

Minutes of the Schools Forum Meeting held on 12 January 2023

Present: Richard Redgate (Chair)

Attendance

Stephen Drew	Mark Boughey
Steve Swatton	Carolyn Trowbridge
Kim Prince Anson	Sarah Clark
Philip Siddell	Helen Barron
Chris Wright	Jessica Roden
Steve Barr (Vice-Chair)	Sadie Jones
Kevin Allbutt	Alun Harding
Judy Wyman	Craig Hodgson
Vicki Lewis	Lindi Nejrup
Anne Tapp	Nicola Mason
Alison Parr	

Observers: Mark Sutton and Jonathan Price

Also in attendance: Alison Barnes, Will Wilkes, Andrew Marsden, Anthony Humphreys and Halit Hulusi

Apologies: Claire Shaw, Tim Moss, Melanie Scott and Emily Verow

New Members

The Forum welcomed Nicola Mason who has joined the Forum as the new Secondary Academy representative replacing Julie Rudge - to serve until December 2026.

Alun Harding was formally welcomed back to the Forum as the Secondary Heads Forum representative, replacing Jane Rutherford - to serve until December 2026.

Julie and Jane were thanked for their past contribution and support on the Schools Forum.

12. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest made on this occasion.

13. Minutes of the meeting held on 10 November 2022

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting held on the 10 November 2022 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

14. Matters arising

Minute 6 – Notices of Concern. At the meeting held on the 10 November 22 Members were informed that a new Notice of Concern (NoC) had been issued to Flash Ley Primary School due to a deficit position and no recovery plan. It was suggested that the implementation of the NoC had created a delay to Flash Ley's Academy conversion, and it was requested that this issue be expedited to allow for the conversion to move forward.

It was explained that the deficit position had not been given as an explicit reason why the proposal for Flash Ley to convert to an Academy had been postponed. It was confirmed that additional information would be sought and shared with Forum members, if it was appropriate to do so.

Minute 7 - Primary Behaviour Support Services - Resolution b. At the meeting held on the 10 November 22, the Forum asked if figures could be provided to show the number of students that had been excluded from maintained Primary Schools, it was agreed at the meeting that this information would be shared at a later date. A query was raised if the information had been shared, and, if not, when it would be.

It was explained that, to better understand the figures being presented, it would be beneficial to provide the data for the full financial year rather than the current period. It was proposed, and agreed, to bring the full data to the next Schools Forum meeting scheduled to take place in March 23.

Minute 8 - Minority Ethnic Achievement Service (MEAS) - Resolution b. At the meeting held on the 10 November 22, the Forum requested more information relating to the relocation of a number of Afghan refugees to Manchester, it was agreed at the meeting that this information would be shared at a later date. A query was raised if the information had been shared, and, if not, when it would be.

It was confirmed that the information was still being sought and would be brought to the next Schools Forum meeting taking place in March 23.

Minute 9 - Historic Commitments. It was noted that at the meeting on 10 November Forum Members approved the SEN transport budget of £250,140, which was reportedly being funded from the High Needs Block. However, in Agenda Item 8 of the 12 January meeting (High Needs Block update), it stated that "the High Needs Block does not include the following costs: SEND home to school/college transport; this is funded from the Council's general fund resources". Clarity was sought as this appeared to contradict what had been approved at the November meeting.

It was clarified that there was an historic fixed amount of £250,140 for SEN transport budget that was funded from the High Needs Block, but this was only a small contribution toward the larger budget of £22m which was funded from the Council's general fund resource.

Minute 10 - High Needs Block. At the meeting held on the 10 November 22 Members were informed that, as the Schools Forum had not supported the 0.5% Block Transfer Request, the Local Authority would be applying to the Secretary of State to make a final decision on the application to make this switch. Confirmation was requested as to

whether the Secretary of State had responded, and, if not, if there was any idea of when this might be expected.

It was explained that, at this stage, no response had been received from the Secretary of State. However, the Local Authority had been requested to complete two census returns on the budgets, one which included the 0.5% Block transfer and another which did not. The return would be submitted on the 20 January 23, and it was expected that a response would be received in early February 23.

Resolved: a. That it be noted that, if appropriate to do so, additional information relating to the Flash Ley Primary School Notice of Concern be shared with forum members.

b. That it be noted that the additional information relating to the Primary Behaviour Support Services (Resolution b), would be provided at the meeting to be held in March 23.

c. That it be noted that the additional information relating to the Minority Ethnic Achievement Service (Resolution b), would be provided at the meeting to be held in March 23.

15. 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.

16. 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.

17. Verbal update on School Budgets 2023/2024

A verbal update was given that related to the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) allocations that were received by the Local Authority on the 16th December 2022 and covered the Schools Block, Central Block, High Needs Block and the Early Years Block.

Schools Block

It was reported that there had been a national funding increase of 5.6% per pupil. This included an additional grant, which would be received separately to the main formula allocation. The rates that were within the main formula allocation had been confirmed to be the same as the provisional allocation released in the Summer of 22. This represented a 2.4% rise for all Factors, except for Deprivation Factors, which had increased by 4.3%. This included the rolling in of the Supplementary Grant of £17m which was received in 2022/23. For 2023/24 the Government had announced an

additional grant of £21m for Staffordshire which would be paid to schools in May 2023. Combined with the main formula allocation, the per pupil increase in Staffordshire was 5.6%, which was in line with the national average. The additional grants would be passed on in full, in line with the Government per school allocations.

The Local Authority awaited a decision from the Secretary of State on the 0.5% block transfer request, which was expected in early February 23, although this date had not been confirmed. Working on the basis that the decision was received in time budgets would be available with schools by the 28 February 23.

In response to a question relating to the potentially short timeframe between receiving the decision from the Secretary of State and allocating budgets to schools, it was suggested that it was not anticipated that the Department for Education (DfE) would put the Local Authority in a position where it would breach the Statutory Deadline of the 28 February 23. It was explained that it was possible to make amendments to the budget allocations quickly once the decision had been received, however, it was acknowledged that there may be an impact on the detail included in the budget documents that accompany the allocation. The Local Authority would ensure Schools were kept up to date with any potential delays via the School Bag communication channel.

Early Years Block

Early Years Block would receive an additional £20m funding on top of £180m of funding in 2023/24 already announced. Local Authorities received average funding increases of 3.4% for 3 and 4 year old entitlements and 4% for 2 year old entitlements. The £20m increase resulted in an extra 1p increase for the 2 year old and 3 and 4 year old rates. As a result of the additional funding the 2 year old rate increased to £5.77 per child per hour – an increase of 3.6%, and the 3 and 4 year old rate increased to £4.87 per child per hour – an increase of 5.6%.

As requested at the Schools Forum meeting held on 10 November 22 a workshop had been arranged to take place on the 24th January 23 with Early Years providers to discuss how this funding was passed on.

Central Block

The allocation for the Central Block was £5.4m which was made up of the historical commitments of £1.3m, along with duties of £4.1m. This demonstrated a £36k increase and was in line with what had been predicted at School Forum in November 22.

Resolved: That the Verbal update on School Budgets 2023/2024, be noted.

18. 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).

Members heard that the forecast outturn for the 2022/23 High Needs Block was £7.8m overspend which was an increase on the Quarter 2 forecast overspend by £1.8m.

Demand continued to exceed capacity – this impacted specifically on the Independent Sector, with placement numbers nearing 575 - nearly double what they were in 2020. These were more expensive placements and represented the most significant budget pressure in the HNB. There had also been a small increase in the post-16 demand and Pupil Referral Units (PRU) placements due to an increase in exclusions.

As a result of the on-going overspend in the HNB the DSG reserve had been fully depleted and at the end of 2021/22 was in deficit by £8.6m. Given the forecast overspend 2022/23 it was likely that the deficit would increase to c£16.4m. Going forward it was anticipated that demand – and costs – would continue to increase in line with historic rises. Given the anticipated annual HNB overspend, this could see the overall accumulated DSG deficit increase to between £70m and £100m by the end of 2026/27.

A longer-term financial management plan to recover the deficit, using the ESFA recommended 'deficit management plan' (DMP) template had been developed and was consistent with the actions and objectives outlined in the Council's Accelerated Progress Plan and wider SEND Strategy. A key part of the DMP was for a funding transfer of 0.5% from Schools Block to High Needs Block in 2023/24. This was rejected by Schools Forum in November 22 and as such the Council had made a disapplication request to Secretary of State to approve the transfer; at this point it was not known if that request had been approved.

A HNB working group met on the 9 January 23 to discuss the modelling and assumptions that made up the DMP in more detail. The Chair provided a brief overview of the discussions that took place during the working group session, primarily focussing upon the desired outcomes of the meeting, the primary causes of the deficit issues, forecast budget pressures, forecast accumulated DSG deficit and the proposed savings to mitigate the shortfall. It was agreed that the presentation given to participants of the working group session would be shared with Schools Forum members.

In response to a question relating to the maintained schools need for access to support when dealing with the behaviour of challenging children, and the excessive costs associated with PRUs, it was explained that it was a primary task of the Strategy for Special Provision, which was currently in development, to enhance the provision in various localities across the County, which could lead to an enhanced resource-based provision that would allow children to access support without the need for an EHCP. It was expected that this would help to support mainstream schools' in their endeavours to meet the challenging behaviour of some children. It was also explained that this would be a shared activity between Schools and the Local Authority, with Special Heads, Mainstream Heads, Clinicians and Educators all involved in the various workstreams. The consultation for the model would take place towards the middle of the Spring term in 2023. It was noted that this was not the first time a strategy or policy had been developed to improve this position and reduce the number of independent providers, it was hoped that this process would prove more successful.

In response to a question asking if the countywide review of special provision included the independent sector, it was clarified that independent schools were included in the statistics and data that was being sent out, however it was clarified that there was very little power the Local Authority had to implement change. However, it was hoped that

change in the independent sector would be influenced by implementing change throughout the entire provision.

The Forum was informed that the indicative High Needs Block allocation for 2023/24 would be c£122m, which was a rise of £7m (6%) compared to 2022/23. This was consistent with the funding levels previously assumed and reflected in the forward projections and Deficit Management Plan. In the recent Autumn Statement, the Chancellor confirmed additional funding for schools of c £2bn nationally of which £400m would be directed to the HNB. It was estimated that Staffordshire would receive a further £4.8m in 23/24. Part of this additional funding had to be used to provide additional support to Special Schools (and PRUs). Payments would be made equivalent to 3.4% of the estimated total grant funding for each school. This additional funding was on top of mandatory Minimum Fund Guarantee (MFG) calculations for 23/24.

In response to a question relating to supplementary grants and why Special Schools were only receiving 3.4% uplift, compared to the uplifts highlighted in the Schools Block, it was confirmed that these were set by Government. It was also confirmed that this would be a cash lump sum payment that would be paid in the 2023/24 and 2024/25 financial years.

Resolved: That the update on High Needs Block (including Education Banding Tool update and Deficit Management Plan) be noted.

19. Date of next meeting

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

Date of next meetings

- 23 March 2023 - via Teams
- 13 July 2023 - face to face meeting – Council Chamber, County Buildings, Stafford.
- 19 October 2023 - face to face meeting – Council Chamber, County Buildings, Stafford.

Resolved: That the date of the next meeting be noted.

Chairman