



Notes of meeting between f40 and DfE funding and SEND team on Wednesday, February 28, 2024

Attending from DfE:

- Charlie Lang, Deputy Director, SEND Review Division (CL)
- Alasdair Duerden, Send Review Division – Change Programme (AD)
- Simon Hampson, Funding Policy Unit (SH)

Attending from f40:

- Cllr Alex Dale, f40 Chair, Cabinet Member for Education at Derbyshire CC (Alex Dale)
- Emily Proffitt, Dep f40 Chair, Staffordshire Primary Headteacher (EP)
- Phil Haslett, Dep f40 Chair, Head of Education Strategy and Development at Glos CC (PH)
- Margaret Judd, Finance Manager at Dorset Council (MJ)
- Andrew Minall, Head of Education Financial Services at Hampshire Council (AM)
- Jackie Fieldwick, CEO of Brunel Academies Trust, and Uplands Enterprise Trust (JF)
- Karen Westcott, f40 Secretary (KW)

1. Introductions

Alex Dale, Chair of f40, thanked the DfE team for the opportunity to meet and said the group continued to value the relationship with the Department for Education.

He said f40 remained concerned about the unfairness of education and SEND funding but was increasingly concerned about the SEND crisis and the increasing deficit budgets that were hanging over local authorities.

PH said his local authority was one of those involved in the Change Programme and there were some good initiatives that will have a positive impact on SEND provision.

PH said the DfE intervention programmes, the Safety Valve scheme – for those councils with the biggest SEND deficits – and Delivering Better Value – to help councils better manage their SEND budgets – had been useful and had enabled local authorities to make some savings.

However, he said there were concerns that neither of the intervention programmes would solve the SEND crisis as demand and inflation continued to outstrip funding and provision, meaning the deficits would just continue to grow.

PH said there was enormous pressure in the SEND system, with local authorities simply not having enough funding to meet current need and expectation. He said some authorities already had more than £100m deficits, and they were projected to triple in the next four years if the crisis was not resolved.

CL said the DfE did recognise the financial pressure in the SEND system. He said there were things that local authorities could do to mitigate some of the pressures, but it was accepted that the issues went beyond that.

He said the DfE team was looking at the causes of what was driving the pressure in the SEND system, so the dialogue with f40 was useful.

CL said the Change Programme was looking at what it would take to turn the current SEND situation around.

AD said the greatest thing the Change Programme had evidenced so far was that it would not be easy to implement everything that was needed.

He said there would be consideration as to how the Safety Valve programme – which offers local authorities both financial assistance and expertise – would operate in the future.

He said the DfE was looking at what it would take in the future to assist local authorities to control their deficits, and what an 'invest to save' model should look like. AD said those questions and issues were being considered.

AD said other issues being considered by the DfE were:

- Enablers to help mainstream schools improve their inclusion of SEND pupils
- Partnership-working
- EHCPs
- Early intervention
- Diverting away from high-cost provision

AD said the DfE was looking at how the Change Programme could pivot to tackle some of these issues. He said the programme would be showcased across the country from May this year, through a variety of webinars and regional roadshows, to enable the DfE to share information and gain valuable feedback from stakeholders involved in SEND.

PH said mainstream schools were under immense pressure and needed more funding to help them provide ordinarily available provision to pupils with SEND. He said failing to fund mainstream schools was a false economy.

PH said if mainstream schools were short of funding, they were often in a position where they had to cut pastoral and SEND support – and were unable to deliver the inclusion that the DfE was looking for.

CL said providing incentives and enablers to encourage more inclusion at mainstream schools was at the heart of the Change Programme.

JF said the SEND system needed to be re-set and revolutionised, however, that could only happen if more funding was put in now to relieve the financial pressure and enable SEND leaders to come together to develop a sustainable SEND sector. She said without additional funding, there would be no capacity for experts to focus on change.

JF said local authorities were understandably working to stop their SEND deficits from rising further, but it was at the detriment of children and schools. JF said the system was so broken and underfunded, SEND leaders were having to look at creative ways to make their budgets stretch, rather than how the sector should be improved.

JF said there were pupils who were going without the level of support they needed because there was insufficient funding. She said f40 had calculated that an additional £4.6bn annual SEND revenue was needed to meet current demand.

EP said schools were on their knees. She said headteachers and teachers went above and beyond to give children what they needed but found themselves in an impossible situation to meet the needs of pupils with SEND.

EP said 90% of parents were doing the right thing for their children when they requested extra support, but she said EHCPs were increasingly difficult to obtain, and the process was slow. She said her school was currently giving a child 25 hours of special SEND provision each week from the school budget because he did not have an EHCP.

She said mainstream schools, including hers, were having to fund lots of different extra support for children because they did not have EHCPs and were not being given SEND funding. She said early support and intervention had declined due to insufficient funding, and headteachers were having to give their own time to support children with extra needs due to the crisis in the system.

AM said while the SEND deficits were currently being held off local authority balance sheets by the statutory override, which is in place until 2026, the deficits were still having a huge impact and were costing councils millions of pounds each year in borrowing costs.

AM also said the National Funding Formula (NFF) for both schools and High Needs needed to be a more dynamic system that reflected the changing needs of schools.

He said schools were paying for SEND support out of their own budgets, as evidenced by EP in her school, and quite often SEND funding was not provided until children were well through their schooling. This particularly impacted on infant schools, he said, when issues first arose. However, funding support was often not secured until the child had moved on to junior school.

AM said mainstream schools that were inclusive of pupils with SEND were victims of their own success and had disproportionately large numbers of SEND pupils, as parents opted to enrol their children there. Conversely, AM said less inclusive schools were not so popular with parents of SEND children, and so had fewer SEND pupils than they naturally should have. This, he said, placed additional pressure on the inclusive schools.

AM said early intervention, SEND support and funding, as well as transition throughout the different stages of school, needed to be connected through one SEND strategy.

He also said giving schools and local authorities greater notice of the funding they can expect to receive would enable them to better plan their spending and budgeting.

SH said he was not able to give an indication of funding for 2025-26. He said the DfE did understand the pressure schools and local authorities were under and the Department was working to find ways to relieve that pressure.

SH said the DfE was looking at the feasibility of moving the NFF to a direct formula but was not setting a final deadline for the introduction of the direct NFF at this stage.

He said the minimum funding guarantee (MFG) would – as now – protect schools from excessive year-on-year reductions in funding. The level of the MFG would depend on future funding levels.

SH said during 2024-25, there would be a further step towards a direct NFF, and local authorities would be required to move towards it.

CL said he unfortunately could not give f40 all the reassurances that members wanted but said the DfE did hear all of the concerns about the pressures in the system and said the DfE was

looking at where reform was needed and was very interested to hear f40's views on where changes should be made.

Alex Dale said the group was currently updating its briefing paper and agreeing where it believed reform was needed, and it would share those details with the DfE in due course.

Members agreed to meet again in the coming weeks/months to discuss SEND and education funding again.

Ends