

Notes of DCE Fact-finding meeting – 25 March 2010

Attendees:

Cllr Jon Hubbard	(Vice-Chairman, Children’s Services Select Committee)
Cllr Lionel Grundy	(Cabinet Member, Children, Education and Learning)
Cllr Alan Macrae	(Portfolio Holder, Schools)
Val Black	(Transport Manager)
Lynda Cox	(Head of Performance, Management and Co-ordination - DCE)
Trevor Daniels	(Head of SEN)
Karina Kulawik	(Central SEN Services Manager)
Henry Powell	(Senior Scrutiny Officer)
Liz Williams	(Head of Finance and Schools Funding - DCE)

1. Apologies and Introductions

Apologies were received from Jason Salter, Principal Officer – PTU.

2. SEN Transport

The following points were discussed:

- The SEN Transport budget provides transport for those children requiring specialist transport. Those who can access mainstream transport will do so under the mainstream scheme, which is funded via TEL budgets.
- Changes to legislation have widened the eligibility criteria for children with SEN living under the statutory distance and those from low income families. The complexity of the needs of individuals requiring SEN transport has also continued to increase.
- Much work has been done in recent years to reduce the cost of SEN Transport, particularly by Val Black, who’s post has now been made permanent. This work has included:
 - Ensuring the eligibility criteria is applied consistently
 - Ensuring the most cost effective mode of transport is used
 - Where appropriate, paying parents to transport their children or to act as Passenger Assistants
- There is a large variance in children with SEN’s transport needs, such as the medical care or behavioural supervision they require en route, the distance they need to travel, the kind of vehicle they require etc. Rationalising the SEN

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Transport service is therefore a careful balancing act between pooling transport where possible, whilst still meeting the differing needs of individuals.

- Both Springfields and Larkrise schools currently provide their own transport, suggesting lessons could be learnt on how they run a cost effective transport scheme. This may not be a fair comparison, however, due to the them being boarding schools needing to make only two journeys per week, and their transportation needs being generally less complex.
- The Passenger Transport Unit's (PTU) annual budget is around £30M and is showing an approximate underspend of £800K. SEN Transport, however, has an annual budget of around £4.3M, but is showing an overspend of £400K. Concern was expressed at this disparity, and the lack of transparency on where the underspend on mainstream transport goes.
- Concern was also expressed that the savings achieved through work around independent travel, reviewing exceptions etc (which in previous years has totalled around £100K) and corporate procurement savings (in the range of £260K per year) are not reflected in savings for the SEN transport budget. The number of children using the service has also decreased.
- Another area of significant expense is the cost of Passenger Assistants to accompany children while they are transported. The council employs around 230 staff to do this job, some of whom work in the field of social care, but most work in SEN Transport. The council employs these staff directly rather than through an agency. which is unusual for a local authority and carries its own cost pressures.
- Senior officers from DCE and the PTU meet regularly to discuss the issue but a some frustration remains as to the disparity between the underspends achieved in mainstream transport and the overspends on SEN Transport. There was also concern that DCE essentially pay an external provider for the SEN Transport service (through the PTU) but have little access to the contracts involved or influence during contract negotiations.
- There was general agreement that closer working was required between DCE and the PTU on this issue and greater prioritisation of the SEN Transport issue. It was noted that Cllr Hubbard would request that an item on this issue (with the agreement of the Chairman) be included on the next agenda of the Children's Services Select Committee. Cllr Grundy also expressed his intention to look into the matter and find a workable solution.

3. DCE Budget Overview

- As at 28 February, the DCE budget's projected overspend was £0.686M, after the impact of previously approved recovery plan. This pressure is mainly from demand led budgets such as External Residential Placements, In-house Foster Care and Aftercare. It is unlikely the budget will recover to balance by the end of the financial year and, if so, a decision will need to be made regarding carry-over or absorption.

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- Further work is being done to identify savings above and beyond those already found. All salary budgets are being reviewed to identify any savings achieved against vacancies, only key posts are being recruited to with all recruitment requiring Service Director authorisation, all grants are being reviewed to ensure that the use of grants is maximised.

4. DCE Performance Overview

- There was no update to the LAA performance figures discussed at the previous Fact-finding meeting.

Meeting closed at 5.30pm.

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