

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
SCHOOLS FORUM
HELD ON 10 JANUARY 2024 FROM 10.05 AM TO 11.40 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)
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)
Debra Briault (Vice-Chair in the Chair)	Secondary Academy School Representative (The Circle Trust)
Nicky Taylor-Dickens	Primary Headteacher - Willow Bank Infant (Maintained)
Sara Attra	Special School Head - Addington School

Non School Representatives

Ian Pittock	Wokingham Borough Council
Ming Zhang	Assistant Director for Education and SEND

Also Present

Luciane Bowker, Democratic & Electoral Services Specialist
Graham Cadle, Assistant Director, Finance
Ian Gough, Energy Manager
Sarah Morgan, Assistant Director, Commercial Property
Emma Shrimpton, Finance Business Partner, Children's Services
Katherine Vernon, Schools Finance Manager
Jonathan Wilding, Safety Valve / SEND Consultant

27 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were submitted from the Chairman, Brian Prebble and Jamie Conran, Head of SEND.

28 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 6 December 2023 were confirmed as a correct record, and would be signed by the Chair at a later date.

Matters arising

Early Years Task and Finish Group – this had now been set up and a meeting date agreed.

Growth Fund error – this had now been amended in the report.

Communication with schools and parents regarding SEND – a Communication Plan was being developed. Schools Forum would be kept informed on its development.

29 DECLARATION OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest was submitted.

30 2023-24 REVENUE MONITORING REPORT

The 2023/24 Revenue Monitoring Report was presented by Katherine Vernon, Schools Finance Manager.

There had been no major changes since the last report. There was a small variance in the Growth Fund due to the reflection on the full year expected usage. It was anticipated that £150k would be left in the Growth Fund if not called upon before the end of this financial year. Therefore there would be less need to draw down from the Schools Block funding.

There was still £19.7 million cumulative deficit in the year.

The appendices had been missed from the agenda and would be circulated to Schools Forum members as soon as possible.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) The report be noted; and
- 2) The appendices to the report would be circulated to Schools Forum members.

31 SOLAR ENERGY REPORT

Sarah Morgan, Assistant Director for Commercial Property shared a presentation and highlighted the following points:

- WBC's Capital investment in renewable energy at schools started in 2012;
- This strategy was reinforced by the Climate Emergency declaration in 2019, which aimed to encourage the development of renewable energy and engagement with young people and promoting sustainable schools;
- Over £4 million was invested in 55 school sites since 2012;
- WBC considered these projects as 'invest to save', there was an expectation that the capital investment would be paid over a period of 25 years;
- The change that was being proposed was driven by the context of raise in cost of energy prices;
- WBC's electricity's contract had gone up by 47% over five years;
- The change aimed to mitigate the circumstances of raising costs to schools and the Council, by retailing the solar energy produced by solar panels in a different way;
- The values that would be charged would be the same for maintained and academy schools, but the processes used for charging would be different;
- In the current arrangements, 90% of the energy produced by solar panels is sold back to the grid and an income is generated. The remaining 10% of energy is utilised on site. The 10% used by the school is at nil cost, but it is a small proportion of the energy needed, the remaining energy that is needed is currently bought at £0.25pence per kilowatt hour (kWh);
- The proposal is to retain 90% of the solar energy produced by the schools' solar panels and retail 10% back to the grid. It was proposed that the energy that was free before, be initially charged at £0.17pence kWh – significantly less than £0.25pence kWh;
- Whilst the solar energy cost was going up, the school would utilise much more of the energy they produced and pay significantly less per kWh;

- If schools did not agree to the new proposed charging arrangements, the current arrangements would continue with the existing contracts. All schools had slightly different contracts, depending on when they were agreed since 2012;
- Schools were encouraged to change to the new contract as it was believed that this would be beneficial to both schools and the Council;
- Schools that did not have any renewable energy sources in their sites would continue to purchase energy at £0.25pence kWh and this was likely to go up in the next few years. Those schools were encouraged to contact the Council about investing in renewable energy;
- Some schools had already signed up to the new contract. Schools that hadn't were encouraged to contact Ian Gough, Energy Manager and his team to discuss individual circumstances;
- In relation to the fee paid to the Council's energy team. Schools paid a fee of 2%, the energy team who provided procurement of energy supplies, with access to lower energy rates. The fee provided around £80k per annum, which was used to help with staffing costs, but was also re-invested in schemes;
- Schools could opt out of using the energy team from the Council, but would then have to use someone else to undertake the procurement function.

Some of the questions and comments made during the discussion of the item are listed below:

- Councillor Pittock was of the opinion that as well as looking at the cost of energy, consideration should be given to the insulation of buildings and minimising the loss of energy. He asked if this was being done?
- Ian Gough confirmed that the team looked at every project that could help with energy reduction. The team worked closely with the property team to optimize opportunities to insulate buildings;
- Councillor Pittock asked if there was support for schools to change cold roofs to warm roofs?
- Ian Gough stated that the Council was ready to work with schools in energy reduction projects with an invest to save approach, with a view to recover the capital investment in a period of time;
- Carol Simpson stated that her school had had very good support from the Council over the years, for example with lighting replacement and heat pumps for the swimming pool. However, she still felt very confused about the solar energy charges which were being proposed;
- Carol Simpson stated that the contract they had stated that they fully utilised the energy produced by the school's solar panels. The information being presented contradicted the statements in the contract, she wondered if schools had been overcharged since 2012?
- Carol Simpson expressed frustration that she had been asking for an example of the implications of this change to her school since January 2023, and many colleagues had been doing the same, without a response being given. Schools were going to have to submit their P9 budget monitoring soon, and this charge would go back to April 2023, there was still no clarity for budget forecasting;
- Ian Gough stated that all the schools forecasting was ready to go out, unfortunately this would go out with the bill. Sadly, it had taken a long time to work out the information for each individual school due to the fact that there were nuances for each individual school;
- Sarah Morgan asked Ian Gough to meet with individual schools, without delay, to discuss their position;

- Andy Hinchliff agreed that it was important to have the detail before signing a new contract. He asked if £0.17pence kWh was an actual amount or an amount because of a percentage reduction from the overall charge that a school could expect? Could there be a variation from £0.17pence kWh?
- Ian Gough explained that £0.17pence kWh was 30% reduction on the charged rate of import. The Council would look to maintain the cost at 30% lower than the market rate, but the £0.17pence kWh could change;
- Liz Woodards stated that it would have been helpful to have seen an example of a school scenario before the new contracts were proposed. She asked how would it work in terms of getting a bill after the forecast was done for last year?
- Ian Gough explained that conversations about this had started over a year ago. The team would like to have sent the bills in October 2023, but it was now ready to go;
- In response to a comment, Ian Gough confirmed that schools would get a bill from April 2023, after the schools forecast was done;
- Sarah Morgan asked to re-consider the issue of timing of bills outside of the meeting;
- Liz Woodards expressed frustration that schools business managers had been asking for more information for a year, with no response from the energy team;
- Debra Briault stated that more detailed information was needed in the contracts, including charging points and credits. If schools had been overpaying since April, would they be refunded? Also, multi-academy trusts needed this information as they were the ones who would sign the contract on behalf of their schools;
- Ian Morgan asked if there was an opportunity for the Early Years sector to benefit from the Energy Team procurement service?
- Ian Gough agreed to work with Ian Morgan about options for the Early Years sector;
- Chris Connian asked for clarification in regard to the bill. Ian Gough explained that the bills had been worked out on the basis of charging £0.17pence kWh. Sarah Morgan clarified that bills would be different depending on schools having signed the contract or not;
- Carol Simpson stated that her school had not received an energy bill since October. Ian Gough agreed to investigate.

Councillor Bray suggested that the Energy Team work together with Debra Briault to ensure that the new contract contained the right information for schools.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) The presentation would be circulated to Schools Forum members; and
- 2) New contracts would include more details, including different scenarios to make it clearer for each individual school.

32 INCLUSION FUNDING

Jonathan Wilding, Safety Valve / SEND Consultant presented the Inclusion Funding report and the Safety Valve update. The following points were highlighted:

- The fund was used to support children who did not quite reach the threshold for an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP);
- £150k was allocated to this fund by WBC and approved by Schools Forum each year;
- Most of this fund (£110k) in the past few years had been passported to Addington School to support their outreach programme;
- £40k had been under-utilised every year;

- The feedback received from schools was that the requirements of the fund or terms of reference were not clear;
- There was consensus that the process and impact needed reviewing;
- The panel had renamed itself the Inclusion Group and there had been a change of chair;
- It had been agreed in principle that WBC would take responsibility for commissioning outreach support;
- A block of the funding was going to be retained to support children who were waiting to have their EHCP assessment through the High Needs Innovation Fund;
- One of the priorities was to create Inclusion Provision, this could be achieved with Nurture Bases at schools to help children access education;
- The proposed budget was:
 - £15k for newly arrived pupils – historically the spend on this had never been more than £13k
 - £45k for priority themes 2024/25 – with an indicative £15k per project
 - £50k for High Needs Innovation Capital Funding – with an indicative £5k for minor refurbishment and fixed equipment to create school Inclusion Bases /Nurture-based provision. (this would be approved as part of the new SEND Capital Programme within the Medium Term Financial Plan for 2024/25 and 2025/26)
- The proposal aimed to create a more impactful system by facilitating collaboration between schools and unlocking schools' creativity to innovate to address key challenges facing the system;
- It was not possible to facilitate this offer for Wokingham pupils attending schools outside of the area. The Panel agreed that non-Wokingham pupils living in Wokingham would be offered this support, and it was agreed that this was fair;
- Schools Forum endorsement was being sought, the fund was ready to be launched in February.

Ming Zhang stated that much work had been undertaken with schools to develop this innovative plan. It was more effective to develop support at schools that could benefit more pupils, rather than supporting individual pupils on a one to one basis. There was much support from schools for this model.

Schools Forum were in support of this model of work.

Jonathan Wilding shared a Safety Valve update presentation and highlighted the following points:

- The programme had been running for nine months, and there had been much development in terms of early intervention and demand management;
- The Vulnerable Learners Panel led to the development of the Inclusion Group;
- The newly appointed Area SENCO was starting this week. Three SENCOs would be recruited to work in this team one day a week;
- The slides contained a list of the developments and activities undertaken in the year;
- The DfE had given a lot of weight to Schools Forum's decision to transfer 0.5% of the Schools Block to the HNB;
- There was a movement in the right direction in relation to achieving a balanced budget;
- There had been a 15% reduction in the requests for assessments. Most request submitted by schools were being approved, most requests submitted by parents were being refused because it was believed that more help could be offered at early stages;

- The process of scrutinising the cessation of EHCPs when a young person finished education was being strengthened to ensure that the EHCP ceased at the appropriate time;
- Of note was the fact that now 51% of pupils with EHCPs were being supported in mainstream schools;
- The number of EHCPs was now in line with the target;
- The verbal DfE feedback had been positive, and it was anticipated that the DfE payments would continue to be received in accordance with the plan;
- One of the challenges, was the fact that the DfE had not yet responded to WBC's request to run the capital project for the two new free schools. It was believed that WBC was best placed to run this project and ensure timeliness;
- Another challenge was parental anxiety. There was an increase in the number of mediation meetings and tribunals. More work to enhance communication with parents was needed to change parental perception about the Safety Valve programme;
- Work was being undertaken to ensure that more contribution from Health was received;
- It was acknowledged that some waiting lists for Health services were very long, work was being undertaken with Health colleagues to address this issue.

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

- Councillor Pittock asked for more information about the challenges in relation to unlocking the financial help from Health;
- Jonathan Wilding explained that historically Wokingham had never received a high level of funding for the most complex cases. Much work was being undertaken with Health colleagues to address this issue, and there were some signs of progress;
- Debra Briault expressed concern that 97% of tribunals found in favour of parents. Jonathan Wilding explained that this was a national figure. It was preferable to avoid tribunals. There was an unbalanced view in favour of parental preference at tribunals, sometimes going against professional advice. However, there was an increase in the number of cases going to tribunals;
- Ming Zhang stated that great effort was being made to avoid tribunals and use mediation meetings instead. Mediation meetings (prior to tribunals) would become a legal requirement from September 2024;
- Sara Attra pointed out that not all mediation meetings could resolve the challenges. Many parents from outside Wokingham requested places at Addington, some of which through tribunal routes, and the school was full. Those cases would not be resolved through mediation meetings and there was a risk in relation to sufficient school places for Wokingham;
- Ming Zhang acknowledged that not all cases would be solved at mediation meetings, but there was an effort to minimise cases going to tribunals.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Schools Forum endorsed the implementation of the Inclusion Fund; and
- 2) Schools Forum would continue to receive regular updates on the progress of the Safety Valve programme, in particular the risks.

33 2023-24 HIGH NEEDS BLOCK BUDGET UPDATE

The 2023/24 High Needs Block (HNB) Budget Update was presented by Katherine Vernon.

Some of the detail was still being worked on, however it was positive to report that the allocation was £1.1 million more than last year. That would help to mitigate the shortfall created by the 0.5% transfer from the Schools Block (the projections had been made using 1% transfer).

The HNB Task and Finish Group would meet in a couple of weeks to discuss the detail: the allocation, the DfE guidance and projected number of EHCPs. The Task and Finish Group would then make a recommendation for the March meeting of Schools Forum.

RESOLVED That the report be noted.

34 2024-25 PROPOSED SCHOOLS BLOCK BUDGET SUBMISSION

Katherine Vernon presented the 2024/25 Proposed Schools Block Budget Submission.

The final allocation was confirmed just before the Christmas break, so the team had worked very hard in a short space of time. The figures were generally in line with what had been anticipated. There was some variation in pupil numbers, but only £77k less than what had been anticipated.

The following points were highlighted:

- The report showed that there was a reduction in the amount set aside for the Growth Fund;
- A consultation had taken place with schools, and there had been no major comments;
- The Minimum Funding Guarantee (MFG) was set at 0.5%;
- The dis-application for the all-through school had been agreed and it was factored into the budget;
- Pupil Premium rates were increasing;
- Schools would still get the Teachers Pay Grant to cover the increase in teachers' pay and pensions;
- The report contained the detail of each school allocation. Some schools had received a reduction in funding due to a drop in pupil numbers. Those schools affected had asked for a reduction in their Published Admission Number (PAN), which would help;
- The report also showed each school's contribution to the 0.5% transfer. Those on the MFG were not contributing and secondary schools were contributing more.

Upon being put to the vote, Schools Forum voted unanimously in favour of the proposed budget.

RESOLVED that Schools Forum approves the 2024/25 proposed Schools Block Budget submission as presented in the report.

35 2024-25 FINAL CENTRAL SCHOOL SERVICES BLOCK (CSSB)

Katherine Vernon presented the 2024/25 Final Central School Services Block.

The final allocation for licences had not yet been received. The table showed that 3% had been allocated for licences, and when the final figure was received this would be adjusted.

This fund consisted of a contribution towards the services that were provided centrally to schools.

Upon being put to the vote Schools Forum voted in favour of the proposed 2024/25 Central School Services Block Budget. Schools Forum would be informed of the final allocation at the next meeting.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) The 2024/25 Central School Services Block, as presented in the report, be approved; and
- 2) Schools Forum would be informed of the final allocation including licences.

36 2024-25 DRAFT EARLY YEARS BUDGET

Katherine Vernon presented the 2024/25 Draft Early Years Budget report.

The Early Years Task and Finish Group would meet next week to work through the different models with the funding for the next year.

The table in the report contained the allocations, including the funding for 9 months to 2 year olds allocation for working parents and disadvantaged 2 year olds. Because of this new funding the DfE required a head count every term to understand the take up.

There was a requirement to passport 95% of the funding to providers, and approval would be sought to keep 5% to fund services given to providers at the March meeting.

Ian Morgan informed that providers were requesting a unified rate for 2 year old working parents and disadvantaged parents, in order to make it easier for them to administrate it. There was agreement that unifying the rate was beneficial.

Ming Zhang stated that the increase in funding for 2 years old was a significant development. It was important to encourage parental take up and provide sufficiency of places, and this work required some added capacity.

Kerrie Clifford expressed concern that disadvantaged parents would not be as well informed as working parents about the funding, and may end up taking up all the places available before the disadvantaged parents found out about their entitlement. She wondered if there was merit in considering paying more for disadvantaged 2 year olds in order to encourage setting to hold places for them.

Ian Morgan stated that with the changes in funding, most of the funding received would be from the government and not from the private sector - he considered this to be a risk. There would be a significant increase in administrative work load for settings.

RESOLVED That the report be noted.

37 FORWARD PROGRAMME

The Forum considered and noted the Forward Programme of work and dates of future meetings as set out on Agenda page 41.

38 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Schools Forum was informed that this was Katherine Vernon's last meeting as she was leaving the Council.

Members of Schools Forum expressed their gratitude to Katherine Vernon for her work over the years and wished her well in the future.

Actions following Schools Forum 10 January 2024

- The Energy Team to re-consider the timing of bills for schools.
- Ian Gough to work with Ian Morgan in relation to procurement opportunities for the Early Years sector.
- Schools Forum to be updated on the Safety Valve risks