

SASH Executive Officer

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Chair

Mark Woodlock,

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Dear Pat,

We are writing to you as a group of school leaders in Somerset with regards to our concerns about how the High Needs Element of the DSG (Dedicated Schools Grant) is being managed by the LA and the Director of Children's Services.

The Chair of Schools Forum wrote to you privately last year setting out concerns about the lack of leadership and management of this budget. You reassured him in correspondence that this would be closely monitored – it appears this has not happened. It is the case that the situation with this leadership has deteriorated and is now causing grave concern to school leaders and parents as seen in the Schools Forum meeting yesterday at which over 40 school Heads attended.

By way of context, in the Spring of 2019 the Schools Forum agreed that there would need to be savings made in the region of £2m in order to alleviate pressures in the High Needs Budget. This was labelled as 'Joint Commissioning' but no details of how this would work were provided. In the Spring of 2020, a full year later, and prior to the outbreak of the pandemic the LA and school leaders engaged in a series of discussions around how schools might pay for the non-statutory element of the work of the PRUs. These discussions did not lead to a consensus and the work was paused owing to the first lockdown. There was however a series of diarised commitments in September and October to resolve this, including input from all stakeholders. These discussions were cancelled by the LA in September with no explanation and it transpires no further work has taken place to identify how these savings might be made.

On 25 February this year, at a High Needs Sub Group meeting, the LA presented a series of decisions identifying how these savings would be made. These included a significant reduction in the income to PRUs and a cut to the Behaviour Partnership Funds which service Frome and West Somerset. These were presented as decisions, with no advance notice, no papers shared or opportunity for discussion or input. You can probably imagine how this landed. The delicate relationship between the LA and Schools was damaged and trust and confidence in the DCS further eroded.

Over the course of the last two weeks the LA has backtracked and now describes the presentation from High Needs Sub Group as 'Proposals' – this position was reaffirmed yesterday at Schools Forum in a further presentation from the DCS. Yet, these 'proposals' have no substance. In order to make the savings that would be required, redundancies would have to be made within the PRUs, but we are reassured that this is not the plan. Our major concern as a group of school leaders is the lack of confidence we have in the DCS to lead and manage the change with High Needs Budget. We do recognise that there are elements of this budget over which no one has control and we also see the progress being made, with schools, to reduce the number of children going into non-maintained settings.

Following the SEN inspection last summer, SASH has fully engaged in all of the activity within the Written Statement of Action, but school leaders are not seeing this translate into tangible action.

Following the meeting yesterday, these concerns about leadership have become acute. When pressed yesterday the DCS stated publicly that he was very confident that £2.4m of savings could be made 'in-year' by schools and that he believed this could be achieved without redundancies. When pressed for details of how this would work, he could not provide any indication of how this could be achieved. We are currently on the 11th March; the LA has missed by some margin its requirement to provide PRUs with an indication of their budgets next year. Yesterday, the DCS's strategy appeared to be 'wait and see' and we will get back to you soon. Most worrying is that the LA has mentioned schools being 'recharged' as a means of making these savings – this would be in-year but with no detail whatsoever shared about the size of this recharge. Our concerns are that this position is frankly absurd. We cannot be addressing this matter with such short notice and the DCS fails to acknowledge how saving £2.4m without jobs losses is irreconcilable given most schools spend in the region of 85% of their income on staffing.

Finally, it is worth remembering that, at the heart of this are often vulnerable children who require greater care and attention in order for them to succeed in education. Our emphasis should be on preventative work. Removing or reducing this preventative, partnership work from the PRUs will simply increase the number of students permanently excluded and therefore create a greater budget and social issues further down the line. That is why having a cogent, broad, considered plan that explains what actions will be required and how they will be funded is imperative. We appear to be a long way away from that.

To recap:

- With less than three weeks before the new financial year schools and PRUs have no idea what their budgets will be next year. They cannot plan a staffing model, have the threat of a recharge hanging over them and work with the possibility that they might receive a termly budget. All of this indicates a complete lack of understanding of how financial planning in schools works.
- Trust and confidence in the DCS and his leadership is at rock bottom. Headteachers from Secondary Schools, PRUs and some Special Schools are openly talking about a vote of no confidence in the DCS. In order for schools to agree to contribute to reducing the deficit, they would need to have confidence that the money would be spent wisely, with a coherent plan. That confidence does not exist at present.
- Schools have been told that there will be £2.4m of savings generated next year, but without any details or assurances about how this will work. No mechanism has been shared, no timeframe, no rationale. Only a vague commitment to share a plan for a plan in the coming weeks.

We have advised you of our concerns in this area for over a year. The matter is now acute. Please do not underestimate the degree to which schools leaders are concerned about how poorly this situation is being lead and managed. We urge you to work with your officers to produce a robust plan and timeframe in which we can engage with you to seek to resolve the financial pressures in the High Needs Budget.

As a matter of urgency, please would you confirm in writing:

1. What action you will take to ensure that a coherent financial plan is placed before schools?

2. What action you will take to ensure that proper engagement and consultation is undertaken with schools in a timely manner that allows for appropriate planning?
3. What action you will take to restore trust and confidence in the leadership within the LA?
4. What future steps will be taken beyond this immediate crisis to ensure that it does not happen again?

Whilst we are open to meeting, we feel it is important to ask for these responses in writing first so that we can understand the approach that you and the LA are taking, and share those responses with the many concerned headteachers.

Yours sincerely,



Mark Woodlock
Chair SASH



Peter Elliot
Chair Schools Forum



Mark Griffin
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