

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE  
SCHOOLS FORUM  
HELD ON 12 JULY 2023 FROM 10.00 AM TO 11.04 AM**

**Schools Representatives**

Carol Simpson	School Business Manager - Colleton Primary
Corrina Gillard	Primary Head - Emmbrook Infant
Brian Prebble	Primary Head - Rivermead Primary - Vice Chairman
Liz Woodards	School Business Manager - Hawkedon Primary
Derren Gray	Academy Head - The Piggott School
Andy Hinchliff	Academy Head - St Crispin's School
Shirley Austin	Academy Head - The Forest School
Debra Briault	Secondary Academy School Representative
Sara Attra	Special School Head - Addington School
Chris Conian	School Business Manager – Bulmershe School

**Non School Representatives**

Ian Pittock	Wokingham Borough Council
Ming Zhang	Interim Assistant Director for Education and SEND
Ian Morgan	Early Years Representative
Kerrie Clifford	Maintained Nursery Head

**Also Present**

Hayley Rees, Category Manager, Strategy and Commissioning  
Emma Shrimpton, Finance Business Partner Children's Services  
Katherine Vernon, Schools Finance Manager  
Helen Watson, Director of Children's Services  
Jonathan Wilding, Safety Valve / SEND Consultant

**Others Present**

Prue Bray Executive Member for Children's Services

**47 APOLOGIES**

An apology for absence was submitted from Paul Miller.

Paul Miller submitted the written statement below with respect to Lynne Samuel's contribution to Schools Forum:

*Lynne brought a new level of professional transparency to the reporting of School Forum finances. She introduced a supportive and collaborative approach to school finance taking time to understand the challenges 'in school'. Lynne actively supported the evolution of the School Forum Task and Finish groups and ensured the recommended outcomes from these groups were well modelled, researched and credible. More recently her detailed analysis of the activities driving High Needs Block expenditures has been instrumental helping Schools Forum understand the reasons for excess expenditures relative to plans, and has underpinned the Borough's application to the government's Safety Valve programme. We will miss her contribution, but wish her every success in the next stage of her career.*

Brian Prebble chaired the meeting.

Schools Forum was informed that Paul Miller had recently resigned from his role with the Circle Trust and consequently had to also resign from Schools Forum.

Brian Prebble made the following statement:

Paul has been a phenomenal chair for Schools Forum. His contribution to Schools Forum has been immense over the years, as member as a vice-chair and finally as a chair. Since taking on the role of chair, he has ensured rigor and effectiveness with Schools Forum meetings, and providing the appropriate support and challenge when needed. Paul has worked in partnership with the finance team to enable a collaborative approach (no more them & us) which resulted in a more transparent approach from the finance team & reports of a higher quality. He is leaving school forum in a significantly stronger position from when he started as chair, and his expertise and knowledge will be sorely missed. I have learnt a lot from Paul, and have thoroughly enjoyed working with him as vice-chair for the past 5-6 years. On behalf of us all, I would like to thank Paul greatly for all his hard work, huge contribution and efforts as chair over the many years he been involved with Schools Forum, but particularly as chair. I wish him all the best for the future.

#### **48 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 15 March 2023 were confirmed as a correct record, subject to the amendment below, and would be signed by the Chair at a later date.

Amendment: Ian Morgan was in attendance at the 15 March 2023 meeting.

#### **48.1 Matters Arising**

Matters arising were dealt with during the meeting.

#### **49 DECLARATION OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest.

#### **50 2022/23 REVENUE OUTTURN REPORT**

Katherine Vernon, Schools Finance Manager presented the 2022/23 Revenue Outturn Report.

There had been an overspend of £7.2 million, the previous forecast was £6.8 million and when the Budget was set it was £3.9 million. Together with the brought forward deficit balance of £10 million, partially offset by the £8 million received from the Safety Valve programme, there was now a cumulative DSG deficit of £ 9.2 million.

The report contained details of the schools balances and changes to Schools Block, High Needs Block (HNB), Early Years Block and Central School Services Block.

The following points were highlighted:

- There had been an increase in EOTAS (Education Other Than At School) funding in the HNB, this funding was difficult to predict;
- Early Years Block – there had been an underspend of £50k, which had been kept to support the hardship fund. The final allocation for 2022/23 was expected later in the year.

Corrina Gillard asked if the EOTAS line included alternative provision. Katherine Vernon explained that where there was a placement in a mainstream school and a pupil had alternative provision it was included in the mainstream schools funding section on the report. Alternative provision funding for unplaced children was included under the EOTAS line in the report

**RESOLVED** That the report be noted.

## **51 2022/23 MAINTAINED SCHOOL BALANCES**

Katherine Vernon presented the 2022/23 Maintained School Balances Report.

The following points were highlighted:

- The balances had increased by £1 million from the end of last year;
- Five schools were in deficit;
- Seven schools had balances of less than 5% of their income;
- 15 schools had balances over 10% of their income;

Currently, there was no mechanism to clawback balances, Schools Forum may wish to discuss this at a future meeting.

The Chairman asked what support was in place to help schools not to fall into deficit. Katherine Vernon explained that at the beginning of the year, the local authority offered to speak with schools that were struggling to set a balanced budget. The team had met with four schools. Schools could contact the local authority for help.

**RESOLVED** That the report be noted.

## **52 2023/24 REVENUE MONITORING REPORT**

Katherine Vernon presented the 2023/24 Revenue Monitoring Report.

At the time the budget was set, a deficit of £8.2 million was expected, the deficit was now £10 million. The main movements were £216k increase in the Schools Block and £1.67 million increase in the HNB.

There reasons for the increase were as outlined in the report.

The allocation for independent maintained schools was now shown in a separate line (used to be included in the independent non-maintained schools line).

The local authority was recently informed of an Early Years supplementary grant, this was 44p per hour for three to four year olds and £2.69 for two year old funding, this was a considerable increase. 100% of this increase would be pass on to providers, the details would be discussed at the next Task and Finish Group.

The £50k Early Years Hardship Fund was still available and no-one had claimed it yet.

In response to a question Katherine Vernon explained that £384 of Schools Block reserves was brought forward for Growth, there was £168k left if things happened as anticipated.

**RESOLVED** That the report be noted.

### **53 GROWTH FUND UPDATE**

Piers Brunning, School Place Planning Manager presented the Growth Fund update. The following points were highlighted:

- The growth for 2024/25 would be led by the level of migrations into the borough;
- It was not certain when the high level of migration into the borough would abate, therefore it was necessary to plan for additional places;
- A spend of £1.6 million was expected for 2024/25;
- The Forest School's consultation on potentially becoming co-educational had a positive impact on planning for places;
- At the moment, the need for secondary school rolls continued to grow;
- A capacity analysis was being undertaken to determine the Growth Fund. This was part of the Gold process, this was a series of Task and Finish Groups led by the CEO. The focus of the Gold process now was to determine the growth for 2024 onwards;
- The number of new houses in the borough had an impact in the planning of school places, in particular for primary school children;
- There was the issue of cross border movement. At the moment Wokingham exported more children than imported. Some children went out of the borough to attend grammar schools. If these children were unsuccessful in obtaining a place, this could create a pressure in Wokingham's Growth Fund;
- Historically, there used to be families moving into the area mid-year, requiring primary school places. Now, there were more families moving mid-year requiring secondary school places. This factor created a significant pressure;
- Appendix B of the report contained a breakdown of the projects being funded by the Growth Fund. It was expected that most of the reserves fund would be used in 2024/25, although it was impossible to now for certain what is going to happen in terms of demand in the next few years.

Chris Connian asked for clarification on the 15 additional numbers relating to Bulmershe School. Katherine Vernon explained that 15 additional places had been agreed by the school for 2022/23 and for 2023/24 – the table showed the payment instalments for those places. The funding was for academic years, but the payment was split in 12 instalments to fit the financial year.

Ming Zhang, Assistant Director for Education and SEND stated that the Growth Fund was directly linked to what was happening on the ground. The Growth Fund had to respond to school placement need.

In response to a question, Piers Brunning informed that there was an ongoing process of engagement with secondary schools to manage the demand for school places.

**RESOLVED** That the report be noted.

### **54 DSG MANAGEMENT PLAN & SAFETY VALVE UPDATE**

The DSG Management Plan and Safety Valve Update was presented by Jonathan Wilding, Safety Valve and SEND Consultant.

Currently, there was a consultation with schools about priorities and to update on the progress of the programme to address priorities. This consultation would end on 28 July, and the result of this consultation would be used to refresh plans. Schools would then be

consulted again with new proposals and budgeting matters. The results of this second consultation would be presented to Schools Forum in October.

Schools would be asked to agree to a 1% transfer from the Schools Block to the HNB. It was recognised that this was a higher amount than previously asked for, the broad financial situation justified such a request. This money was not intended to pay for the HNB deficit, it was to fund investment in schools and provision of services which would benefit schools.

It was proposed that the HNB deficit would be paid for by the Safety Valve fund and the Council tax levy.

Following discussions with secondary schools, the local authority was asked to produce a model to mitigate the disproportionate negative effect of the 1% transfer to smaller schools. Schools Forum was being asked to decide if such a model should be developed, in light of the fact that it would take a considerable amount of Officers' time and legal advice to produce it.

In response to a question, Jonathan Wilding stated that having a proposed model to mitigate the impact on smaller schools would potentially help smaller schools to agree to the proposal.

Corina Gillard stated that schools would want to know more details about how the money would be used. In her opinion, schools would be more likely to support the transfer if the proposal contained specific information about how the money would be invested.

Jonathan Wilding stated that the consultation had an accompanying document which contained detailed information about the investment. He re-assured Schools Forum that there were many new and innovative initiatives to fill the gaps, and the project was moving at rapid pace.

Sara Attra informed that she had had technical difficulties in accessing the SEND consultation, she worried that other headteachers may have the same problem and may not be able to read the documents attached to it. Jonathan Wilding agreed to look into this.

Ming Zhang emphasized that it was important to work with schools and identify what the schools' priorities were, and both he and the officers had reached out to individual school leaders to inform the priorities that were being presented to Schools Forum today. The block transfer would be used to spend in these priorities areas as resources being invested back to schools.

Councillor Bray, Executive Member for Children's Services thanked Ming Zhang and Jonathan Wilding for their efforts in engaging with schools. She recognised that in the past schools had not been in favour of transferring 0.5% of the Schools Block to the HNB, it is possible that it had not been properly explained to schools what the money was for. This time, this transfer was crucial to achieve the outcomes set out by the Deficit Management Plan. She added that the smaller schools would benefit the most.

Councillor Bray explained that it was extremely important to work together to tackle the HNB deficit. If this transfer was not agreed, the DfE would not give Wokingham any more money towards the Safety Valve and the plan would fail, and therefore everyone would

fail. She accepted that this decision would be difficult for some schools as budgets were tight. However, there were real risks if the plan failed. She offered to speak to any headteachers who needed more information to understand the situation.

Derren Gray asked what was the definition of 'small' school? Jonathan Wilding explained that this had not been defined, he believed that the fairest way to differentiate would be by numbers on roll. The system did not currently allow for this differentiation, the local authority would have to apply for disapplication, and the methodology was still to be worked out.

Liz Woodward stated that 85% of her school's budget was to fund teachers' salaries. She asked what would happen if schools agreed to the 1% transfer and subsequently there were increases in salaries and schools went into deficit as a result? What support would there be for schools if salary raises were not funded?

Katherine Vernon explained that the local authority passed all the funding received to schools. There was the possibility of developing a mechanism to clawback funds from the schools balance reserves.

Ming Zhang added that it was the local authority's intention to support schools as much as possible, not just financially but with other resources as well.

Upon being put the vote, Schools Forum voted unanimously in favour of asking the local authority to develop a model to support smaller schools in respect of the 1% transfer from the Schools Block to the HNB.

**RESOLVED** That:

- 1) Schools Forum notes the report and current consultation with schools to inform investment in the transformation and improvement of the local SEND system; and
- 2) Schools Forum endorses the proposal to review DSG/Schools Forum guidance to evaluate the possibility of transferring a sliding scale percentage based on school size and intake.

## **55 2024/25 DSG BUDGET PLANNING**

Katherine Vernon presented the 2024/25 DSG Budget Planning report.

The Task and Finish Groups would continue to meet as in previous years. The DSG usually revealed what the rates were going to be for the following year at the end of the summer term. With this information, the models would be worked on over the summer. The Task and Finish Groups would then meet in September to discuss the possible models.

The Early Years allocation would be known in December, and the Task and Finish Group would meet then to discuss it.

The HNB Task and Finish Group would meet in the Autumn.

The report contained a diagram with timescales.

**RESOLVED** That the report be noted.

## **56 2024/25 BUDGET CONSULTATION ARRANGEMENTS**

This item was discussed in conjunction with item 54.

## **57 BERKSHIRE EDUCATION PARTNERSHIP UPDATE**

Brian Prebble informed that the group had been looking at:

- The progress of the Safety Valve;
- The school improvement offer from the local authority – this had changed to the School Strategic Partnership, in recognition of the fact that it needed to be a school led system when it comes to school improvement;
- Strategic school placement planning; and
- Early Years multi-agency partnership

Brian Prebble stated that the Board had been an improved in partnership working between the schools and the local authority.

Ming Zhang emphasized the importance of engaging with Early Years. He believed that investing in Early Years produced better outcomes in the future.

Ian Morgan asked if there was any representation from independent providers. Ming Zhang stated that this group would be included.

**RESOLVED** That the verbal update be noted.

## **58 FORWARD PLAN**

The Forward Plan of work was noted.

## **59 ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

Brian Prebble stated that a review of Schools Forum membership would be necessary, in view of the fact that many schools were converting to academy status from September. Some members who currently represented maintained schools would not longer be able to represent that phase of schools.

Additionally, with Paul Miller's resignation from Schools Forum, there was currently no governor or academy trust representative on Schools Forum. Members were encouraged to think about approaching governors at their schools who may have the expertise to contribute to Schools Forum's work.

Luciane Bowker, Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist added that the election of Chairman and Vice-Chairman would take place at the next meeting. She asked Members to consider who might like to take these positions.