



Audit & Governance Committee

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Strategy - Progress

Purpose of the report:

To update the committee on the preparation of a new Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (“SEND”) Strategy for the County Council.

Recommendations:

It is recommended that the committee notes the report’s description of work in progress and provides any input it wishes to the preparation of the final strategy.

Introduction:

1. On 31 July 2014, the Audit & Governance Committee considered the findings of the audit of Special Schools – Funding for Residential Provision. Of particular concern to the committee was that the SEN Strategy had not been updated since 2010. This had led to a disconnect between Schools and Learning Service’s stated strategic objectives and the delivery of residential provision. The committee was also interested in the finding that a consultant had been appointed to undertake a wide-ranging remodelling of the County Council’s residential (maintained) school provision. The Chairman wrote to the Cabinet Member for Schools & Learning to request information on the two issues. Following a response from the Portfolio Holder (attached as Annex 1), the committee requested an update at a committee meeting.
2. This paper updates the committee on the preparation of a new Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (“SEND”) Strategy for the County Council.

3. The last formal SEND strategy for Surrey was agreed by the Council in 2010. A new strategy is currently being prepared. The new strategy is intended to take into account both major legislative changes, principally from the Children and Families Act 2014, the changed position in which the Council finds itself with regard to resources, and the Council's ambition to deliver better user experiences for the families of children with SEND and better outcomes for the children and young people.

Partnership

4. It is intended that the new strategy is jointly produced and maintained by the key partners working in the area: Children with special educational needs and their families; schools and other education providers; Surrey County Council; and the National Health Service in Surrey.
5. Since July 2014 these partners have met together through the SEND Governance Board for Surrey. The Governance Board is debating and overseeing the production of a new strategy.

Legislative Change

6. The Children and Families Act 2014 sets out a significantly different system for assessing and meeting the needs of children and young people with SEND than the arrangements that preceded it. Local services available to families are described through a Local Offer. Statements of Special Educational Needs are replaced by Education, Health and Care Plans, and families are given a much larger role in the production of these plans. An element of personal budgeting is introduced. Further, the scope of Plans is significantly greater than that of statements, which were restricted to young people at school or yet to start: the new plans can support a young person who needs it to the age of 25.

The Needs of Families

7. The process of assessing a child's needs can be a difficult one for families, both because it is potentially highly emotionally charged and because it is technically complicated and requires co-operation between a range of services. Surrey is anxious to develop an assessment system that is smooth-running and experienced as supportive, and which gives parents and families a full opportunity to help shape the outcome.

Outcomes for Children and Young People

8. There has been significant criticism of past SEN assessment systems that they can be more focused on process than on what children can actually achieve as a result of extra intervention. Therefore we are trying to design a system that is outcomes-focused and which carefully steers extra support towards targeted improvement.

Financial Sustainability

9. The limited resources currently available within the public sector present a major challenge to improving our service. To make progress it is vital that we spend money carefully and efficiently, and have a real understanding of what types of investment best benefit our children.
10. At present, the government funding for education is divided into a schools block (that supports mainstream schools), a high needs block (that supports special and additional education), and an early years block that supports early years education. In 2015/6 Surrey is making a significant transfer from its Schools to its high needs block, reflecting the fact that we have previously spent heavily in this area. There is a will to correct this position.
11. Research shows that Surrey is out of step with other authorities in two ways: first, we place a rather higher proportion of children in special schools than is the norm; second, of these children we are a much higher user of independent special schooling than is typical, with independent schools generally being much higher cost than their state-maintained equivalents. We have therefore agreed three broad aims for our strategy:
 - to increase the proportion of young people with SEND attending mainstream schools;
 - to increase the proportion of young people who require special schooling attending state maintained special schools;
 - to reduce our use of non-maintained and independent schools.

To achieve the first aim we will need to increase the skills base in mainstream schools and ensure that all schools contribute to the common direction. To achieve the second, we will need to commission an increased number of state-maintained special school places in Surrey that provide for the needs currently underserved, notably autism.

12. Through Schools Forum, we hope to agree a programme with Surrey schools whereby the “borrowing” from the schools block can be progressively reduced as more children attend both mainstream and state special schools.

Further areas for development

13. In the coming months we will be addressing through the Governance Board a number of other areas necessary to a complete SEND strategy. These will include:
 - The linking of social care and educational services for children with disabilities;
 - The provision of health services that support children and young people with SEND;

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- Services for young people with SEND aged 18-25;
 - Home to School and College Transport for children and young people with SEND.

Financial and value for money implications

14. There is no direct cost to adopting a new strategy beyond minor administrative expenses. If the strategy is successful it will provide a means, over time, of controlling expenditure on SEND so that it comes and remains within the limits indicated by the Government's allocation of High Needs Block funding.

Equalities and Diversity Implications

15. No separate Equalities Impact Assessment has been completed as this report describes the progress in preparing a strategy and does not set out the completed strategy. Children and Young People with SEND are a disadvantaged and potentially vulnerable group and it is important that the Council's SEND strategy enables their individual needs to be identified and addressed. The strategy is concerned both with improving child outcomes and family experiences and with doing this in a manner that is sustainable within the resources available.

Risk Management Implications

16. Failure to deliver a new strategy entails significant risks for the County Council: the reputational risk of not having a coherent or sustainable approach to SEND; this risk to the quality of service to individual children and families; and the risk of disrupting the partnership with schools required to manage gross education funds effectively through School Forum. The Strategy when completed should ensure that there is a coherent approach in place to SEND that will balance these risk factors.

Next steps:

17. Take elements of strategy bearing on resourcing by May 2015 for final agreement in November 2015.
18. Complete full strategy by September 2015
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Background papers:

None