

OPTION: EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY SERVICE

BUDGET SAVING: £80,000

DESCRIPTION OF OPTION

The Council provides an educational psychology service, to help children who have special educational needs.

The option in this area is to reduce this service while continuing to meet statutory requirements. This will need a more targeted approach.

The Education Psychology Service has a budget of £728,800. A budget saving of £80,000 is proposed and would mean the loss of approximately one post.

The current establishment is of 10.6fte. Three years ago it was 13.5fte. There is currently a vacant senior Educational Psychologist (EP) post; a maingrade EP post is currently being advertised.

RATIONALE FOR SAVINGS

DFE benchmarking data indicates that Wirral's costs are the average of its statistical neighbours at £15 per pupil. The Council must employ EPs to provide advice for statutory assessments of SEN. The Council undertakes more assessments and maintains more statements (3.3% vs 2.2%), and has more pupils in specialist schools than the national average (58% vs 28%).

Alternative options would be to:

- Cost and charge the preventative element to schools and settings and the service given an income target to meet. Some soft market testing is underway with trading but this is to create extra capacity;
- The pragmatics of sharing services with other authorities, with each authority having unique, small-scale service configurations, means that sharing individual psychologists would not be viable or return savings. Sharing management and supervision arrangements with other authorities may have possibilities, for example, employing one team leader across two authorities.

IMPACT

The impact of the proposed budget saving would be to reduce the service's preventative capacity. Statutory work, already dominant, would remain the priority and take up most capacity. The Council's extensive specialist SEN provision keeps demand for statutory work high. An unintended consequence could be to push an already rising demand for statutory work (up 25% over the last 2 years) as schools, parents and other stakeholders perceive likely reductions in provision and services. The impact of reduced capacity would be distributed across the borough.

A positive impact of the proposed change will be improved prioritization for targeted and specialist services. The main risk is around changing the assumptions of service users and stakeholders about what has been the traditional role, and response times, of the service. An increase in legal challenges to local authority decisions about SEN is highly likely.

MITIGATION

The development of a single gateway should help mitigate the impact of the proposed budget saving.