

Minutes of the Schools Forum Meeting held on 14 January 2021

Present: Richard Redgate (Chairman)

Attendance

Alun Harding	Nicky Crookshank
Jane Rutherford	Richard Lane
Wendy Whelan	Jennie Westley
Philip Tapp	Vicki Lewis
Philip Siddell	Anne Tapp
Chris Wright	Les McDowell
Steve Barr (Vice-Chairman)	Alison Parr
Kevin Allbutt	Abigail Rourke
Judy Wyman	Jonathan Price (Observer)
Claire Evans	

Observers: Jonathan Price

Also in attendance:

Apologies: Sara Bailey

PART ONE

17. Declarations of Interest

No declarations were made at the meeting.

18. Minutes of the meeting held on 15 October 2020

Under the membership item in the minutes, it was felt that the two vacant seats for the maintained primary and secondary academies should be advertised to provide as much representation as possible. It was agreed that these would be advertised as soon as possible and prior to the scheduled May election timeframe.

It was reported that the constitutional review would be considered at the next meeting of the forum in March.

A question was asked on page 3 of the minutes, final paragraph under 'Notices of Concern' and those schools who may have set a robust budget prior to Covid-19 but who may now find themselves in financial deficit at the end of the financial year. It was reported that the DfE, in their guidance to schools had referred to Local Authority (LA) providing support, however, officers were not aware of any additional funding available to schools. Officers had contacted the DfE to understand what their expectations were and where funding would come from, particularly for the additional costs that go beyond those that could be claimed for, such as staffing cost over summer or free school meals. A response was awaited.

Under items 11 and 12, 'Primary Behaviour Support Services and Minority Ethnic Achievement Services' it was noted that the Forums Resolution should refer to financial year 2021-22 not 2020-21.

On page 2, item 5 'Matters arising' it was noted that the last paragraph should read 'and, as agreed, the 2018/19 **unspent contingency** had been.....'

It was noted that the Executive summaries had not been provide in reports for this meeting as previously requested but would be in the future.

RESOLVED –

- a) That 'underspend' be changed to 'unspent contingency' in the last line of item 5;
- b) Under minute items 11 and 12, (Primary Behaviour Support Services and Minority Ethnic Achievement Services) should refer to 2021-22 not 2020-21 in the resolution.
- c) That subject to the amendments above, the minutes of the Schools Forum held on 15 October 2020 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman.
- d) That the current vacant seats for the maintained primary and secondary academies places be advertised prior to the normal election of members in May 2021.

19. Decisions taken by the Chairman under delegated powers

The Chairman reported that the only decision he had made relating to business of the Forum had been to conduct this meeting via Teams rather than face to face.

20. Notices of Concern

It was noted that the 'Notice of Concern' issued to Western Springs Primary School had been withdrawn following their conversion to academy status on 1st November 2020. There had been no new notices of concern or licensed deficits issued since the last meeting.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

21. High Needs Block Update

The Forum considered the report of the Deputy Chief Executive and Director for Families and Communities which provided a detailed update on the High Needs Block funding. Members of the Forum were informed that the forecast overspend on the 2020/21 High Needs Block (HNB) was now £5.5m which was significantly worse than previously forecast but was in line with previous historic overspends. The Forum were reminded that at the time of setting the budget it was thought that the budget would enable the LA to improve the offer to special schools in line with maintained schools for the first time in several years. There was also additional investment through the newly formed Locality Hubs. The Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP) backlog had meant significant additional financial pressure across all school sectors and there had been an increase in the number of children with higher and more expensive needs. The

impact of this meant that at the end of the current financial year the overall DSG reserve would be in deficit.

At the last meeting the Schools Forum had agreed a 'deficit recovery management plan' which used surplus Growth Fund money, set against the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) reserve. This would be monitored closely to see if further action was necessary.

The Forum was reminded that the Government had reaffirmed their commitment to increase the school budget by £7.1 billion. Subject to confirmation of funding levels, initial estimates were that the Council would, with a contribution from the Growth Fund allocation, be able to fund in full, the National Funding Formula (NFF) for schools in 2021/22.

The report listed the reasons for the increase in demand on the HNB. It was explained that this was a general list, some of which had more relevance to this year than others, for example there had been less permanent exclusions this year from mainstream schools but over a longer time period this had had a significant effect on the budget. The extension of the age group to 25 years for those with EHCP's had been introduced a number of years ago.

The first meeting of the High Block Needs Working Group had been convened and had met during the previous week. A copy of the notes of that meeting had been emailed to the group for information. Claire Evans and the Chairman were members of the working group and informed members of the usefulness of the group and its intention to meet and share information and try to come up with manageable suggestions for more efficient use of the HNB.

It was requested that all members of the Forum email their thoughts to the Assistant Director for Education Strategy and Improvement who would collate and circulate to the forum. Following a question of the implementation timescales of any recommendations made by the working group, officers informed the Forum that they would be writing out to schools within the next few weeks with the settlement and matrix level funding for next year. Any recommendations made by the working group would be fed into conversations on the Education banding tool (next report on the agenda) and introduced in 2022/23.

The report also outlined the School funding settlement for 2021/22. The £2.2b uplift nationally, against all the key funding blocks meant that Staffordshire schools block had increased to £529.9m, an increase of £19.1m or 3.7% which should mean that in 2021/21 the LA should be able to fund in full the National Funding Formula. The High Needs Block funding would be £101.01m an increase of £11.06m on the previous year. The rates to be applied next year will be reported to the Schools Forum at the March 2021 report.

The Early Years Block had increased to £50.548m an increase of £0.681m or 1.4%. This allocation was based on the January 2020 census and there was still an intention from Government to use the January 2021 census which would be adjusted in July 2021. It was felt that the risk was that the census number of children will be low due to the pandemic and work was taking place with Government to ensure that this did not adversely affect the overall level of funding. There was concern that there were 4,000

less places taken up in nursery places due to key workers taking priority and the effect this would have on next year funding. Officers had made representations to Government and there had been reassurances that the LA will not be penalised by the potentially low figures and that as children return to nursery there would be funding. Continued representations would continue to be made.

Following a question on how the early years funding would be passed out to providers, the Forum was informed that Officers were currently waiting to hear what the Government's funding position would be. The LA intention would be to pass out the rises to the sector as in previous years, but there may need to be a larger contingency if there wasn't clarity from the Government. Officers would make contact with the Forum as soon as more information was available, and a meeting would be arranged if it was felt appropriate.

Following a question on the prudential commitment to borrowing for SEND, the Forum were reminded that this was long term and had approximately 10/15 years left to repay. The backlog of EHCP's had been largely cleared but it was not yet clear how many had failed due to time obligations which were a result of LA delays.

RESOLVED – That:

- a) The update on the High Needs Block since the previous report in October 2020 be noted;
- b) That the latest Dedicated Schools Grant Government settlement be noted.
- c) Members of the Forum email their thoughts to the Assistant Director for Education Strategy and Improvement who would collate responses and circulate to the forum.

22. Education Banding Tool

The Forum heard that currently the Education High Needs Block top-up funding varied between educational settings as there was inconsistency in the assessment criteria across the sectors. The report explained the current funding formula.

The Local Authority had decided to introduce an Education Banding Tool across mainstream, special school and further education providers to calculate the education element of the top-up funding for children and young people with Education Health and Care Plans (EHCP's).

The toolkit was a single algorithm which would answer a number of assessment questions around a child's needs and would produce a banding level which would create the right level of top up funding and would be an equitable and consistent mechanism of funding across all the sectors. The needs profile for a child applying for an EHCP would be completed by the SEND Key worker who carries out the assessment.

The toolkit was not designed to reduce funding, but it would inevitably lead to some increases and some decreases. The level of protection offered to schools would need to be considered by the implementation group. It was expected that the banding levels

would be reviewed each year. Full consultation would be carried out prior to the implementation.

The software company chosen to provide the toolkit was Imosphere. A presentation by Imosphere had been given to partners, including School Forum members in January 2020. A draft implementation programme was outlined in the report with the planned implementation date being April 2022. It was noted that a full implementation plan would be prepared and shared with all stakeholders prior to implementation. If Members of the Schools Forum had any nominations to help with the plan, they were asked to email the Senior Commissioning Manager with their role and contact details.

A question was asked on the current funding criteria and if split site funding was still included. The meeting was informed that a number of schools still benefited from the split site allowance and it was part of the national funding formula.

RESOLVED –

- a) That the introduction of an Education Banding Toolkit across mainstream, special schools and further education providers to calculate the education element of the top-up funding for children and young people with EHCP's was noted.
- b) Any nominations to sit on the Implementation Plan group be emailed to the Senior Commissioning Manager (Lesley Calverley).

23. Work Programme

It was felt that the work programme was not meeting expectations. It needed to be forward looking; include standard items; and act as a reminder for those items which the Forum had raised as issues but for which no information or feedback was yet available.

RESOLVED – That the Work Programme be noted and developed to include standard and pending items.

24. Date of next meeting

RESOLVED – That the next meeting of Schools Forum scheduled for Thursday 25 March 2021 to be held via Teams.

Chairman