

# **WIRRAL COUNCIL**

## **SCHOOLS FORUM**

### **REPORT OF INTERIM DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES**

#### **CONSULTATION FOR COMMISSIONING PLACES IN SPECIAL SCHOOLS**

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##### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

As pupil numbers fall and a number of parents are expressing a preference for a mainstream school for their children with special needs a shift in demand for some special school places has been identified. This change in demand does not apply to all types of Special Needs and, for instance, demand for places for children with Social and Emotional difficulties remains at previous levels. Previously the authority has responded to such changes in a fairly rigid way, which did not facilitate school planning. This paper sets out an approach, discussed with special school headteachers and governors, that can be used to manage this reduction in funded places in a planned and more flexible way.

##### **1. Current Funding Arrangements**

Unlike mainstream, where schools are funded on the number of pupils on roll, special schools are funded on the number of places for the three years of the funding cycle. This approach recognizes that special schools should neither have an incentive to attract children nor an incentive to maintain children on roll when a review of their statement indicates that they could have their needs better met in mainstream or other schools.

##### **2. Current Numbers in Wirral Special Schools**

An analysis of the number of places funded in special schools, (Appendix One) using the October census data indicated a mismatch between funded places and actual pupils on roll thus leading to potential over funding of some schools at least on a nominal basis. In addition the authority is faced with financial pressures by special schools for extra funds from the exceptional needs budget heading which is overspent, and by requests for pupils to attend independent school provision out of the borough.

The mismatch is most apparent for places for children with specific, complex and moderate learning difficulties.

##### **3. Wirral and the National Context**

The overall number of pupils attending special school provision in Wirral in comparison to other authorities is very high. Wirral maintains more statements of SEN, and has more pupils in special provision both in the borough and outside the borough, than the national average. (See Appendix Two for details.) This can be attributed to local parental demand, local policy, good special school provision and, in the past, a lack of suitable alternative mainstream provision. Current fluctuations in the number at each school can be attributed to such factors as parental preference, reduction in the general pupil population, the changing nature of some special educational needs, and the increased capacity of mainstream schools to make provision.

#### **4 Funding Adjustments for Excess Demand**

Periodically the authority finds itself in the position where it has to make available either more places in special schools or fewer places. Currently a formula is in place whereby numbers can be increased in response to a growth in demand. The “trigger mechanism” for funding additional places recognizes that during the course of a year the number on roll in a special school can fluctuate. At times the number can be marginally below the number funded and at other times marginally above. To respond to a growth, the current agreement is that if the school exceeds its number by more than five pupils funding, based on the average weighted pupil cost for the school, is released for the sixth and each additional pupil admitted. This system that has been agreed with schools has worked well and it is not proposed to modify it.

#### **5. Funding Adjustments to Reduced Demand**

The current procedure is if numbers on roll reduce then there will be a reduction in funded places. The requirement to reduce numbers in the past has not been a frequent event although it has been used, for instance, to reduce the numbers at Elleray Park.

The current procedure is straightforward but has a number of weaknesses. It does not build in enough flexibility to encourage inclusion work or assist in long term planning for the school or strategic planning of the Authority, nor does it happen as part of a planned cycle or by some numeric trigger and it is not responsive to short term movements in numbers. It also has the potential to be a disincentive for children to be returned to a mainstream or other school.

As the pupil population is falling and as parents are increasingly wanting the choice for their children with special needs to be educated in mainstream planning and managing the number of places in special provision needs to be improved.

A procedure that mirrors the trigger mechanism for funding excess demand is proposed to manage a reduction in demand. This means that if a school has more than five empty places the Authority negotiates with the school what the “surplus funding” can be commissioned to achieve for one year. At the end of that first year a review takes place which could lead to further work being commissioned or numbers being reduced for the start of the next academic year.

Consultation has taken place with Wirral Special Headteachers’ Association (WISPHA) and Governors have met on two occasions to consider this proposal. In addition the proposal was taken to the Professional Associations meeting on 9<sup>th</sup> December, 2010. Attached as Appendix Three are the written comments received from Special Schools in response to this proposal.

At a meeting with Governors held on 6<sup>th</sup> January 2011 those present were in agreement with the proposal but wanted a smaller working party to consider in finer detail how the procedure would operate.

#### **6. Conclusion**

The Children and Young People's Department has identified that whilst the overall budget for statemented pupils in special schools needs to be maintained at current levels there is a need for some changes in the way special school places are commissioned and kept under regular review. In addition demand on other budget lines is increasing thus requiring an appropriate response.

In order to manage this situation more flexibly, and to ensure the best use of scarce resources, a modification to current arrangements for dealing with a reduction in pupil numbers at special schools is proposed.

If these commissioning arrangements were to be supported it would allow for a more flexible response meet the needs of children and families from our resources and allow special schools a clearer process and time frame in which to plan for any reduction in numbers.

It is recommended that if funding were to be re-directed it could be used, for example to :-

- (1) Fund growth in those special schools where demand outstrips the number of funded places or where enhanced provision could potentially avoid independent school provision.
- (2) Support an extended role for special schools in providing support to mainstream schools.
- (3) Support the funding of places in independent school provision where this is necessary.

It is recommended that a Panel made up of members of the Schools Forum and Special School representatives along with officers would consider any proposals.

Any consequent changes to the Funding Formula would be approved by Cabinet.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- The forum is asked to note the comments from Special Schools in Appendix Three and recommend the extension of the trigger mechanism to accommodate a reduction in Special school place numbers from the start of the new funding cycle.
- The Forum is asked to note that a group of Special School and Schools Forum representatives will be consulted to consider in detail the procedures around the application of this approach.

**David Armstrong**  
**Interim Director of Children's Services**