

**WESTMINSTER CITY COUNCIL****SCHOOLS' FORUM 19TH JUNE 2023****REPORT BY THE ASSISTANT DIRECTOR, SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS  
AND EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY AND LEAD STRATEGIC FINANCE  
MANAGER – BI-BOROUGH CHILDREN'S SERVICES****FEEDBACK FROM THE HIGH NEEDS BLOCK REFERENCE GROUP**

This report provides feedback from the High Needs Block Reference Group discussion and updated budget for 2024/25.

**FOR INFORMATION AND DECISION****1. INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1 Schools' Forum (Paper A2 High Needs) on 20th March 2023 agreed to increase top ups for the SRPs and Special Schools along with funding for bands 1-7 whilst extending capping of bands 8-10 indefinitely and raising the capping threshold to £22,364 as an alternative to clawback. Forum also agreed to distribute the funds transferred to the 2022/23 high needs block (from the schools block) to mainstream schools.
- 1.2 Although Forum agreed to approve £243,000 budget for high needs pupil developments, it agreed to defer discussion and approval of the £545,000 budget to the High Needs Block Reference Group (HNBRG).
- 1.3 Schools Forum in March was advised that although the DfE had invited 55 local authorities with significant dedicated schools block (DSG) deficits to participate in its Delivering Better Value (DBV) in SEND Programme, Westminster was not eligible to participate. Action endorsed by the Schools Forum had addressed in full Westminster's high needs block DSG deficit.
- 1.4 The Schools' Forum is requested to note the views of the HNBRG which met on 15th May 2023 and the resulting recommendations detailed in this report.

**2. BACKGROUND**

- 2.1. The High Needs Budget Review Group (HNBRG) was established to provide termly meetings for officers and headteachers from all ages, phases and provision schools/settings continues to meet termly to jointly monitor HNB funding.

- 2.2. Schools' Forum in January 2023 agreed the high needs block budgets for 2023/24 which were adjusted after decisions made by the Schools Forum in March 2023.
- 2.3. Through the work of the HNBRG, Westminster high needs resources continue to be robustly reviewed with recommendations on high needs expenditure to the Schools' Forum.

### 3. HIGH NEEDS PUPIL DEVELOPMENTS

- 3.1. The HNBRG noted that Westminster's SEND Commissioning Plan, sets out plans to respond positively to parent preference and meet future demand for specialist provision. Whilst the commissioning intentions respond to the forecast level of need, they do not address the drivers of demand.
- 3.2. The HNBRG noted that despite falling primary rolls, requests for statutory assessment continue to increase. There were 223 received in 2022 calendar year. Ordinarily available provision is not always well understood and this is evidenced by 25% of referrals (54 of 216 in 2022) not meeting the statutory threshold for an assessment.
- 3.3. The drive for Education Health and Care plans (EHCPs) continues with 164 new plans were issued during 2022 compared with 137 in 2021. The proportion of EHC plans for autistic pupils reached 43% of the total whilst those for speech language and communication needs (SLCN), the second most prevalent need type, reached 23%.
- 3.4. At the May meeting, members of the HNBRG were advised of emergent findings from the first wave of diagnostic work in the national DBV programme. Findings from 19 LAs indicated that:
  - The demand for Education Health and Care Plan (EHCPs) for children with autism, SEMH and SLCN is growing 20% faster than other needs and should be the main focus in preparing for the future.
  - The single highest impact objective to pursue, to reduce the need for a special school place, is increasing the ability of mainstream schools, increasing staff skills and tackling wider system resources/capacity.
  - Increasing parent carer confidence in the ability of mainstream schools to meet their child's needs (e.g., communication with parents, involvement in support planning) is key to successful implementation.
- 3.5. The WCC Strategy for SEND 2021-24 sets out a commitment to ensuring links to the local authority services and training to provide high quality inclusive support and practice, particularly prioritising the development of staff who work with pupils who have communication and interaction needs because these are the most prevalent in the borough. We recognise schools and settings are facing recruitment and retention challenges as well as exceptional financial pressures and the importance of the professional development offer providing support in this context. The HNBRG considered a proposal to create speech

and language expertise in Westminster primary schools and support inclusion of autistic pupils with EHCPs to invest in developing the mainstream workforce; staff skills, professional development for teachers. Members of the HNBRG expressed concern around legacy costs e.g. salary cost and timetabling capacity for any new areas of responsibility. In light of this discussion HNBRG declined to recommend establishing workstream activity to take this forward.

- 3.6. Members of the HNBRG highlighted physical accommodation constraints in some schools. The HNBRG recommended physical space and changes driven by falling rolls be seen as accommodation opportunities for targeted capital investment alongside high needs funding. The current SEND Strategy 2021-2024, co-produced with families, emphasises the right to mainstream inclusion and a commitment to workforce development. It was recommended that a facilitated focus group looking at physical accommodation in the autumn term be held as a precursor to the strategy refresh.
- 3.7. It is therefore proposed to increase the available budget for specialist resourced provision and other pupil developments to tackle the root causes of the current pressure and allow for some further volume and price increases.

#### 4. **RECOUPMENT**

- 4.1. The HNBRG considered proposals regarding recoupment charges for pupils resident in other boroughs with EHCPs attending schools in Westminster. It was agreed that it was no longer practical to include separate administration costs and as per the DfE guidance and regulations, schools should ensure that the full costs are recovered.

#### 5. **FORWARD PLAN FOR HNBRG**

- 5.1. The forward plan for the HNBRG is proposed as follows:

| <b>Meeting</b> | <b>Forward plan</b>  |
|----------------|--|
| October        | Impact of the DfE's Improvement Plan<br>EBT update<br>Commissioning Plan |
| Spring         | Request for Assessments  |

#### 6. **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 6.1. Schools Forum is asked to:
  - 6.1.1. note the discussion from May HNBRG (section 3) and agree the budget as per paragraph 3.7;
  - 6.1.2. note the recommendations re future recoupment charges (section 4); and
  - 6.1.3. note the forward plan for the HNBRG (section 5).

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**Background papers:**

Commissioning plan