

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE SCHOOLS FORUM

HELD ON 15 MARCH 2023 FROM TIME NOT SPECIFIED TO TIME NOT SPECIFIED

Schools Representatives

Carol Simpson	School Business Manager - Colleton Primary
Brian Prebble	Primary Head - Rivermead Primary - Vice Chairman
Liz Woodards	School Business Manager - Hawkedon Primary
Ali Brown	Primary Head - Nine Mile Ride Primary
Julia Mead	School Business Manager - St Sebastian's CE Primary
Phil Sherwood	Primary Academy Head - Sonning Cof E Primary
Derren Gray	Academy Head - The Piggott School
Andy Hinchliff	Academy Head - St Crispin's School
Paul Miller	Trustee - The Circle Trust - Chairman
Shirley Austin	Academy Head - The Forest School
Debra Briault	Secondary Academy School Representative
Sara Attra	Special School Head - Addington School
Iain Thomas	Pupil Referral Unit Head – Foundry College
Chris Connian	School Business Manager – Bulmershe
Paul Gibson	Academy Head – Maiden Erlegh

Non School Representatives

Morag Malvern	Wokingham Borough Council
Ming Zhang	Interim Assistant Director Learning Achievement and Partnerships

Also Present

Luciane Bowker, Democratic & Electoral Services Specialist
Piers Brunning, Senior Specialist (People and Place) Strategy and Commissioning Teams
Hayley Rees, Category Manager Strategy and Commissioning
Lynne Samuel, Finance Business Partner, Children's Services
Katherine Vernon, Schools Finance Manager
Jonathan Wilding, Safety Valve / SEND Consultant

37 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were submitted from Corrina Gillard, Ben Godber and Amanda Woodfin.

Amanda Woodfin was substituted by Chris Connian.

38 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 11 January 2023 were confirmed as a correct record and would be signed by the Chair at a later date.

38.1 Matters Arising

- Add a Consultation item to the July meeting – action completed.
- To discuss the need to declare Declarations of Interest – this was discussed via email and this standing item would remain in the agenda.

- Confirmation to schools on the number of places required for 2023/24 – Brian Prebble informed that primary schools had access to the number of preferences for their own schools, but not for others.

The expectation had been that the number of preferences for all schools would have been shared.

Shirley Austin stated that secondary schools had been given the information via the portal. 47 girls had not been offered a secondary school place on national offer day, and it would be useful to know if they had now been offered a place.

Derren Gray stated the information requested was about the number of additional places that were required over the planned admission number.

Ming Zhang, Interim Assistant Director for Learning Achievement and Partnerships confirmed that 47 girls were not offered a place on 1 March. However, it was positive to note that 96% of pupils were offered one of their preferred schools. Currently there were 66 rejections and the team was monitoring the situation very closely and were expecting the no-offer number to reduce.

Derren Gray believed that this information was linked to the Growth Fund, the schools that had agreed to take on additional numbers would need to be funded accordingly.

Lynne Samuel, Finance Business Partner – Children's Services stated that it was expected that the contingency fund in the Growth Fund would be realised and would cover the cost of the additional places. She stated that future reports would be more detailed in this respect.

Members asked for reassurance that the additional school places would be fully funded by the Growth Fund. Lynne Samuel agreed to provide this information.

Ming Zhang informed that planning discussions for the next year had already started to take place with school leaders at the Wokingham Partnership Board, which agreed to start a small group of three school leaders to have an initial discussion. Additionally, the Council set up a Gold Group to discuss and plan sufficiency of school places for immediate needs and for the future. A more scientific demographic planning model was being developed, as the current model was now obsolete in light of significant changes to the patterns of people movements in the past three years.

Paul Gibson asked how decisions in relation to expansion of school places were scrutinised.

Ming Zhang informed that the Gold Group was chaired by the Chief Executive Officer, others members of the group included the Section 151 Officer, the Director for Children's Services and top tier leaders.

Members asked that a governance diagram of the Gold Group be produced and shared with the Forum.

The other actions in the list would be discussed during the meeting.

39 DECLARATION OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

40 2022/23 REVENUE MONITORING REPORT

Katherine Vernon, Schools Finance Manager presented the 2022/23 Revenue Monitoring report.

There had been an adverse movement of £331k since the last time this report was presented to Schools Forum. The current in-year deficit was £6.8m , with the budget pressure continuing to be within the High Needs Block (HNB). Taken with the brought forward deficit of £10m, a forecast cumulative deficit of £16.8m was now projected.

There was an increase in the De-delegation – staff costs of £17k to cover Union Duties, however the budget still projected a small underspend.

The appendixes contained details of the Growth Fund spend.

There was an increase in funding within the HNB for mainstream schools, largely as a result of supporting children awaiting places in other settings and specialist schools.

The Early Years contingency fund was forecast to be fully spend or clawed back by the DfE and therefore no variance was reported.

No significant risks were reported.

In response to a question Katherine Vernon confirmed that any flexibility identified in the Growth Fund would be held to support place planning challenges next year.

In response to a question Lynne Samuel confirmed that there were still further in-year risks in relation to the HNB. The team was working towards finding mitigations. Regular updates would be shared with Schools Forum and the Wokingham Borough Partnership Board.

RESOLVED That the report be noted.

41 DSG MANAGEMENT PLAN & SAFETY VALVE UPDATE

Jonathan Wilding, Safety Valve/ SEN Consultant presented the DSG Management Plan & Safety Valve Update.

During the presentation the following points were highlighted:

- The bids for two free schools were both approved;
- The outcome of the Safety Valve programme would be announced on 16 March;
- The outcome of the capital bid for £6.3m was expected in the next two weeks;
- Wokingham was one of only three local areas to have been awarded two free school bids, the other awards were in far larger areas;
- It was believed that deliverability was a key aspect for the success of the bids;
- The two new schools were in addition to the new Oaktree school which was due to open in September;
- The timetable expected a fast pace of programme to deliver the two new schools as soon as possible;
- There were two aspects of the capital bid:
- Proposal 1 – Resource Base Review and New SEND Designated Units

- Proposal 2 – Post-16 Provision
- The SEND Strategy was being refreshed, in view of the fact that there had been many changes recently;
- Potential sites for the new schools were being considered;
- A public consultation on SEND Sufficiency was going to be launched very soon;
- It was hoped that the local authority would lead the management of the projects.

In response to a question Jonathan Wilding explained that in some areas the DfE managed the capital programme. However, it was believed that it would be better if the local authority was able to manage it locally.

Andy Hinchcliffe asked if Gray's Farm was being considered as a location for one of the schools. Jonathn Wilding explained that a site assessment was currently being carried out. However, this was not due to be concluded until April, so other options were also being considered.

The Chairman recognised that due to confidentiality, it was not yet possible to share the detail of projected savings over the life of the programme. He asked that detailed information be included in the report for the July meeting.

Jonathan Wilding stated a lot of the savings would be from reducing the need to send children to out of borough placements. For this to happen it was important to improve the early help intervention and to develop partnership work with all schools.

Ming Zhang emphasized the importance of partnership work with schools in order to achieve the desired outcomes set out in the Safety Valve programme.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) The report be noted; and
- 2) A detailed report would be submitted to the July meeting of Schools Forum.

42 2023/24 FINAL HIGH NEEDS BLOCK BUDGET

Lynne Samuel presented the 2023/24 Final High Needs Block Budget report.

A spend of £36.6m was projected for the 2023/24 financial year, with an income of £28.4m, therefore a £8.2m in-year deficit was forecast for Year one of the Safety Valve programme.

It was pointed out that all the work being undertaken with the DSG Management Plan and the Safety Valve would take some time to realise the savings and this level of first year deficit was expected.

The Task and Finish Group had been working on the Budget and considering all options. There was a desire to uplift all bands in line with inflation, however there was a constraint to work within the income received. The report contained details of the uplifts.

The graphs in the report showed the profile and the balance of the number of out of borough placements in relation to the increase in the number of in-house placements would change in future years; and how this would affect the Budget going forward.

Wokingham applied an annual inflationary cap to requests from INMSS providers, this was set at 2.5% for the 2022/23 financial year. This cap applied to all placements whether made through the framework or not. The inflation increase requests being received by local authorities was far beyond what was affordable, and negotiations would be carefully managed.

The Task and Finish Group would continue to meet. At the next meeting they would review the terms of reference and work programme.

Sara Attra stated that it was good to have a Task and Finish Group, but that going forward, she would like more time for discussions at the Task and Finish Group. She expressed concern that capping the increase to 2.5% to independent and non-maintained special schools was not realistic in view of what was being asked by those schools. She also stated that for the Addington Budget, further pay increases would not be fully covered leading to a potential deficit in the next two years.

Iain Thomas was in agreement with Sara Attra's comments and shared the concerns that staff costs are going up and a deficit was projected as a result of the funding uplifts not fully covering the cost increases.

Lynne Samuel recognised that there was challenge in relation to the fact that the funding received by the local authority did not fully cover the schools' needs.

The Chairman asked if there were any further risks that could potentially compromise the delivery of the Safety Valve programme. Lynne Samuel stated that the local authority was continuing to closely monitor all risks.

The Chairman asked that the Christmas tree graph include the geographical allocations, showing in and out of area spend.

It was recommended that planning for the consultation on possible transfers from the Schools Block to the HNB start as soon as possible to ensure that schools were well informed about the options. Lynne Samuel agreed and added that the Task and Finish Groups would be involved in the preparation of the consultation papers.

Schools Forum members were encouraged to contact Lynne Samuel if they wished to take part in the Task and Finish Groups.

RESOLVED That the report be noted.

43 EARLY YEARS HARSHIP FUND

Elaine Munro, Principal Educational Psychologist presented the Early Years Hardship Fund report.

The following points were highlighted:

- The Early Years Hardship Fund was created to provide a level of support to providers facing financial hardship, to ensure that local sufficiency could be maintained;
- Most of the Early Years funding available would be passed on to all settings based on the number of funded hours, with a modest amount held back for the Hardship Fund;
- The local authority had a duty to provide a certain number of placements for Early Years;

- A system was being put in place for providers to apply for a one-off payment;
- It was recognised that the number of places fluctuated during the year and it could take providers a bit of time to adjust staffing ratios;
- Applications would be made through the Early Years and Childcare Team;
- There would be quarterly reports on the amount of money that has been withdrawn from the fund;
- £50k was being retained for this fund, and it was hoped that this would be sufficient. Any remaining funds would be re-distributed to providers at the end of the financial year.

Ian Morgan stated that he was in support of the proposal, he believed that this proposal was a good compromise following previous discussions with the senior leaders.

In response to a question Elaine Munro informed that a cap had not been set, but from previous experience during Covid, £7k was the maximum amount requested previously. Notionally, the team was not expecting requests to be over £10k.

RESOLVED That the report be noted.

44 2023/24 FINAL EARLY YEARS BUDGET

Katherine Vernon presented the 2023/24 Final Early Years Budget report.

This year the local authority was requesting that £580,263 (4.7%) be retained to fund statutory duties. The proposal also included increases to:

- Base rate for 2 year olds by 50p per hour
- Base rate for 3 and 4 year olds by 30p per hour
- Quality Supplement by 5p per hour
- Maintained Nursery Supplement by £130,000
- Early Years Inclusion Fund by £50,000

The Task and Finish Group had met and was in support of the recommendations contained in the report.

Ian Morgan stated that it was positive that the increase was significant. He noticed a discrepancy in relation to the 4.7% in table C of the report and asked for clarification. Katherine Vernon explained that this was because that table only showed 3 and 4 year old funding, not the total (the 4.7% was taken from the total which included 2 year olds).

Ian Morgan stated that more detail about how the centrally retained money was used by the local authority would be welcomed by the providers. Lynne Samuel agreed to include more detail in the future.

Upon being put to the vote, members voted unanimously in favour of the proposals contained in the report.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) The 2023/24 Final Early Years Budget be approved with 4.7% to be centrally retained; and

2) Future information shared through the Task and Finish Group would contain details on the use of the Early Years centrally retained funds.

45 FORWARD PLAN

The dates of futures meetings were noted with the following comments:

12 July 2023

- DSG Management Plan and Safety Valve Programme – with more detailed information
- 2024/25 DSG Budget Planning (not update)
- F40 Group update

11 October 2023

6 December 2023

10 January 2024

13 March 2024

46 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Carol Simpson reported that some schools were expressing concerns that they would not be able to achieve balanced budgets and they were not sure how to present their budgets. She wondered if there was support available for those schools in this situation.

Lynne Samuel informed that any school struggling was encouraged to contact the local authority for support. She also offered to include information in the monitoring reports presented to Schools Forum.

It was requested that information about the offer of support be communicated to all schools without delay.

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Actions following Schools Forum meeting on 15 March 2023

- Confirmation that the additional school places requested will be funded by the Growth Fund.
- A governance diagram of the Gold Group be shared with Schools Forum.
- Update on F40 Group at the July meeting.
- Safety Valve update to include details of savings over the life of the programme.
- To provide detailed information about how the Early Years centrally retained money is used by the Local Authority – to share this information with the Early Years T&F Group.
- To send information to all schools about the support available through the local authority about budget setting.