

Slough Schools Forum

28th September 2023

Finance & Safety Valve Update

DFE Safety Valve Monitoring Report

The latest DFE Safety Valve Monitoring Report was completed on Friday 15th September and is the first full report on progress against the key targets in its Safety Valve Agreement. Overall Slough Borough Council is on track to meet the deficit control and reduction targets set out in the agreement.

The provisional outturn position for 2022-23 is an overspend on all DSG blocks of £0.097m with an overspend on the High Needs DSG Block of £0.407m. This contrasts with a forecast overspend on all DSG Blocks at quarter 3 of 2022-23 of £1.638m. 2023-24 Period 5 Budget Management report for High Needs DSG has total forecast spend of £22.3m against a budget of £25.1m.

The SEND Statutory team has built up a backlog of 290 live cases where a request for an EHC plan has been received but the process has not been completed. Although, the potential costs of these cases is obviously not included in the overall figures above, it is possible to estimate how many will translate into an EHC plan and what the average costs of a plan have been since September 2022 (see below). This forecast is for additional High Needs Block top-up funding of £2.6m. Therefore, even including this additional forecast spending, this would give an overall projected spend of £24.9m and an estimated underspend of 0.2m in 2023-24.

More work is being undertaken to refine our modelling forecasts and a more accurate estimate of the final outturn for 2023-24 will be available in the December 2023 update report. The review of mainstream resource bases has identified some young people that have been placed that we will need to consider a special school setting for in the future. It will be important to ensure that we develop additional spaces with Arbour Vale School to meet this demand.

There is pressure both in terms of demand for EHC plans and existing settings requesting larger than usual cost of living inflationary increases. The Council has agreed a maximum uplift policy of 3.5% which we have been able to adhere to so far.

Mitigations here are inbuilt and based on rigorous process and decision-making, which is already seeing an impact. In addition, there is potential for capital projects to support commissioning of places as population fluctuates (this is anticipated and planned for), and these are being incorporated into the current draft of the Council's Place Planning.

Key Factors Behind Current High Needs Block Position

Key factors in the current positive position are the reduction in the average cost of a new EHC plan and the increase in the percentage of pupils being placed in mainstream settings. The average cost of a newly issued plan has decreased from £11,086 in July-Sept 2020 to £8,478 in July-Sept 2022; this exceeds the savings figures set out in CR4 of the Management Plan. The proportion of newly issued plans designated mainstream as type had increased from 81% to 92% and settles at +/- 90% with some fluctuation at times e.g. mover ins and phase transfers.

This has been achieved by reviewing panel processes ensure and assuring that only pupils whose needs cannot be met at local Maintained Provisions are being placed in independent non maintained special schools [INMSS]. Consultation processes are being strengthened and INMSS schools are only being consulted with where appropriate.

Commissioning has been better informed and quality, appropriateness and value for money are the key considerations. Spend to save options must be produced on any expenditure or suggestion of an Out of Area placement.

High Needs Block and Safety Valve Monitoring Actions

A new High Needs Block and Safety Valve Monitoring Board has been formed which includes the Director of Childrens Services, the Section 151 Officer, the Education Finance Lead, the Associate Director of Education and Inclusion and the SEND Consultant leading on commissioning. The Board is in the process of agreeing a timetable for project management actions including an action plan, a risk log and a finance dashboard that includes panel decisions and corresponding future budget projections.

This will include testing existing Safety Valve Agreement assumptions against future data trends for EHC plans, average costs and placement decisions. This will allow early identification of potential gaps and possible mitigations, including alternative savings.

One important area of work will be ensuring that there is a focus on mainstream school inclusion numbers, use of school SEND funding and the graduated approach available to all pupils. This should help to manage future requests for High Needs Block funding by reducing demand for EHC plans.

Work is underway on a joint commissioning strategy to be brought to the SEND Partnership Board by the end of December 2023 with a Commissioning and Transformation consultant appointed to lead on this work. Capacity analysis of current SRP provision has been conducted and detailed SLAs agreed for each setting will be issued. Another key workstream is a new joint commissioning approach for integrated health therapies.

Current placements are being reviewed for all young people placed in INMSS including post 16 college placements. The effectiveness of the setting is reviewed after taking into consideration the young person's outcomes, aspirations but also ensuring quality of placements and value for money.

A review of the process for permanent exclusions and preventative placements has been started and will be completed by April 2023. It is clear that the existing model is not sustainable and cost reductions have already been implemented around a more manageable costing to reflect the LA's Statutory responsibilities around exclusions. Further reductions have been proposed over a three-year period to mitigate impact and allow the schools to develop other models of delivery with schools.

This work will be supported by a refreshed Place Planning Board including a working party focusing on SEND sufficiency. Initial scoping meetings have taken place to identify opportunities for wider delivery with Arbour Vale School, Haybrook College and Littledown School to develop more alternative provision and special school places.

A Preparation for Adulthood [PfA] Lead officer has been appointed to assure annual reviews consider ceasing EHC plans as appropriate. An operational guide for ceasing EHC plans appropriately has already been agreed. PfA will now be starting before NCY 9 and will ensure that, at key transitions, consideration is given to whether placements are still the most appropriate placement for the child or young person.

Work has begun to co-produce a new Matrix for banded funding ready for implementation in March 2024. This will ensure that funding matches the needs of each young person accurately and are modelled both operationally and financially to ensure that needs are met while keeping regard to sustainability and the existing financial envelope. Our matrix funding levels will be informed by the existing models used by statistical neighbours and other South-East authorities.

MTFS Savings

The planned savings for Home to School Transport of £480k were achieved in 2022/23 and we are on track to achieve the planned additional savings of £115k in 2023/24.

The planned savings to be achieved through a staff restructure of the education staffing teams of £210k will be fully achieved from 2024/25 onwards but, due to the delay in implementing the new structures, a one-off saving of £105k is expected in 2023/24.

Increases for inflation on contracts (£253k for Home to School Transport and £105k for the Regional Adoption Agency contract) have not been added to base budgets as this requires a Cabinet decision which will follow from the P3 exercise.

Statutory Direction Issued to Slough Borough Council

On August 4th this year, the Secretary of State for Education issued a Statutory Direction to Slough Borough Council in relation to its SEND services. The DFE acknowledged that there has been “considerable change in senior leadership at SBC” and that the new team are “determined and motivated to bring positive change”. Nevertheless, SBC accepted the decision because there has clearly been a lack of progress against the areas of significant weaknesses at the time of the DFE visit in February.

One condition imposed by the DFE as a result of the Statutory Direction is that the remit of the Children’s Services Commissioner, Paul Moffatt, will be extended to include SEND functions. The Commissioner already oversees the SEND Partnership Board and a SEND report is included on the agenda for every Getting to Good Board.

Department for Education (DFE) Monitoring Visit July 2023

The feedback from the DFE officials attending the latest monitoring visit acknowledged the hard work that has been put into improving SEND 0-25 services in Slough since the start of March. The SEND Partnership Board new project reporting and data dashboard now provides a good understanding of the quality of the services being provided. Whilst the improvements made were too recent to have made a significant difference to the quality of SEND 0-25 service, the monitoring evidence showed early signs of improvement.

A number of key actions that had been taken were shared with the DFE officials including the establishment of a Strategic Inclusion Partnership Board providing strategic oversight, a data dashboard measuring performance against agreed KPIs and a live cases dashboard to support decision making for individual pupils.

Shortly after the visit, the latest monthly reporting to the DFE included the fact that 28 EHC plans had been finalised in July. This is the most in one month since the inspection and included 5 that had been completed within statutory timescales which is again the best performance since 2021. The key factors in this change of performance are the changes to the team and the sourcing of more locum educational psychologists to complete assessments. Although this is very encouraging and evidences the improvement in the service, it is not yet at the level of the service in 2020 when around 30-35 plans were completed each month. Given that some of the team are still inexperienced, new officers are now in place and that systems are still being improved, it is hoped that this level will be achieved (and potentially surpassed) in the new term and the team are determined to maintain this standard moving forwards.

Report Contact

Neill Butler
Interim Strategic Finance Manager

Email: Neill.Butler@slough.gov.uk