



PARENTS' FORUM

24TH JANUARY 2020

10 parents attended. We were joined by Sue Spaargaren, HJS Special Educational Needs Coordinator.

Special Educational Needs (SEN)

Sue explained what the role of the SENDCO (Special Educational Needs and Disability Co-ordinator) is in school, and how funding is allocated for children with high levels of need. To place the discussion in context, Bristol's citywide approach to meeting the needs of children with special educational needs has recently been inspected by Ofsted, and found to be inadequate. This does not come as a surprise to anyone working in schools or indeed in the city's education services. Over the years, there have been several changes of leadership, multiple attempts to reorganise the structure, and inadequate communication between different services. The result has been that the professionals working in schools directly with children have struggled to secure additional funding to support children with the highest levels of need, and parents of those children have been baffled and frustrated by an administrative system that has been very slow to respond to applications for assessment or funding.

We are pleased that a permanent new Director of Education, Alison Hurley, has been appointed and that her top priority is to overhaul the SEND system. The aim is to respond more quickly, to allocate funds more effectively and to reduce the burden of unnecessary or duplicated paperwork, so that the children who need support get it in a timely manner.

This, in brief, is how school funding is allocated:

Every school receives a General Annual Grant (GAG), based largely on pupil numbers, with a formula that allocates additional amounts based on factors such as deprivation and pupil mobility. Of that GAG, an amount is identified as being notionally for SEN. It is not ring-fenced, but is based on an assumption that some children in any school will require some adaptation of the curriculum or extra provision over and above what is provided to all children.

In addition, the local authority has a budget for direct funding of individual students with high levels of need. Schools have to apply for this funding, by submitting an application to a "top up panel" (made up of education, health and local authority professionals). Schools have to prove that they are already spending extra money from their GAG on the child, in order to access an additional amount per year. In some cases, the time taken to prepare the relevant paperwork to put to the panel consumes more money than the award, and it is simply not worth doing. Even if children are awarded the highest rates of additional funding, it invariably costs the school more than that to provide the relevant support.

If the school has children with additional needs that must be met, and there is not enough money in the notional SEN budget or direct funding, then more demands are placed on the remaining GAG, and that's when cuts have to be considered to the general provision for all children.

Fortunately, HJS has a very well managed budget, a highly experienced staff and a track record of including children with a wide range of complex needs.

Visitor assemblies

We talked about the recent assembly presentation by Bristol Airport.

The Airport assembly was not connected with the expansion proposal, or even with air transport, but was specifically related to their goal of eliminating the use of single use plastics at the airport. They came in response to letters written by Year 4 children as part of their literacy and environmental education. The letters they wrote were clearly persuasive enough to inspire the airport to respond and to offer to come and talk to the children.

Mr Parr organises a variety of visitors from the world of work to come and talk to the children in Wednesday assemblies, and there is always an opportunity for children to ask questions. We have a lot of children at HJS who are knowledgeable, conscientious and articulate enough to put challenging questions. Through our general approach to dialogue in the classroom, based on the Philosophy 4 Children model, children learn to challenge and question, and to consider multiple points of view.

The parents present had heard different messages, or nothing at all, from their children about the content of assemblies. We certainly don't invite companies in to "pitch" their products or services to children; but inevitably some children will think more deeply about what they hear than others. Some may go home excited because someone from the airport came in, without remembering anything of what was said. Others may make thoughtful connections with what they know about pollution and climate change. Others may remember the message about single use plastics without even registering who it was that delivered the message.