

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
SCHOOLS FORUM
HELD ON 4 MARCH 2020 FROM 10.00 AM TO 11.45 AM**

Schools Representatives

Carol Simpson	School Business Manager - Colleton Primary
Corrina Gillard	Primary Head - Emmbrook Infant
Emma Clarke	Primary Head - Farley Hill Primary
Helen Ball	Primary Head - Polehampton Infant
Brian Prebble	Primary Head - Rivermead Primary - Vice Chairman
Nick McSweeney	Headteacher - The Emmbrook School Secondary
Ali Brown	Primary Head - Nine Mile Ride Primary
Ben Godber	Academy Head - Bohunt School
Derren Gray	Academy Head - Piggott School
Ginny Rhodes	Academy Head - St Crispins School
Paul Miller	Governor - St Crispins - Chairman
Sian Lehrter	School Business Director - The Holt School
Shirley Austin	Academy Head - Forest School
Sara Attra	Special School Head - Addington School
Jay Blundell	Pupil Referral Unit Head - Foundry College

Non School Representatives

Graham Howe	Wokingham Borough Council
Sal Thirlway	Assistant Director Learning Achievement and Partnerships

Also Present

Luciane Bowker, Democratic & Electoral Services Specialist
Lynne Samuel, Senior Finance Specialist
Carey Tulloch, Senior Specialist People Commissioning
Katherine Vernon, Schools Finance Manager
Alan Voyzey, Interim Schools Finance Specialist

37 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were submitted from Sylvia Allen, Carol Cammiss, Paul Gibson and Julia Mead.

Members wished to place on record their appreciation of the work undertaken by the Finance Team and Democratic Services to offer training to members of Schools Forum. Members felt it was useful for existing members as well as new members.

The Chair asked that another training session be offered in October before the beginning of the next academic year.

38 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 15 January 2020 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman, subject to the correction that Jay Blundell was present.

38.1 Update for Matters Arising

Lynne Samuel, Senior Finance Specialist presented the matters arising paper.

Insurance scheme for maintained schools

Lynne Samuel stated that the Department for Education (DfE) had published the consultation on the extension of the risk protection arrangement (RPA) to maintained schools. It was now confirmed that the RPA scheme would be extended to maintained schools from April 2020, however this depended on local arrangements as Schools Forums had already agreed the de-delegated fund for this year.

Given that the current year's proposals had already been agreed, Lynne Samuel proposed to set up a group to meet in the summer to consider the implications and options available to schools for the next year. Therefore, any changes would apply to the 2021/22 financial year.

Lynne Samuel stated that Insurance Officers were willing to join the group discussions and help to explore options.

In response to a question, Lynne Samuel stated that it looked like the RPA option was cheaper, however, it was important to consider if it offered the same level of protection. The size of the school was also a consideration, particularly for smaller schools who benefited from the advice from the Local Authority's insurance team. It was necessary to help schools to make an informed decision.

In response to a question, Lynne Samuel stated that insurance contracts could run for a number of years, therefore, there could be potential financial implications for the Local Authority if new arrangements were sought. She stated that the Council's insurance was very comprehensive, covering a wide range of circumstances.

Carol Simpson stated that this option should be considered as the saving was significant, on the surface, for her school it was in the region of £10k per year.

Corrina Gillard and Carol Simpson agreed to take part in a new Task and Finish group to look at options around schools' insurance. This would be reported back to Schools Forum at the next meeting.

Sian Lehrter asked if all academies took part in the RPA, it was established not all did, some had opted for independent providers. Sian Lehrter stated that the RPA was a government run scheme, and as such it had a duty of care towards schools. If schools put together a business case explaining unforeseen circumstances (referencing the corona virus outbreak and trips overseas), the government would probably to cover it. She stated that RPA was not the same as other commercial insurances, and that schools should consider it, as it was very cost effective.

Sian Lehrter was invited to join the discussion group and she agreed.

Schools Block Budget 2020/21 – changes to indicative allocations

Lynne Samuel stated that the indicative Block Budgets were approved in the January meeting and submitted to the DfE. Following the Education & Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) review, there were a few queries which had now mostly been resolved. There had been some changes to the minimum per pupil level and the use of year groups rather than phases, these were unforeseen circumstances.

The changes resulted in a reduction from the indicative budget for some secondary schools and an upward adjustment for Bohunt which had increased from 1 group to 2 groups at KS4.

Derren Gray stated that there had been no changes to primary schools as the changes did not affect KS1 and KS2. He also added that there would be no changes to the Growth Fund.

Carol Simpson asked if this represented an issue for Bulmershe School. Lynne Samuel stated that they had had an increase of 60 pupils and still had an increase of £400k this year.

39 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

There were no declarations of interest.

40 2019/20 CONTINGENCY UPDATE

Katherine Vernon, Schools Finance Manager presented the 2019/20 Contingencies update report.

Katherine Vernon stated that there were no changes since the previous meeting, with £77k uncommitted, representing an underspend which would be carried forward.

Helen Ball asked if this fund could be used to cover potential costs resulting from the corona virus outbreak and if there were any additional plans in place.

Sal Thirlway, Assistant Director Learning Achievement and Partnerships stated that currently there were no additional plans for schools. Schools would have to find any additional funding from within their own budgets. He was in regular contact with the Public Health for England and the government about this issue and he was updating schools accordingly.

Brian Prebble stated that it had been suggested that schools might have to increase class sizes during staff absences. Helen Ball added that Headteachers would have to risk assess if this was feasible or not.

The Chair believed that if the government declared a notifiable disease, schools would be able to make insurance claims.

Ian Morgan stated that he had checked with Early Years insurance providers and corona virus was not covered in their policies.

Helen Ball stated that depending on the circumstances it might be easier closing schools.

Sal Thirlway stated that the safest place for children was at school, it was necessary to balance the advice from the government, local circumstances and the implications to society in closing a school. The Local Authority would not tell schools to close, it would work with schools to mitigate the situation as much as possible.

Kerry Clifford stated that some parents were choosing not to send their children to nursery as they were not yet at the statutory school age.

Sal Thirlway stated that the Local Authority was sending out messages to try and reduce people's anxiety. He stated that the advice given when people called 111 was dependent on what individuals were reporting, the triage was based on what was said, this was why the advice given could vary.

The Chair stated that if the situation changed and escalated and schools had to close, schools might be able to put in a bid for contingency funds.

Sal Thirlway stated that schools were advised to follow the advice from Public Health England.

Shirley Austin stated that there were concerns about the contingency date for GCSE exams, should exams have to be moved due to the corona virus, some parents had already booked their holidays assuming the contingency date would not be used.

Sian Lehter asked what the advice was regarding schools' overseas trips. Sal Thirlway stated that schools should follow the government advice and not travel to the category A areas.

Lynne Samuel stated that if necessary, the finance team would look at any financial implications resulting from the corona virus outbreak.

Sal Thirlway confirmed that at the moment it was business as usual, if anything changed he would communicate with schools.

RESOLVED That the report be noted.

41 2019/20 REVENUE MONITORING REPORT

Katherine Vernon presented the 2019/20 Revenue Monitoring report. She stated that there were no changes from the report presented in January. The Forecast showed a projected overspend of £3.33m against a Budget of £142.86m, representing 2.3% of the Budget.

Lynne Samuel stated that although there were some small changes, they were not significant enough to change the Forecast report.

Derren Gray clarified that the Forecast overspend of £3.3m included a brought forward deficit from 2018/2019 of £1.6m and an in-year deficit of £1.7m for 2019/20.

Members noted that there were no changes in the variance column.

RESOLVED That the report be noted.

42 2020/21 CENTRAL SCHOOL SERVICES BLOCK (CSSB)

Alan Voyzey, Interim Schools Finance Specialist presented the 2020/21 Central School Services Block (CSSB) report.

Alan Voyzey stated that the CSSB was the smallest block of the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG). This grant provided a contribution to the total cost of the central statutory services which, in total were approximately £2m. Appendix A of the report identified the range of services being supported.

Alan Voyzey stated that CSSB allocation for 2020/21 was £936k, this was a reduction of £10k from the previous year's allocation. This was a relatively small reduction and the line by line proposals contained in the report reflected that reduction.

Alan Voyzey stated that one of the changes was to Copyright Licences from £129k to £133, an increase of around 3%, this was determined centrally. The proposal showed a reduction pro-rata in the other services in the region of 1.7% to 5% to account for the reduction in funding.

During the discussion of the item the following comments were made:

- Alan Voyzey stated that the reduction in funding did not mean a reduction in service levels, this grant did not fully cover those statutory services, the Local Authority funded the remaining costs;
- Alan Voyzey stated that the cost of the various licences which were determined nationally and allocated centrally to local authorities had increased by £4k (3%), but the other allocations had in the main been reduced by £14k (1.5%);
- Lynne Samuel confirmed that this block did not fully fund these services, it was a contribution towards its cost.
- Lynne Samuel reported that the School Admissions function had come back in to Children's Services, as a result the finance team was going to be able to review that team's budget;
- Alan Voyzey stated that the government had discontinued the Education Services Grant a few years ago, and that some local authorities had used this grant to deal with historical costs. This was not the case in Wokingham, but overall there was still a reduction in funding;
- Ginny Rhodes stated that the school improvement grant (page 29 of the agenda) had not been reported to Schools Forum before and she asked for more information, including the monetary value of this grant. Lynne Samuel stated that this grant come directly to the Local Authority for it to deliver that function, however, she agreed to include more information about it in future reports.

Officers agreed to bring a report to the next meeting of Schools Forum containing details of the school improvement grant, including its impact on schools.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) The report be noted; and
- 2) A report containing details on the school improvement grant will be presented to the next meeting of Schools Forum.

43 2020/21 EARLY YEARS BUDGET

Alan Voyzey presented the 2020/21 Early Years Budget report.

Ian Morgan stated the Early Years Working Group had met with colleagues from the finance team and Early Years representatives, they went through the funding formula and the proposed Early Years Budget in detail. As a result, additional funding was identified in addition to the hourly rate increase, and most providers would benefit from this sum by an increase in the quality supplement. Ian Morgan stated that it would be preferable if all providers could benefit from the quality supplement (currently only 65% of providers would

benefit from the quality supplement). Lynne Samuel explained that, in total the sum was equivalent to a very small percentage of a pence and it would have been difficult to add to the hourly rate.

Alan Voyzey stated that the quality supplement was therefore being increased from £300k to £375k, increasing the hourly rate from 20 pence to 25 pence.

Ian Morgan stated that it had not been possible to agree the Early Years Budget at the last meeting because the previous report was lacking detail. The detail was now clear and he was pleased that qualified teaching staff would have an increase by 5p per hour.

Kerry Clifford stated that over the last few years there had been a move towards having more qualified teachers and graduate students working in nurseries. She believed that it was right to benefit those providers who had put in the time and effort in taking on more qualified staff.

Lynne Samuel stated that although not all providers would benefit from the quality supplement, all would receive a 7 pence increase in the hourly rate.

Alan Voyzey stated that there had been a delay in receiving information from the government this year, due to various reasons, including Brexit; but he expected that individual Early Years providers would be notified of the full impact of the rate increases by no later than 31 March.

In response to a question Lynne Samuel stated that the Early Years' Contingencies fund was legally different from that of the Schools Block Contingency, it should be considered a balancing Reserve. She suggested having a discussion about Early Years' contingencies/reserves at the Task and Finish Group.

Ian Morgan and Kerry Clifford confirmed that they were in agreement with the proposal.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Schools Forum approved the centrally retained element of the 2020/21 Early Years Budget which would be used to fund the associated statutory duties of the Local Authority;
- 2) Schools Forum noted the proposals to increase the current hourly rates paid to all providers by 7p per hour, and to increase the quality supplement to providers employing qualified teaching staff by 5p per hour; and
- 3) The Early Years Task and Finish Group would discuss the Early Years' contingencies options.

44 2020/21 HIGH NEEDS BLOCK BUDGET & IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMME UPDATE

Lynne Samuel presented the 2020/21 High Needs Block (HNB) Budget and Improvement Programme update.

Lynne Samuel stated that the Council had received an additional £1.6m (8.6%) for the coming financial year, in recognition of the increasing pressures faced in the HNB by the Local Authority. This additional funding was welcome, however the HNB still faced

challenges, with a projected in-year deficit of £1.7m. It was also recognised that budgets had been static for a number of years, with no increases in top up funding.

Lynne Samuel stated that the Local Authority was required by law to submit a balanced budget to the DfE (regardless of what the reality was). The appendixes showed the breakdown of the figures, with some small adjustments still to be made. She stated that home to school transport budget had been moved to the Council's general fund.

Sal Thirlway stated that extensive work was being undertaken to reduce the HNB deficit. These are some of the comments he made:

- The Resource Bases work continued, this was a challenging but positive piece of work, with the strategic commissioning team involved;
- Northern House special school – the Council continued to work with the Northern House Trust and the Regional Schools Commissioner to find a new provider for the school. This represented a challenge for the Local Authority as many Wokingham children were placed there;
- The SEND Improvement Board had met the day before and they had had a robust meeting;
- The SEND Strategy was moving forward with the six strands of work which were identified as priorities (but not limited to those six strands of work);
- The provision of home to school transport was being considered in the context of broader arrangements in the Council, he believed that this service should sit with Children's Services;
- There had been a deficit recovery meeting with the ESFA and SEND Improvement colleagues, the Council had provided them with a clear overview. However, it was unlikely that the deficit would reduce as the Local Authority had not been given the level of resources that were needed.

During the discussion of the item the following comments were made:

- Lynne Samuel stated that going forward she expected that there would be more communication with the EFSA and more clarity on how to deal with the deficit;
- Lynne Samuel stated that there were challenges in achieving a balanced in-year position and in dealing with the historical deficit;
- Sara Attra stated that Addington School had received interim top ups from other neighbouring Local Authorities who used the school. She warned that this represented a large amount (for 44 pupils) and if it was reduced would have an impact;
- The Chair stated that the Out of Borough independent non-maintained schools represented the largest amount of money (30% of the annual HNB Budget), the report did not contain the narrative around this. Lynne Samuel agreed to include the relevant paragraph with the minutes;
- Sal Thirlway stated that this issue was being looked at, more places were being created within the Borough. However, for some children whose needs were very high, it may never be appropriate to bring them back to the Borough;
- Carey Tulloch, Senior Specialist People Commissioning stated that there was a robust review of processes taking place, looking at resources, spend, commissioning, contracts, financial monitoring and outcomes for children;
- Sara Attra stated that the Local Authority should consider bringing children back to the Borough at transitions points;

- Sara Attra stated that in order to bring children back to the Borough, it was necessary to increase the provision of therapy in schools;
- Brian Prebble stated that there was an element of parental choice that had to be considered;
- Sal Thirlway recognised that this issue had been going on for a long time and that this was frustrating for the Forum. However, he ascertained that the service was now undertaking the necessary work to tackle these issues;
- Corrina Gillard pointed out that there seemed to be a disconnection between School Admissions and SEN teams, she asked if this was going to improve;
- Sal Thirlway stated that it was his intention that those teams, as well as home to school transport worked together to improve the delivery of the services;
- Lynne Samuel stated that HNB updates were now standing items in Schools Forum agendas, the finance team would continue to update the Forum on the progress and any changes to the HNB.

Schools Forum members wished to place on record that this was the clearest HNB report in a number of years, they expressed their gratitude to all involved in producing it.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) The report be noted;
- 2) High Needs Block updates would become a standing item in Schools Forum agendas.

45 SCHOOL ADMISSIONS

Sal Thirlway gave a verbal update on School Admissions.

Sal Thirlway stated that this service was now under Children's Services. It was his intention to develop pathways to connect School Admissions, School Transport and SEN. This connection had not yet happened in a directed way because the School Admissions team was extremely busy, dealing with secondary school offers.

Sal Thirlway stated that School Admissions Forum, which was a meeting of the Council, had now been disbanded. The intention was to create a School Admissions Task and Finish Group, as a sub-group of Schools Forum, involving colleagues from Schools Forum, SEN, Home to School Transport and SEN. A paper containing this proposal had been submitted to School Admissions Forum and been agreed. He believed that this format would have a bigger impact and facilitate sharing information in a more constructive way.

Sal Thirlway stated he was looking into ways to increase resources in School Admissions as it was recognised that there were capacity issues. The team of specialists needed to be re-built.

During the discussion of the item the following comments were made:

- Corrina Gillard stated that the lack of communication between School Admissions and SEN had resulted in her school having to admit children over the admission number, creating difficulties for the school;
- Sal Thirlway agreed that there had been unintended consequences to the previous arrangements within the Council;
- Sal Thirlway asked members to take into account the size of the changes that he was proposing. He was trying as much as possible to expedite the changes;

- In response to a question Sal Thirlway stated that elected Members were supportive of the changes being implemented by Children's Services. He stated that he wished Schools Forum to continue to hold him/the service to account to promote further improvements;
- In response to a question Sal Thirlway confirmed that the School Admissions Task and Finish Group would report to Schools Forum. The Terms of Reference and membership of the group were still to be drafted and presented to Schools Forum for review. He asked for volunteers to join the group, and the following members volunteered: Nick McSweeney, Shirley Austin, Brian Prebble and Corrina Gillard;
- Sal Thirlway stated that the current School Admissions Forum and SEN colleagues would also be invited to take part;
- Councillor Howe confirmed that there was political support to the proposals. He would continue look at other ways to support the service.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) The verbal update on School Admissions be noted; and
- 2) Schools Forum endorses the proposal of creating a School Admissions Task and Finish Group which would report back to Schools Forum, in the first instance with a Terms of Reference for governance and operational arrangements.

46 FORWARD PROGRAMME

The Forum considered and noted the Forward Programme of work and dates of future meetings as set out on Agenda page 53.

The following items were added to the 15 July meeting:

- Update on School Admissions Task and Finish Group
- Update on Insurance issues
- Growth Fund update – Primary school provision

The Chair stated that Schools Forum was interested to know more about the political steer in relation to Growth Fund, in particular about Primary Strategy.