum noted the update.

4 Date of the next meeting

The next meeting of the Schools' Forum would take place virtually on Monday 17th June 2024 from 5pm.

(The meeting commenced at 5.00 pm and closed at 6.25 pm)

CHAIRMAN

Date of Signature