

20<sup>th</sup> July 2020

Agenda Item: 7

## **REPORT OF THE SERVICE DIRECTOR, EDUCATION, LEARNING AND SKILLS**

### **CHANGE TO THE STAFFING STRUCTURE OF THE SENSORY TEAM WITHIN SCHOOLS AND FAMILIES SPECIALIST SERVICES**

#### **Purpose of the Report**

1. To seek approval to convert a 0.6 fte specialist Teaching Assistant (Grade 4) vacancy in the Schools and Families Specialist Services (SFSS) staffing structure into a 0.6 fte Sensory Technician (Grade 4) post.

#### **Information**

##### **The Current Staffing Structure**

2. The Sensory Team is one of the four teams that form Schools and Families Specialist Services. The Sensory Team offers support and advice to schools and families. They have contact with babies, young children and school students from the ages of 0-19 years who have a visual or hearing impairment.
3. Many of the young people on the Team's caseload are referred at birth and the principal referral route is via medical teams although referrals are also received and accepted from parents, schools and other settings.

Current staffing as shown on the structure:

- 7.7 fte Teachers of the Deaf (including 1 fte Educational Audiologist)
- 5<sup>1</sup> fte Teachers of the Visually Impaired
- 2.4 fte Specialist Teaching Assistants (supporting both hearing impaired (HI) and visually impaired (VI) children and young people)
- 1 fte Habilitation Officer
- 1 fte Sensory Technician/Teaching Assistant.

The current vacancies within the team are as follows:

- 2.1 fte Teachers of the Deaf
- 0.6 fte Specialist Teaching Assistant.

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<sup>1</sup> There are currently 5.5 fte teachers of the visually impaired, following permission from the Schools Forum to recruit over the baseline to enable succession planning. It takes two years for a qualified teacher to obtain the additional qualification to become a specialist teacher of the deaf or of the visually impaired.

4. Despite attempts by the Sensory Team Lead to recruit to the vacant 0.6 fte Specialist Teaching Assistant post, it has not been possible to fill this vacancy. This has either been because the candidates did not have the right qualifications and/or experience. In addition none of the existing part-time Teaching Assistants wish to take on additional hours.
5. When Schools and Families Specialist Services was restructured in May 2019, the Sensory Technician post that had existed previously was converted into a hybrid Sensory Technician/Teaching Assistant role. The reason for this change was that it enabled the post holder, who is a qualified Teaching Assistant, to deliver training and provide support and advice in relation to the equipment they had provided. This was an efficient use of their time, school staff time and has also meant that there is continuity between the person delivering and installing the equipment and the person providing the advice and training around its use for children and young people who are blind or visually impaired.
6. Technical support for children and young people with visual impairments also involves producing resources, such as texts and examination papers in Braille, which can be a lengthy and involved process. Overall the change to the structure facilitated by the creation of a hybrid Sensory Technician/Teaching Assistant role has been very positive in terms of being able to support the needs with pupils who are visually impaired.
7. It has however become apparent that a consequence of the creation of this hybrid role is that there is less capacity to support the Audiologist with the repairs and servicing of radio aids for children and young people who are deaf or hearing impaired. The prohibitively high costs of brand new radio aids mean that the team has to purchase reconditioned radio aids. These reconditioned units are available at one tenth of the cost of a brand-new item, but as a consequence are much more labour intensive to maintain.
8. At present the Sensory Technician/TA is only able to give the hearing-impaired element of the technician role a maximum of one day per week of support. At peak times, this can be reduced to as little as an hour per week. This then impacts on the support that is available to the Teachers of the Deaf with regard to radio aids in terms of the setting up and maintenance of equipment. As a consequence the service to schools is slower and less responsive than would ideally be the case, with children and young people on occasion being without equipment for weeks rather than days.
9. There are additional key tasks that a Sensory Technician needs to undertake, which are detailed below, that are increasingly difficult to undertake systematically with the current level of staffing:
  - cataloguing all HI equipment allocated to schools and keeping accurate up to date records on the data base
  - monitoring repairs and upgrades and keeping equipment records updated on the data base (where equipment has to be sent externally for these repairs/upgrades)
  - budget control - monitoring expenditure and forecasting future spend, including identifying best value in accordance with the County Council's financial regulations
  - monitoring stock/ replacing sundries and consumables
  - monitoring use of equipment and completing accurate records for files
  - providing training for Sensory Team staff
  - attending training offered by companies to keep up to date with new systems
  - liaising with team members.

## **Rationale for change to the staffing structure**

10. The rationale for requesting this change to the staffing structure has been prompted by three key factors:
  - the need to address the imbalance in the technical support available for children and young people who are deaf/hearing impaired compared with those who are visually impaired
  - the high numbers of active HI and VI cases requiring technical support (which show no sign of diminishing)
  - having two staff designated as Sensory Technicians will enable them to provide peer support regarding training and professional development, as well as being able to cover for each other e.g. during sickness absence.

## **Caseload numbers**

11. There are currently 718 babies/children/pupils on the Sensory Team caseload of which 475 are active cases and have the most complex sensory needs. The Team keeps children and young people 'on-request'; this is where the need is not deemed to be high, but where advice may be required at key times, for example for transition between settings or phases of education. There are currently 243 children and young people in this category.
12. Of the active cases, 228 are children with a visual impairment and 247 are children with a hearing impairment. Caseload size is roughly similar across both visual and hearing impairment.

## **Caseload Complexity**

13. The number of children who are accepted onto caseload born at 25 – 28 weeks gestation increases each year. Whilst overall the number of extremely premature babies referred to the team is small, the impact on services and their capacity to meet the needs of these children and their families is significant and shows no sign of reducing.
14. Extremely pre-term births are only one aspect of the increase in survivability of children with complex needs and conditions. This has been reflected in the growth in numbers of children who will require Braille to access the curriculum. In 2010 the Local Authority had three children who required this mode of access and there are now 11 children in mainstream schools. Braille users require specialist equipment and specialist input throughout their school career and as such are given priority for resourcing. There is also an increase in numbers of pupils who have a dual diagnosis, currently on caseload there are seven complex needs pupils with both a VI and HI diagnosis.
15. The Local Authority has seen an increase in the numbers of children who are born profoundly deaf. The use of Cochlear Implantation has meant that many of these children will be able to access speech and will not therefore require the additional resourcing associated with being dependent on British Sign Language. However the demand for personal FM systems (radio aids) increases as the HI population increases and campaigns led by national organisations campaign for FM systems to be provided for all pupils with a HI. There has been a 45% increase in the number of radio aids issued by the Sensory Team over the last 4-5 years. The numbers of children with a radio aid in infant school and nursery has gone up by about 5% and additional numbers of children with sound field systems used in conjunction with radio aids has increased by approximately 20%.

16. There has also been an increase in the number of children being issued with Bone Anchored Hearing Aids (BAHA5) and the development of new Bluetooth technology that works with this type of hearing aid accounts for a 20% increase in numbers of children with this new type of radio aid.
17. In total there are currently 147 children and young people in Nottinghamshire who have been issued with specialist equipment to support them with needs arising from their hearing impairment. The conversion of a vacant Teaching Assistant post to an additional Sensory Technician role within the Sensory Team will ensure that the team is better able to service the needs of this cohort of children and young people, which arise from the specialist equipment which has been issued to them.

### **Other Options Considered**

18. No other options have been considered.

### **Reasons for Recommendation/s**

19. The recommendation increases capacity to provide technical sensory support in particular for deaf and hearing impaired children and young people.

### **Statutory and Policy Implications**

20. This report has been compiled after consideration of implications in respect of crime and disorder, data protection and information governance, finance, human resources, human rights, the NHS Constitution (public health services), the public sector equality duty, safeguarding of children and adults at risk, service users, smarter working, sustainability and the environment and where such implications are material they are described below. Appropriate consultation has been undertaken and advice sought on these issues as required.

### **Financial Implications**

21. There are no financial implications arising from the proposed change. A 0.6 fte Teaching Assistant post at Grade 4 costs £18,037, including on-costs. The proposed 0.6 fte Sensory Technician post which was part of the Schools & Families Specialist Services structure until May 2019 was similarly graded at Grade 4 and the salary costs are therefore identical.

### **Human Resources Implications**

22. If this request is approved, it will result in a 0.6 fte vacant Teaching Assistant (Grade 4) post being disestablished from the Sensory Team staffing structure and the establishment of a new 0.6 fte Sensory Technician (Grade 4) post. As the 0.6 fte Teaching Assistant post is vacant there are no redundancy implications arising from the proposed structural change.

### **Implications for Service Users**

23. The proposed change will better enable the Sensory Team to respond to the needs of children and young people with a hearing impairment in Nottinghamshire, their families, settings and schools. This is because it will increase capacity to provide technical sensory support in particular for deaf and hearing impaired children and young people. Historically it has not proved possible to recruit to a 0.6 fte Teaching Assistant post which has been vacant for some time. The proposal is intended to provide additional Sensory Technician

capacity to help support the increasing numbers and complexity of need of children and young people in Nottinghamshire with hearing and visual impairments.

## **RECOMMENDATION/S**

- 1) That the Committee approves the following changes to the staffing structure of the Sensory Team within the Schools and Families Specialist Services:
  - the disestablishment of a 0.6 fte Teaching Assistant (Grade 4) post
  - the establishment of a 0.6 fte Sensory Technician (Grade 4) post.

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### **Constitutional Comments (KK 30/06/20)**

24. The proposals in this report are within the remit of the Children and Young People's Committee.

### **Financial Comments (SAS 07/07/20)**

25. There are no financial implications arising directly from this report. A 0.6 fte Teaching Assistant post at Grade 4 costs £18,037, including on-costs at the top of grade. The proposed 0.6 fte Sensory Technician post which was part of the Schools & Families Specialist Services structure until May 2019 was similarly graded at Grade 4 and the salary costs are therefore identical. The Schools & Families Specialist Services budget is £3.877m and is funded from the High Needs Block of the Dedicated Schools Grant.

### **HR Comments (BC 08/07/20)**

26. The staffing implications are contained within the body of the report. As the 0.6 fte Teaching Assistant post is currently vacant, there are no redundancy implications arising from this report.

### **Background Papers and Published Documents**

Except for previously published documents, which will be available elsewhere, the documents listed here will be available for inspection in accordance with Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972.

None.

### **Electoral Division(s) and Member(s) Affected**

All.

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