

Minutes of the Schools Forum Meeting held on 23 March 2023

Present: Richard Redgate (Chair)

Attendance

Stephen Drew	Mark Boughey
William Wilson	Carolyn Trowbridge
Steve Swatton	Helen Baron
Kim Prince Anson	Sadie Jones
Chris Wright	Emily Verow
Steve Barr (Vice-Chair)	Alun Harding
Judy Wyman	Lindi Nejrup
Vicki Lewis	Nicola Mason
Anne Tapp	

Observers: Jonathan Price

Also in attendance: Alison Barnes, Will Wilkes, Tim Moss, Melanie Scott, Anthony Humphreys and Carolyn Knight

Apologies: Richard Sutton, Claire Shaw, Kirsty Rogers, Alison Parr, Sarah Clark and Jessica Roden

Apologies given, sent substitute: Philip Siddell – Tim Hopkins attended

20. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest made on this occasion.

21. Minutes of the meeting held on 12 January 2023

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting held on the 12 January 2023 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

22. Matters arising

Minute 7 – 10 November 22 - Primary Behaviour Support Services update

As requested at the Schools Forum held in January 23, additional information was provided in relation to the Primary Behaviour Support Services update given at the Schools Forum held in November 22.

The Forum was informed that of the eight pupils from maintained schools who were permanently excluded during 2021-22, five had been referred into the Behaviour Support service, equating to 3.7% of the total number of referrals received to the service that year.

One pupil out of the eight had been seen previously in 2020, the pupil's school were offered further support but did not take up the offer.

One pupil out of the eight had been referred into the Behaviour Support service, but then moved out of County before the support was delivered.

One pupil was not known to the service.

Minute 8 – 10 November 22 - Minority Ethnic Achievement Service (MEAS) update

As requested at the Schools Forum held in January 23, additional information was provided in relation to the Minority Ethnic Achievement Service (MEAS) update given at the Schools Forum held in November 22.

The Forum was informed that none of the families housed in bridging accommodation in Newcastle settled permanently in the Newcastle district. All accommodated families were offered a permanent home in Staffordshire. 25 permanent homes were made available by District and Borough Councils and Stoke-on-Trent City Council. Two permanent homes offered by Newcastle Borough Council were taken by families who lived elsewhere. Circa 50% of the available homes were accepted by the families as many wanted to wait for accommodation in larger urban areas. The remaining homes offered in Staffordshire and Stoke were taken by Afghan families in accommodation elsewhere in the country.

When the Home Office advised families that the hotel in Newcastle was to close, those that had not accepted the offer of a permanent home were relocated. None of the families that were relocated had moved back to the Newcastle area.

Minute 18 - High Needs Block (including Education Banding Tool update and Deficit Management Plan)

It was noted at the meeting held on the 12 January 23 that a consultation of the Strategy for Special Provision would be taking place “towards the middle of the Spring term in 2023”. The Schools Forum queried if the consultation had taken place and were informed that, as Staffordshire County Council (SCC) had now entered the pre-election period of Purdah the consultation had been delayed. As such the consultation would now commence on the 17 May 23 and run until the 5 July 23.

23. Decisions taken by the Chairman under delegated powers

It was confirmed that no decisions had been taken by the Chair, under delegated powers, since the last meeting.

24. Advanced Notice of the Election of Chair and Vice Chair

The Forum was reminded that an election for the positions of Chair and Vice-Chair would be taking place at the Schools Forum in July 23, with the roles appointed from amongst the Forum’s membership. The positions would be held for a period of two-years.

Forum members were informed that if they wished to stand for either position they would need another member to propose them for the position on the day, with a vote taking place should there be more than one candidate for each position.

As per the constitution, both the incumbent Chair and Vice-Chair were asked whether they wished to stand for re-election. Both confirmed their intentions to stand for re-election of the current positions.

Resolved: That the future Election of the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Schools Forum be noted.

25. May Election

Forum members were informed that several representative positions on the Schools Forum were due for re-election in May 23. These specifically related to:

- All maintained primary
- All primary academies (x 2 posts)
- All secondary academies
- All academy special schools
- All Alternative provision academies

The affected members were informed that the election process would start on Monday 27 March 23 with a view to having the positions filled in May 23.

The Forum was also informed that two positions representing the Middle Schools Forum and Schools' Consultative Group were also due to be renewed. These positions were filled by a representative nominated by the relevant Forum and Group. The incumbent members were asked to confirm with the appropriate body whether they would be re-nominated for a further term of office, or if a new representative would be nominated.

The Forum was also informed that Dr Sarah Clark had tendered her resignation from the Schools Forum as a representative of "All secondary academies". The Chair thanked Sarah for her contribution to the Schools Forum and wished her well in the future.

Resolved: That the future election process of representatives on the Schools Forum be noted.

26. Notices of Concern and Licensed Deficit Agreements

It was confirmed that no new Notice of Concerns had been issued or withdrawn.

The Entrust Schools Finance team continued to work with all schools who had an existing Notice of Concern or Licensed Deficit agreement.

Resolved: That the Notices of Concern and Licensed Deficit Agreements to schools be noted.

27. Staffordshire Scheme for Financing Schools & Procurement Regulations

The Schools Forum received a report relating to proposed updates to the Financial Regulations for Schools which had recently been reviewed and updated.

Section I – Insurance, was being replaced in full. The Regulations would now state *“insurance cover for schools is now being provided through the Department for Education’s (DfE) Risk Protection Arrangement (RPA) scheme”*. A link to the DfE’s RPA scheme would be provided in the Finance Regulations and an updated version of the Regulations would be uploaded to the Schools Learning Net.

The full details of the proposed changes were included in Appendix A to the report.

Resolved: That the proposed changes to the insurance section of the Staffordshire Scheme for Financing Schools Financial Regulations for Schools and Procurement Regulations, be approved.

28. Schools Budget Update

The Schools Forum received an update report relating to the Schools Budget 2023-24.

In summary the report provided the following information:

Schools

- The request to transfer 0.5% of Schools Block Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) to High Needs had been rejected by the Secretary of State
- The growth fund budget had been set at £2.7m. Any underspend would be transferred into the DSG reserve as per the deficit recovery plan.
- The final education functions levy had been set at £54 per pupil
- School budgets had been set using the National Funding Formula (NFF)
- The minimum funding guarantee (MFG) had been set at 0.5%
- To ensure the NFF was affordable within the schools block DSG allocation, gains had been capped at 2.64%

Early Years

- Early Years funding base rates had been set at £4.52 per hour for 3 & 4 year olds and £5.67 per hour for 2 year olds
- An Early Years contingency had been set at 0.7% of the Early Years Block funding
- Any underspend on Early Years contingency would be returned to providers as a one-off payment in the following financial year (subject to affordability).

High needs

- Staffordshire’s High Needs Block (HNB) funding for 23/24 had increased by £12m compared to 2022-23
- Special School budgets had been set to provide for a Minimum Funding Guarantee of 0.5% (and no capping of gains)
- A further significant overspend was anticipated on the HNB in 2023-4

Central Provisions

The Forum were reminded that the Growth Funding was allocated to the local authority on a formula basis. The allocation for 2023-24 was £4.1m, and the funding had been used to fund growth above the census in the NFF. The remaining funding would be held centrally to meet commitments under the infant class size and exceptional growth fund policies. The amount retained centrally was £2.7m. Any underspend would be transferred to the DSG reserve as per the deficit recovery plan.

At the November Schools Forum meeting, maintained schools approved a levy per pupil for Education Functions of £56.47. Due to a change in the number on roll at maintained schools, the Forum was informed that the final levy for 2023-24 had been set at £54 per pupil.

Individual School Budgets

The Forum was informed that within the NFF, the deprivation factors had increased by 4.3% and all other factors had been increased by 2.4%. The supplementary grant paid separately in 2023-24 to help towards the costs of the Health and Social Care Levy and other costs had been rolled into the NFF by adding the grant funding rates to the relevant factor in the NFF. The minimum funding guarantee (MFG) had been set at 0.5%. To ensure the NFF remained affordable within the Schools Block DSG allocation, gains had been capped at 2.64%.

Mainstream schools would receive a separate Mainstream Schools Additional Grant (MSAG) as announced in the Autumn Statement. These payments would be made by the government in two instalments. Academies would receive the funding directly from the ESFA. Funding for maintained schools would be paid to the local authority and payments were expected to be made in April 23.

Early Years Funding

For 2023-24 SCC had been awarded the minimum national funding rate of £4.87 per hour for 3&4 year olds and a rate of £5.77 per hour for 2 year olds, this was a 26p and 20p rise respectively from 2022-23. The increase for both rates has been passed through to the base rate in full; making the 3&4 year old base rate £4.52 per child per hour and the 2 year old rate £5.67 per child per hour.

The Disability Access Fund (DAF) had increased by £28, from £800 to £828 per eligible child per hour to support access to the free entitlements.

The Early Years Pupil Premium had increased by 2p, from 60p to 62p per eligible child per hour.

The early years funding central expenditure approved by Schools Forum on 10 November 2022 allowed 96% of 3&4 year old funding to be provided directly to providers. This was 1% above the minimum limit of 95%.

A workshop took place with the Early Years Reference Group in January 23, as requested at the November Schools Forum meeting. This enabled officers to gain views of the Early Years sector on rate changes for 2023-24 and to inform decision making.

A concern was raised around school budgets as a whole. A question was asked as to whether any action was taking place centrally in relation to the major issues such as free school meals, universal free schools meals, energy costs, NJC pay awards and SEND costs. It was highlighted that the MSAG had been introduced in recognition of pressures caused by the increased costs and the cost of living crisis. It was also noted SCC supported the lobbying exercises that had taken place, most notably the F40 – fairer funding campaign. The Forum also heard that local Elected Members continued to lobby Government on behalf of Staffordshire education. Particularly in relation to the needs of education providers and also the local authorities needs with regards the High Needs Block.

It was highlighted that the Manor Hall Academy Trust had worked closely with the local MP and had written to the Secretary of State expressing concerns over funding; it was confirmed that a thorough answer had been received. It was agreed that a letter would be drafted on behalf of Schools Forum noting the specific issues being experienced across Staffordshire which would be sent on to the Secretary of State.

The WorthMore Group was highlighted as an organisation that had lobbied on behalf of schools in the past, and it was queried as to whether they would be able to support in this situation. The Vice-Chair offered to contact a colleague that was heavily involved in the Group and would provide an update to the Schools Forum after the meeting.

It was noted that the NFF cap on gains for 2023-24 Schools Budget was reported as 2.64%. It was asked what the cap on gains was for 2022-23 and it was confirmed that the gains had not been capped in that time-period.

Resolved: a. That the School Budgets update, be noted.

b. That a letter be drafted and sent to the Secretary of State on behalf of Schools Forum.

c. That the Vice-Chair contact the WorthMore Group and report back to the Schools Forum.

N.B. Following the meeting the Vice-Chair provided the response received from the WorthMore Group. The information provided included:

- Drafted a possible manifesto platform for campaigning leading into the next election.
- Trying to create a unified voice and a clear consistent message with a strong research base.
- Proposal to roll out a campaign with support across all the main representative bodies and to utilise school leaders.
- Action / plans to be implemented during the Summer Term.

29. High Needs Block (including Education Banding Tool update and Deficit Management Plan)

The Schools Forum received a report from the Director of Children and Families relating to the High Needs Block (HNB).

The Forum heard that the Government had initially indicated a HNB allocation 2023-24 for c £122.2m; however, in the Autumn Statement, the Chancellor confirmed additional funding for schools of c £2bn nationally including £400m that would be directed to the HNB. Staffordshire would receive a further £4.8m in 2023-24 which had to be used to provide additional support to Special Schools and Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) equivalent to 3.4% of the estimated total grant funding for each school.

For Staffordshire the HNB 2023-24 was £127.0m, a net increase of c£12m compared with 2022-23. It was insufficient to close the existing funding gap, and Staffordshire would continue to lobby for both additional funding and a fair and equitable mechanism for addressing cumulative deficits. It was SCC's intention to pass on the full budget increase next year for the provision of SEND support; none of the funding rise would be used to repay historical deficits.

SCC recognised the financial pressures schools across Staffordshire were facing and given the increase in Government funding, would increase funding to providers by as much as was affordable, acknowledging the current pressures on the HNB and the depleted DSG balances which – at the end of the current financial year – would likely be in deficit by circa £14m.

2023-24 Special School budgets would be set based on a Minimum Funding Guarantee of 0.5%; ensuring that funding for all Special Schools, on a like for like basis, would increase next year by a minimum of 0.5%. This was in line with Government guidance for an MFG of 3% over 2 years. There would be no capping of school gains

In April 2022 SCC introduced a new Education Banding Tool (EBT) to help calculate top up funding in a fair and consistent way. The Forum heard that current monitoring of the 'average' top up cost of EBT placement costs compared with the matrix levels indicated an increase. Whilst the number of children assessed on EBT remained relatively low, the average 'top up' cost for those placements was significantly higher (c£11,800) compared with the matrix model (c£7,300). This represented an unaffordable increase in costs and appeared to reflect a significant 'shift' in the profile of assessments towards higher levels (i.e. EBT levels 7-10) compared with the desktop sample / exercise that had been undertaken as part of the implementation, and on which the proposed EBT rates were set. The EBT had been in place for a year and a review of the implementation would be undertaken during the forthcoming year to ensure it continued to deliver the intended objectives.

In response to a request for more information as to what form the EBT review would take, it was explained that negotiations had been undertaken to secure the services of the Commissioning Manager, who had supported the implementation of the EBT in 2022, to start the review process. A meeting had been arranged to take place in April 23 to develop the scope of the review. It had already been agreed that this would follow the same principles with which the EBT had been implemented, including the creation of a

working group to support the process. It was agreed that an update would be brought to the Schools Forum in July 23.

The Forum raised concerns that the Supplementary Grant would be low as numbers used to calculate the allocation were based on figures of 2021-22, which were lower than normal because of the impact of Covid. It was explained that the calculation to determine allocations was prescribed by Government, and they had already calculated and published the amount that Local Authorities were expected to pass on to PRUs. This information was available on the ESFA website.

In response to a question regarding when it might be possible to see tangible results from the implementation of the Special Provision Strategy, it was confirmed that following the consultation process in the Summer Term, the Strategy would begin to be implemented from January 24 onwards. It was expected that on the ground enhanced provision would be visible from that point onwards.

Resolved: a. That the High Needs Block budget update 2022-23 and latest forecast outturn, be noted.

b. that the proposed High Needs Block budget for 2023-24, be noted.

c. That an update of the EBT review be added to the Work programme and be brought to the Schools Forum in July 23.

30. Work Programme and date of next meeting

The future work programme, date of next meeting and future meetings were shared with forum members.

Work Programme

It was agreed that an update on the budget announcement on Nursery funding and wraparound childcare be included on the Work Programme for the July meeting.

Date of next meetings

- Thursday, 13 July 2023, 2:00pm - face to face meeting to be held at the County Buildings, Stafford.
- Thursday, 9 November 2023, 2:00pm - face to face meeting to be held at the County Buildings, Stafford.

Resolved: a. That an update on the budget announcement on Nursery funding and wraparound childcare be included on the Work Programme for the July meeting.

b. That the dates of the next meetings be noted.

Chairman