



Delegated decision report

DECISION UNDER DELEGATED POWERS

DECISION CANNOT BE TAKEN BEFORE 24 FEBRUARY 2021

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| Title | PROPOSAL TO MOVE TO A SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS BANDING FRAMEWORK FOR EDUCATION, HEALTH AND CARE PLANS TOP UP FUNDING |
| Report of | CABINET MEMBER FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES, EDUCATION AND SKILLS |

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. The Isle of Wight Council holds an amount of funding from the High Needs Block on behalf of local mainstream schools, which it then allocates upon its production of an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) to a school for the delivery of the provision set out in the EHCP. This is known as 'Element 3', or 'top-up' funding.
2. Many schools use a wide repertoire of approaches to meet the needs of children and young people with an EHCP. This brings the funding in line with best practice that schools have adopted.
3. The proposed special educational needs (SEN) banding framework is aimed at allocating resources to mainstream schools, in a way that offers them greater flexibility to organise provision and would support children and young people with EHCPs to become more independent and achieve better outcomes.
4. The Isle of Wight Council recently undertook a formal eight week consultation on this proposal to move from a system of allocating "Element 3" funding based on "hours of learning support assistance" to a Banding Framework.
5. The purpose of this report is to seek approval from the Cabinet member for children's services, education and skills to move to a SEN Banding Framework for the allocation of EHCP top-up funding to mainstream schools.
6. This report summarises the proposed changes to the current system for top-up funding for Education, Health and Care plans (EHCPs) and the feedback from the public consultation responses. It highlights the areas of concern that were raised through the public consultation and proposed mitigating actions. It is considered that these mitigating actions are sufficient should this proposal be agreed as is recommended in this report.

BACKGROUND (CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION)

Top-up funding for Education, Health and Care Plans in mainstream schools

7. The Isle of Wight Council holds an amount of funding from the High Needs Block on behalf of local mainstream schools, which it then allocates upon its production of an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) to a school for the delivery of the provision set out in the EHCP. This is known as ‘Element 3’, or ‘top-up’ funding. The current amount of funding allocated in the 2021/22 budget is £1,722,000 which is an increase of £341,000 from 2020/21.
8. Under the current arrangement, an amount of top-up funding is provided as “learning support assistance” from which the provision in the EHCP is to be implemented. This amount is based on the calculation of an equivalent amount of funding for a number of teaching assistant hours. This is often mistakenly interpreted as hours of one to one support for the young person with the EHCP.
9. Many mainstream schools use a wide repertoire of approaches to meet the needs of children and young people with an EHCP. This proposal brings the funding in line with best practice that schools have adopted. Evidence from Deployment & Impact of Support Staff project (Blatchford, P. Bassett, P., Brown, P., Martin, C., Russell, A., and Webster R. London: Department for Children, Schools and Families) and Education Endowment Foundation meta-research shows that, on its own 1:1 support from a learning support assistant is not the most effective way to support children and young people with SEN as outlined within the research. From a financial perspective, it is also inefficient as there are no opportunities to gain economies of scale, for example, by being able to share staff expertise between children and young people across the class or school.
10. The proposed SEN banding framework is aimed at allocating resources to mainstream schools, in a way that offers them greater flexibility to organise provision and would support children and young people with EHCPs to become more independent and achieve better outcomes.
11. In December 2018, the council decided to review its top-up funding for mainstream schools as its arrangement (known on the Isle of Wight as ‘hours of learning support assistance’) was out of step with other local authorities’ practice.
12. The 2018 review found that the preferred system for the majority of local authorities is a Banding Framework. This is where the top-up funding is set into bands of increasing value against an agreed set of criteria. The amount provided to the school is a best fit of the required provision in the EHCP matched against the appropriate criteria in the Banding Framework.
13. Having consulted with the Isle of Wight Schools Forum, and with its support, the council undertook a review of other local authority banding approaches, with a view to developing its own. This identified East Sussex County Council’s banding matrix as a model of good practice.
14. In partnership with Hampshire County Council, the Isle of Wight Council convened a multi-disciplinary group of educators and related professionals to investigate East Sussex County Council’s banding matrix in more detail. The

group comprised headteachers, teachers, special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs), local authority officers, specialist teacher advisors, educational psychologists, NHS commissioners, NHS therapy managers and parent representatives.

15. The group found it to be a well-considered and established approach that closely matched the ambitions of the Isle of Wight Council and Hampshire County Council and most mainstream school leaders across both authorities. The group considered that East Sussex County Council's matrix needed only small changes to reflect some aspects of Isle of Wight's context. Permission was granted from East Sussex County Council to adopt its matrix and adapt it for the Isle of Wight's use.
16. As part of this process, informal consultation took place with key stakeholders and this process indicated broad support for this proposal and understanding of the potential positive impact on outcomes for children and young people.
17. Following financial modelling of the banding values, stress-testing research was undertaken with ten per cent of mainstream schools on the Island between March and May 2020. The primary purpose of the research was to determine the feasibility of the banding values against current EHCP's. Additionally, the research sought to determine the support and readiness within Isle of Wight schools should the proposed framework be accepted.
18. The financial testing returned 100 per cent support for implementation of the proposed framework. Overall, the banding values and the descriptors against the bands were supported but concerns about the level of funding allocated to these bands were shared.
19. It is suggested that this report is considered alongside the SEN Banding Framework public consultation and technical document (see Appendix 1).

The proposed SEN Banding Framework

20. Please see Appendix 4 for a visual representation of the proposed framework.
21. The council is proposing that an agreed Banding Framework would simplify the process of allocating top-up funding so that schools and parents are clear on what is being provided and why. Allocating top-up funding against an agreed framework is a transparent process where both schools and parents can see how the allocation of top-up funding has been determined.
22. The Banding Framework would not be used to determine the provision that a young person requires. This would still be determined through the EHC Needs Assessment process.
23. The proposal only covers the top-up funding that mainstream schools receive for children with more complex SEN requiring an EHC plan and not the core funding of mainstream schools.
24. The proposal is not intended, or expected, to lead to a reduction in the High Needs Budget used to fund provision identified in EHC plans in mainstream schools. The total cost of provision set out within an EHCP would continue to

be met jointly from the school and the local authority's High Needs Budget.

25. It is anticipated that the proposed Banding Framework, in combination with the separately published guidance about SEN support in mainstream schools, would enhance outcomes for children and young people by enabling access to a broader range of support and promote a young person's independence.
26. All formal routes of appeal relating to EHC plans and provision would continue to be available in their current form.

STRATEGIC CONTEXT

27. As highlighted in the main body of the report it is anticipated that this proposal if agreed, would enhance outcomes for children and young people by enabling access to a broader range of support and promote a young person's independence. This is a key ambition as set out in the Corporate Plan 2019-2022. This ambition contributes to the corporate priorities "Opportunity and Wellbeing."

CONSULTATION

28. An eight-week public consultation on the proposal ran from 19 October 2020 to 13 December 2020.
29. The consultation was communicated to residents and stakeholders through a range of channels that included:
 - social media posts drawing attention to the consultation and linking to the consultation web page on the Council website;
 - a press release to media organisations on the Island, as well as shared with the Cabinet member for children's services, education and skills, Parents Voice IW and SENDIASS;
 - a school communication sent to headteachers by the assistant director, education and inclusion, Children's Services;
 - attendance by council officers at two Parents Voice IW meetings where the proposed funding mechanism was described, questions were answered, and the group was encouraged to circulate details of the consultation with their membership;
 - internal communications with council employees.
30. A dedicated webpage providing full details of the consultation timeframe, links to the main and Easy Read consultation documents, a summary presentation and the response questionnaire was published for the launch of the consultation.
31. A dedicated in-box was specifically set up during the consultation to deal with particular enquiries which were addressed as they came in and for submissions to the public consultation which were submitted via email.

Findings from the consultation

32. There were 90 responses to the consultation response form, all of which were submitted online:

- 79 were from individuals (27 of which were from one postcode area).
- Six were from a nursery, school, college or place of education.
- One was from a democratically elected representative of a local area.
- Four did not indicate either way.

The SEN Bandings Consultation Findings Report can be found at Appendix 3.

33. There was one separate unstructured response (received via letter or email) that was received within the consultation period; this response is also included in this report.

Key findings from the formal consultation

34. Overall, respondents preferred the current mechanism over the proposed banding mechanism (68 of 86 responses). Responses from schools were overwhelming positive, signalling agreement with the proposed banding framework. However, only a small proportion of schools responded. Previous informal consultation and involvement of schools had already signalled overall support for the proposal. Responses from parents were generally against the new system with most preferring the old system.
35. Respondents who disagreed with the proposed bands were asked to explain why they felt this way, and 24 of 68 (35 per cent) respondents provided a comment. The most frequently mentioned reason for disagreement related to funding, among whom nine (ten per cent) of all respondents mentioned that funding for SEN is not sufficient under the current mechanism. Six (six per cent) of all respondents mentioned that any changes to the banding may affect funding further and will negatively impact children and families and three (three per cent) of all respondents mentioned that funding should not be reduced.
36. Respondents from households with children with SEN preferred the existing framework (21 of 23 responses). Thirteen (14 per cent of total respondents) comments were provided about why they felt this way, the majority of which highlighted positives of the current approach and potential pitfalls of the new approach. Specifically, respondents spoke of how the current approach ensures that children have the required care to meet their needs, (two mentions) while the new approach was perceived by some respondents as a way to reduce funding for SEN support in schools.
37. Respondents generally disagreed that the proposed framework would achieve the suggested benefits. However, those responding on behalf of places of education felt that three of the five potential benefits could be achieved, specifically that the proposed approach would:
- enable schools to deploy a wider range of strategies to help children to become more independent (four of six agreed);
 - simplify the process when the local authority is undertaking an EHC Plan assessment for a child or young person (four of six agreed);
 - be simpler for service users' families to understand (three of six agreed).
38. There was overall disagreement with the suggestion that the proposed framework would provide the necessary resources for schools to support children with SEN. Places of education were also unconvinced, with an even

split between agreement and disagreement, this was split two/two/two between agree/no view/disagree, but were more aligned on the following points:

- Enable schools to deploy a wider range of strategies to help children to become more independent (of six responses, four agreed, two disagreed).
- simplify the process when the local authority is undertaking an Education, Health and Care Plan assessment for a child or young person (of six responses, four agreed and two disagreed).

39. When asked about the potential impacts of the proposed mechanism, respondents reflected how the framework could impact children, 13 (14 per cent) mentioned that children may miss out on the support that they require, while nine (ten per cent) respondents mentioned that the banding system could impact upon children's academic and personal progress. Two schools and colleges were concerned that there would need to be staffing changes and that the new approach may increase workloads.

Parental engagement sessions

40. Parental engagement with the Steering Group from Parents Voice IW was started prior to the formal consultation process. As part of the local authority commitment to co-production, information was shared regarding a proposal to consider a move to a Banding Framework prior to the formal consultation process. At this stage, the research and principles were discussed.
41. Feedback at that point focussed on wider SEN issues including supporting schools to fully understand SEN. However, there was general understanding and support for a Banding Framework and recognition of the benefits of such an approach.
42. The more formal engagement programme consisted of a formal event organised by Parents Voice IW. The event was advertised by the organisation via social media but was attended by a small number of parents. In response to the wider issues identified a further event was arranged to address these issues. Again, whilst this was advertised by Parents Voice through their usual channels but again was only attended by a small number of parents.
43. At these formal meetings, whilst there was some concern raised regarding a move away from one-to-one support generally, the discussion focused on accountability and implementation at school level. A view was expressed that the current system helped parents hold schools to account.

Key themes identified via the consultation process and parent engagement sessions

Through the consultation process, the following key themes have been identified.

44. Support for the proposed framework

- Education settings were supportive of the proposed framework.
- Parents were not supportive of the proposed framework and preferred the current mechanism.

45. Implementation

There was broad agreement from places of education that the banding framework would:

- Enable schools to deploy a wider range of strategies to help children to become more independent (of six responses, four agreed, two disagreed).
- Simplify the process when the local authority is undertaking an Education, Health and Care Plan assessment for a child or young person (of six responses, four agreed and two disagreed).

46. Funding

- The consultation document clearly stated that the proposal was not intended, or expected, to lead to a reduction in the budget used to fund EHC plans in mainstream schools and that the total cost of provision set out within an EHCP would continue to be met jointly from the school and the local authority. However, responses to the consultation focused disproportionately on levels of funding and most frequently mentioned the concern that SEN funding is not sufficient under the current mechanism and that any changes to the banding system may mean a decrease in funding for SEN in schools.
- The stress testing generally supported the sufficiency of the banding values to meet needs. This was only raised as a concern in the consultation where there was not an opportunity for direct financial modelling against the framework.

47. Reduction in levels of support

- The consultation also confirms that the current mechanism continues to be frequently misunderstood and that 'hours of learning support assistance' means the number of hours a pupil will receive one to one support in school. Comments referred to the possibility that children would no longer receive the support they require, and that the banding system could impact upon children's academic and personal progress.

48. Wider SEN issues

The consultation responses along with analysis of the questions and comments made at the public events shows that there are wider issues that have been identified. While these are not directly related to the proposed framework, they are very likely to be contributing to objections against it. These are the following:

- The quality of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), including the quantification and specification
- The implementation of provision in EHCPs within settings
- That flexibility means less accountability in settings.
- Many parents feel that the number of hours of support in an EHCP is a measure by which schools can be held accountable for the overall provision their child receives.
- The feedback from the public events suggests that the priority for parents is provision – what input their child receives. This does not yet appear to be in balance with outcomes and progress – what their child has achieved. This is understandable when viewed in context to the other wider issues identified.

49. **Response to public consultation and parent engagement sessions**
The following points address concerns raised through the consultation and parent engagement sessions.

The sufficiency of the banding values to meet needs

- The financial research undertaken in May 2020 tested the feasibility of the banding values. This research tested the banding values against live EHCP's in ten per cent of mainstream schools. The overall support for the proposed banding framework was at 100 per cent suggesting the bands were deemed sufficient to meet needs. Concern was raised in the consultation when this level of financial analysis was not possible.

That schools' individual budgets will be affected

- The money allocated to a school through their notional SEN budget is not affected by this proposal.
- The banding proposal would only apply to new EHCPs initially and therefore would not change existing funding.
- There may be a change to the funding for an individual EHCP at the point of annual review, which is the same as the current system, if the evidence suggests it is appropriate to do so.
- The band for each EHC plan would be determined on a best fit arrangement to the provision described in section F of the EHCP. The value may, therefore, be slightly higher or slightly lower than the current funding level and through the new model, schools would gain extra flexibility in how they use this money to ensure greater efficiency and support better outcomes.
- Based on the financial modelling completed, the impact of this change on a school's budget would not be significant. Individual mainstream schools would retain the flexibility to pool and draw on their overall budgets and would continue to be legally required to use their best endeavours to provide for all children and young people's SEN including those who are subject to an EHC plan. Similarly, the council would maintain its ultimate duty to secure the provision in EHC plans.

The overall schools High Needs Budget will be reduced

- There is no proposed reduction to the mainstream school's top up element of the High Needs Budget. The proposed budget for 2021/22 is £1,722,000 which is an increase of £341,000 from 2020/21.

That the proposed framework will remove one-to-one support, and/or quantification from EHCPs

- This would be addressed via the proposed Banding Framework document which describes the use of one to one support as part of a wide range of provision. This would make clear that one to one support remains an essential provision for many pupils as part of their overall support.
- Where EHCPs specify one to one support in Appendix F of the plan it would need to be provided.
- Work is underway through the hub to improve specificity of advice so that qualification is more explicit.

There were important wider issues identified as part of the consultation process, in particular the public engagement events as noted previously. These will be addressed as part of the wider SEN Service strategy.

- The SEN Service regularly undertakes EHCP quality improvement. The SEN Service is currently implementing the EHC Hub and is working with contributors to the EHC needs assessment to improve the quality of advice to inform the content of EHCP's. The hub development is also integral to the improved management of EHCP annual reviews, which contribute to better monitoring of EHCP implementation.
- In addition to this, the SEN Service has regular parent-led sessions with Parents Voice IW.
- Finally, schools have a role in increasing parental confidence in the EHCP provision being offered. The consultation suggests that parents feel that the current mechanism helps hold schools to account. This was noted as part of the Isle of Wight SEN Care Quality Commission Ofsted inspection and it was suggested that greater co-production with parents would increase confidence of parents in the approaches being used by schools and enable a more outcomes focused discussion. This work will be undertaken in partnership with the Hampshire Inspection and Advisory Service (HIAS). The development of a comprehensive change management plan will support this activity plus the delivery of a programme of engagement which includes training; engagement with parent groups; and a communication strategy.

50. **Next steps**

If agreed, the framework would become effective from 1 April 2021 and would apply to EHCPs agreed for assessment after this date. Existing EHCPs would be reviewed against the framework and a banding value determined over three years in academic years 1, 5 and 8. A detailed process for this will need to be co-produced with stakeholders and Parents Voice IW.

Current funding arrangements would remain in place until then.

A training programme would be rolled out for both council officers and for settings which informs on the framework and the banding structure.

51. **Conclusion from the consultation**

Overall, respondents preferred the current mechanism (68 of 86) responses) to the proposed funding mechanism. Schools were generally supportive of the proposals with five out of six places of education agreeing with the proposed banding framework. Through informal feedback, the majority of education settings also supported the Banding Framework.

While concerns regarding the levels of funding, reduction in levels of support and wider SEN issues have been raised by respondents through the public consultation. The Isle of Wight Council's Children's Services Departmental Management Team considered the consultation outcomes, the detailed response and mitigating actions outlined above which has led to the recommendation in this paper.

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE VIEW

52. The Policy and Scrutiny Committee for Children's Services, Education and Skills were given the opportunity to raise any comments that should be taken into account. There were only two matters which were for clarification and no concerns were identified with the proposed way forward.
53. The subject of this report has been:
 - (a) discussed at Schools Forum, 14 January 2021;
 - (b) discussed at the Corporate Management Team on 2 February 2021;
 - (c) discussed at the Children's Services Department Management Team on 3 February 2021.

All committees are supportive of the potential implementation of the SEN banding framework for replacing the current top-funding mechanism based on hours of learning support assistance. The committees recognised that the consultation feedback raised concerns, however, they noted the mitigations for these areas of concern clearly outlined in the report alongside the overwhelming support of educational settings for the new framework.

FINANCIAL / BUDGET IMPLICATIONS

54. The proposal is not intended, or expected, to lead to a reduction in the budget used to fund EHC plans in mainstream schools. The total cost of provision set out within an EHCP would continue to be met jointly from the school and the local authority's High Needs Budget.
55. The proposal only covers the top-up funding that mainstream schools receive for children with more complex SEN requiring an EHC plan and not the core funding of mainstream schools.
56. There is no proposed reduction to the mainstream schools top up element of the High Needs Budget. The proposed budget for 2021/22 is £1,722,000 which is an increase of £341,000 from 2020/21.
57. An additional Capita ONE report will be required for the interim period where two payment calculations are required. There will be a financial impact not yet quantified as this work is not covered in the existing Service Level Agreements.
58. Additional support from the Finance Team to set up the new system will be required if this proposal is agreed. This has been costed at approximately £1,500 and will be covered from within existing budgets.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

59. As a public consultation was undertaken it is necessary for the Cabinet member to consider the outcomes from the consultation and to make a decision on the proposal.
60. The Children and Families Act 2014 (CFA 2014) sets out the responsibilities of local authorities to assess and make provisions for children and young people with special educational needs (SEN) through the use of Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans (section 36 & 37).

61. Section 27 of the CFA 2014 places local authorities under a duty to keep their education and care provision under review for those who have special educational needs or a disability (SEND).
62. Section 42 requires an authority to secure special educational and health care provision in line with an EHC plan. Section 42 of the CFA 2014 does not prohibit administering SEN funding through a system of bandings as long as the funding system secured the child's overall SEN provision.

EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY

63. The council, as a public body, is required to meet its statutory obligations under the Equality Act 2010 to have due regard to eliminate unlawful discrimination, promote equal opportunities between people from different groups and to foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not share it. The protected characteristics are: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.
64. Under the Equality Act 2010 we are required to have due regard to our equality duties when making decisions, reviewing services, undertaking projects, developing and reviewing policies. This has been undertaken throughout this proposal at the formative stage.
65. This report introduces a proposed change of an existing policy or procedure, an equality impact assessment (EIA) has been undertaken and the results are summarised here:
 - There would be no negative impact to children or young people in the provision of top-up funding for EHCPs in mainstream schools.
 - It is anticipated that if agreed, the proposal would enhance outcomes for children and young people by enabling access to a broader range of support and promote a young person's independence.
 - That this ambition contributes to the corporate priorities of Opportunity and Wellbeing.
 - The Banding Framework would not be used to determine the provision that a young person requires, this would still be determined through the EHC needs assessment process.
 - Provision of an Education, Health and Care plan is a statutory function of the local authority as set out in sections 36 and 37 of the Children and Families Act 2014. These provisions are not impacted by this proposal.

66. The EIA is attached to this document as Appendix 2.

OPTIONS

67. Option 1 – To move to a SEN Banding Framework for the allocation of EHCP top-up funding to mainstream schools.
68. Option 2 – To retain the current mechanism for funding.

RISK MANAGEMENT

69. As outlined in the main body of the report concerns were raised through the public consultation regarding the proposed implementation of the Banding Framework.
70. Detailed analysis and feedback has been undertaken and the main report also outlines the key mitigations that will be in place should this proposal be agreed. This can be found at point 48.
71. The detailed information contained in the public consultation document clearly demonstrates that some of the feedback relates to areas not covered by the public consultation.
72. The detailed information in the report also indicates some misunderstanding that the consultation was proposing to cut funding for SEN. It was clearly stated in the consultation document that this was not the case and that in fact the 2021/22 budget had increased by 341,000. We have collated this information at point 47 and these will be addressed as separate issues.
73. As part of the pre-consultation phase the council undertook a stress testing exercise which indicated 100 per cent support for the proposal.

EVALUATION

74. It is recommended that the Cabinet member supports the move to a SEN Banding Framework for the allocation of EHCP top-up funding to mainstream schools.

RECOMMENDATION

75. That the Cabinet member for children's services, education and skills notes that;
 - the proposed Banding Framework, in combination with the separately published guidance about SEN support in mainstream schools, is intended to enhance outcomes for children and young people by enabling access to a broader range of support and promote a young person's independence.
 - this proposal aims to bring the funding in line with best practice that schools have adopted.
 - this system moves away from hours of learning support assistance and assigns funding against a broad range of best practice provisions that matches specific types and levels of need.
 - based on the financial modelling completed, the impact of this change on a school's budget would not be significant. Individual mainstream schools would retain the flexibility to pool and draw on their overall budgets and would continue to be legally required to use their best endeavours to provide for all children and young people's SEN including those who are subject to an Education, Health and Care plan. Similarly, the Council would maintain its ultimate duty to secure the provision in EHC plans. The proposal is not intended, or expected, to lead to a reduction in the High

Needs budget used to fund top-funding for EHC plans in mainstream schools.

- overall, respondents preferred the current mechanism (68 of 86) responses) to the proposed funding mechanism. Schools were generally supportive of the proposals with five out of six places of education agreeing with the proposed banding framework. Through informal feedback, the majority of education settings also supported the Banding Framework.
 - while concerns regarding the levels of funding, reduction in levels of support and wider SEN issues have been raised by respondents through the public consultation. The Isle of Wight Council's Children's Services Departmental Management Team considered the consultation outcomes, the detailed response and mitigating actions for the concerns raised, and support the recommendation in this paper.
76. That the Cabinet member for children's services, education and skills approves the proposal for Option 1 – To move to a SEN Banding Framework for the allocation of EHCP top-up funding to mainstream schools.

APPENDICES ATTACHED

77. Appendix 1 - Consultation on Isle of Wight Council's proposed Special Educational Needs (SEN) banding framework for children and young people who have Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans in mainstream schools.
78. Appendix 2 - Equality impact assessment.
79. Appendix 3 - SEN Banding consultation findings report Isle of Wight.
80. Appendix 4 – Banding framework infographic.

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All representations in regard to this decision must be submitted to delegated.decisions@iow.gov.uk by the close of the consultation period.

STEVE CROCKER
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(CLLR) PAUL BRADING
*Cabinet Member for Children's Services,
Education and Skills*