

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
SCHOOLS FORUM
HELD ON 6 DECEMBER 2023 FROM 10.00 AM TO 10.45 AM**

Schools Representatives

Carol Simpson	School Business Manager - Colleton Primary (Maintained)
Corrina Gillard	Primary Head - Emmbrook Infant (The Circle Trust)
Liz Woodards	School Business Manager - Hawkedon Primary (Maintained)
Julia Mead	School Business Manager - St Sebastian's CE Primary (The Keys Academy Trust)
Phil Sherwood	Primary Academy Head - Sonning Cof E Primary (The Keys Academy Trust)
Derren Gray	Academy Head - The Piggott School (The Agape Multi-Academy Trust)
Andy Hinchliff	Academy Head - St Crispin's School (The Circle Trust)
Jenny Comber	Academy Head - Bohunt School (Bohunt Education Trust)
Shirley Austin	Academy Head - The Forest School (The Forest School Academy Trust)
Debra Briault	Secondary Academy School Representative (The Circle Trust)
Sara Attra	Special School Head - Addington School
Ian Thomas	Pupil Referral Unit Head – Foundry College
Ian Morgan	Early Years Representative

Non School Representatives

Ming Zhang	Assistant Director for Education and SEND
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Also Present

Luciane Bowker, Democratic & Electoral Services Specialist
Al Moore, Finance Business Partner
Emma Shrimpton, Finance Business Partner Children's Services
Katherine Vernon, Schools Finance Manager
Jonathan Wilding, Safety Valve / SEN Consultant

16 APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was submitted from Brian Prebble.

17 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 11 October 2023 and of the meeting held on 6 November 2023 were both confirmed as a correct record and would be signed by the Chair at another date.

Matters arising from the meeting held on 11 October 2023

Schools Forum members were asked to continue to seek governors with the relevant experience to join Schools Forum.

It was confirmed that there had been no changes to the membership of the Early Years Task and Finish Group. Katherine Vernon, Schools Finance Manager informed that this group would meet in January 2024.

18 DECLARATION OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

19 2023/24 REVENUE MONITORING REPORT

Katherine Vernon presented the 2023/24 Revenue Monitoring Report.

The current financial position showed a small adverse movement from what was last reported to Schools Forum. The projected in-year deficit was now £12.5m, with the main pressure continuing to be in the High Needs Block (HNB). Taken with the brought forward deficit of £9.2m, and expected Safety Valve funding received mid-year, a forecast cumulative deficit of £19.9m was now projected to 31 March 2024.

There was a small variance in forecast for the Schools Block due to increase in the Growth Fund of £120k and a reduction in spend on Maternity under de-delegation of £24k.

The De-delegation staff costs was £24k less than budget due to academy conversions.

The Contingency continued with £55k as no-one had withdrawn from this fund this year.

It was expected that the Growth Fund would be used for schools expansion next year, requiring around £1.6m from the Schools Block. This would be modelled through the work of the Task and Finish Group.

The forecasting of the HNB was stabilising, as a result of the impact of the Safety Valve programme. A Council wide piece of work was being undertaken to unlock Health funding.

A lot of work would be carried out to work out the models for the new rates for Early Years from September 2024. This would be discussed with the Task and Finish Group. The rates for Early Years were received last week and were as follows:

- 3-4 year olds - £6.31
- 2 year olds - £9.05
- 9 months old to 2 year olds - £12.97

A range of rates would be shared with providers at the earliest opportunity to aid with budget planning.

The Hardship Fund contained £50k which was unspent and would be carried forward in case any school needed it.

There was no variance in the Central Schools Services Block.

In response to a comment, Emma Shrimpton, Finance Business Partner for Children's Services explained that it was the *forecast* for the HNB that was stabilising, this did not mean a reduction in the demand or cost of Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs). The intelligence and data analysis were getting better.

Sara Attra was pleased to note that an effort was being made to unlock funding from Health. She was interested to know how the service was gathering evidence for this piece of work. She stated that she had not been asked to provide information, even though she worked with Health within her school.

Emma Shrimpton explained that this was a Council wide initiative, and that Commissioning Services were leading on this piece of work. Conversations were being held at a high level at the moment, but this would filter down in due course. A better process with Health needed to be put in place.

Ming Zhang, Assistant Director for Education and SEND confirmed that Commissioning Services were working with Health to unlock the funding for the Council.

In relation to Appendix B – Growth Fund, Derren Gray clarified that the Piggott School had taken 46 pupils, not 45 pupils as stated in the document (this had already been pointed out at a previous meeting). Officers agreed to amend it.

RESOLVED That the 2023/24 Revenue Monitoring Report be noted.

20 DSG MANAGEMENT PLAN / SAFETY VALVE UPDATE

Jonathan Wilding, Safety Valve / SEND Consultant informed that the local authority was in the process of submitting its third report on the Safety Valve to the DfE.

A meeting with the DfE had taken place and there were early signs of a positive impact of the Safety Valve programme. The number of requests for EHCP assessments was stabilising if compared to the same period last year. A higher number of school requests were being approved, with a decline in the number of approvals from requests submitted by parents. As expected, there was some discontent about this within the parents' community. The service was trying to enhance communication with parents to explain the situation.

The feedback received from the DfE was that Wokingham was progressing relatively well compared to other benchmarkable local authorities.

A revised SEND Strategy was being drafted and it was hoped that this would go out for consultation in the new year.

Changes were being made to the Exceptional Needs Funding, this was being rebranded as Inclusion Funding. More information about it would be provided at the next meeting.

A new area SENCO had been appointed and was due to start work in January 2024.

Progress was being made to achieve the target of opening the two new special schools in 2026. It was anticipated that this timescale was achievable.

The service was in the process of contacting schools that had demonstrated an interest in developing resource spaces in the next few years.

Work was ongoing to develop an Early Years Strategy, this was important in order to improve readiness for school and had been requested by schools.

There had been inflationary requests received for places in the private sector, but this was being managed by the Commissioning Team.

Debra Briault asked for more detail on the feedback received from parents. Jonathan Wilding stated that there had been an increase in the number of mitigation meetings and tribunals. This was somewhat inevitable and the result of changes in policies and better

scrutiny. It was important to improve communication with parents and schools. Parental confidence was a national issue.

Debra Briault asked that schools be kept informed in order to help enhance the communication with parents.

Ming Zhang stated that it was important to gain a better understanding of the parents' perspective. The DfE was designing a survey for parents and carers in an effort to acquire the parents' views on a national level. It was hoped that with this information it would be possible to address the issue of low parental confidence.

RESOLVED That the verbal update report be noted.

21 DRAFT 2024/25 SCHOOLS BLOCK BUDGET

Katherine Vernon presented the Draft 2024/25 Schools Block Budget Report.

The pupil census data was still incomplete as some academies provided their numbers directly to the DfE. Therefore, the Budget contained indicative numbers at this stage.

The final figures would be received from the DfE at the end of the week. Officers would work with that information and send indicative Budgets out to schools for comments as soon as possible. The Task and Finish Group will meet in January to discuss the Budget, ahead of the next Schools Forum meeting.

The way in which the Growth Fund was received had changed and a new tool had been provided. At the moment, the provisional census figures had been used and it looked like the local authority would receive £1.1m from the DfE. However, it was anticipated that £1.6m was needed for the Growth Fund. The final figures were still to be confirmed.

The disapplication request for the all-through school had been submitted and accepted. It had not been necessary to submit a disapplication request for the 0.5% transfer from the Schools Block to the HNB.

In response to a question, Katherine Vernon confirmed that the Budget information would be sent out during the Christmas period via emails to schools' finance business managers and headteachers.

RESOLVED That the report be noted.

22 2024/25 PROPOSED DE-DELEGATED BUDGET

Katherine Vernon presented the 2024/25 Proposed De-delegated Budget. She explained that a couple of years ago, a Task and Finish Group had recommended that maternity cover and jury service be kept as de-delegated items.

A new rate of £27.53 per pupil had been calculated, this was the cost to maintained schools.

The contingencies fund contained £55k, Schools Forum could consider using this fund to help schools facing financial difficulties.

Upon being put to the vote, the maintained schools representatives voted in favour of keeping the maternity cover and jury service de-delegated items, at a rate of £27.53 per pupil.

It was agreed that the Contingencies Fund would be discussed at a future meeting.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) The maternity cover and jury service elements of the De-delegated Budget be maintained;
- 2) The rate to be charged to maintained school will be £27.53 per pupil; and
- 3) The Contingencies Fund will be discussed at a future meeting.

23 2024/25 DRAFT CENTRAL SCHOOL SERVICES BLOCK BUDGET

Katherine Vernon presented the 2024/25 Draft Central Schools Service Block Budget.

As the final allocation was not yet known, the report contained provisional amounts based on last year's census figures.

The Central School Services Budget represented a contribution towards the cost of services, it did not fully cover the total cost.

The Budget assumed that the cost of licenses would go up by 3%.

Members were in broad agreement with the proposal contained in the report, the final figures would be agreed at the January meeting.

RESOLVED That the report be noted.

24 INCLUSION FUNDING

This item was deferred to the next meeting.

25 FORWARD PROGRAMME

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

The following items were added to the January meeting:

- Inclusion Funding Report
- Solar Energy Report

Members were asked to consider if they wished to continue with virtual meetings. A face to face meeting in the Council offices in Shute End could be organised if required.

RESOLVED That the Forward Programme be noted.

26 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Debra Briault informed that a meeting with the Energy Team and schools had taken place where there had been discussions about the use of solar energy. There had also been conversations via emails about this issue.

Carol Simpson stated that at the meeting, schools were advised that they would start to be charged 17p per kilowatt hour - currently there was no charge. Schools had been asking for information about what this actually meant, as this was not known. In her school the solar meters were not working so it was impossible to know the cost.

Carol Simpson added that a contract was sent for schools to sign. Her school had a contract from 2012 and she had been told that that contract was no longer valid, she would like to understand why?

Carol Simpson stated that schools wished to ask the following questions:

- Who within the Council had made the decision to charge schools?
- Where would the proceeds of this charge go?
- Why were the current contracts no longer valid?
- Could the Energy Team to provide a forecast of the cost as soon as possible? Before the P9 Budget?

Schools felt unhappy about this proposal and had refused to sign the contract.

Debra Briault added that schools had been advised that the charge would be backdated to April 2023, she worried that schools would not be able to manage that.

Carol Simpson stated that the contract her school had with WBC stated that the school would benefit from the generated electricity for the next 25 years.

Additionally, the new contract that was sent to schools stated that the 17p per kilowatt hour could be reviewed every year. There was also a threat that if schools did not sign the contract they would not be guaranteed 30% lower than standard tariff rate discount.

Liz Woodards expressed frustration that schools had been asking for more detailed financial information and this had not been received.

Ming Zhang asked Carol Simpson to send him the information so that an internal investigation could be carried out. He stated that a response on this issue would be provided at the January meeting.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) A report on the issue of solar energy charge be brought to the January 2024 meeting;
and
- 2) Information about the financial implication of the charge be circulated to schools as soon as possible.