

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
SCHOOLS FORUM
HELD ON 13 MARCH 2024 FROM 10.00 AM TO 11.00 AM**

Schools Representatives

Brian Prebble (Chair)	Primary Head - Rivermead Primary - Vice Chairman (Bellevue Place Education Trust)
Liz Woodards	School Business Manager - Hawkedon Primary (Maintained)
Amanda Woodfin	Headteacher - Bulmershe School (Corvus Learning Trust)
Phil Sherwood	Primary Academy Head - Sonning C of 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 (Vice-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
Angela Blogg, Schools Finance Manager
Al Moore, Finance Business Partner, Children's Services
Emma Shrimpton, Finance Business Partner, Children's Services
Jonathan Wilding, Safety Valve / SEND Consultant

Others Present

Councillor Prue Bray, Executive Member for Children's Services

39 APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was submitted from Julia Mead.

40 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 10 January 2024 were confirmed as a correct record.

Matters arising

Ian Morgan informed that he was getting a better rate from his current energy supplier than the rate offered by WBC, therefore he was not going to pursue the option offered by the Council.

41 DECLARATION OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

42 2023/24 REVENUE MONITORING REPORT MARCH 2024

Angela Blogg, the new Schools Finance Manager, was welcomed to the meeting.

Al Moore, Finance Business Partner for Children's Services presented the 2023/24 Revenue Monitoring report.

The schools financial position had not changed significantly since the last meeting of Schools Forum.

There had been a revision of spend in the Growth Fund and £1.4m was being carried forward to next year.

A deficit of £12.1m was being forecast, this represented a cumulative deficit of £19.6m. These numbers took into account the Safety Valve funding received from the DfE. The pressure continued to be from the High Needs Block (HNB).

The rate of increase in the number of Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) was decreasing but the cost of plans was still higher than what was desired.

There was a risk in relation to funding expected from Health. The Council was aware of this risk and conversations were taking place at high levels to find a solution.

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

- The Chairman asked when the funding from Health was expected to come through?
- Ming Zhang, Assistant Director for Education and SEND explained that negotiation were taking place between senior leaders from the Council and Health Integrated Care Board (ICB). This was being taken very seriously and it was work in progress. Schools Forum would be kept informed of any progress;
- Emma Shrimpton, Finance Business Partner explained that it was unlikely that the funding from Health would come through this year, but Officers were working hard to secure this funding as soon as possible. The expected amount was around £900k.

Schools Forum asked for an update at the next meeting on the progress of negotiations with Health.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) The report be noted; and
- 2) Schools Forum will receive and update on the progress of negotiations with Health about funding.

43 FINAL 2024/25 HIGH NEEDS BLOCK BUDGET

Al Moore presented the Final 2024/25 HNB Block Budget report. He explained that this had been a challenging budget to set.

He highlighted the following points:

- There was a requirement to pass an additional grant of 3.4% to special schools, PRUs and hospital school settings;

- The hourly rates and bandings were being kept the same due to the financial pressures;
- The budget was in line with the one submitted to the DfE, with the addition of the 0.5% Schools Block transfer and a top slice from the Early Years Budget;
- It was hoped that the new resource spaces being created would help to offset some of the costs of misplacements;
- It was hoped that the effect of the many measures being undertaken to contain cost would start to be felt later in the year;
- The deficit position was now at £10.2m.

Sara Attra asked if other local authorities were also not increasing their banding? If Wokingham was not increasing its hourly rates, it would not be possible to increase the charge to pupils from other local authorities, the top up rates, and this could create an inequality.

Al Moore was aware of this potential issue and was in discussions with colleagues about it. He was going to do some research with his counterparts in other local authorities to gain a better understanding of the situation and would report back to Schools Forum.

Members pointed out that independent and non-maintained schools were increasing their top-ups and uplifts, and part of the reason for the deficit was that this increase had been forecast to be lower than what it actually was. It was not realistic to forecast a 2.5% increase when in reality independent schools would ask for more.

Officers stated that the commissioning team was negotiating very hard to obtain the best possible rates.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) The report be noted; and
- 2) Schools Forum would receive an update on the research about top-up and uplifting costs in neighbouring local authorities.

44 DSG MANAGEMENT PLAN / SAFETY VALVE UPDATE

Jonathan Wilding, Safety Valve / SEND Consultant share a presentation and highlighted the following points:

- Benchmarking of HNB spending was being undertaken;
- Schools and the local authority were continuing to work in partnership to co-produce HNB spending plans;
- The demand for EHCPs was on course with projections, but the financial pressures were not reducing as fast as expected;
- The current banding system was based on hourly rates. Many areas had moved away from this system as it offered limited flexibility around delivery arrangements;
- There were 50 levels of banding with no consistency in the system;
- The first level of funding in Wokingham started at £4k, this was much higher than in other areas;
- There were fewer EHCPs per head of population in Wokingham, but the spend per head of population was higher than in other areas;

- There were low levels of pupils receiving SEN support in schools, with inconsistencies in what different schools considered in their SEN register;
- Wokingham was historically a low investor in early stages intervention. It was recognised that intervening late was costing more money;
- There was an uneven distribution of EHCPs in schools in the borough;
- It was good that a high proportion of EHCPs were being supported in mainstream schools;
- An effort was being made to review the banding system and make it simpler and fairer;
- A new banding system had already been developed for Oakbank School, which would be used as framework for the review;
- There was no new money in the system, so there would be some winners and losers, but there would certainly be more equity and fairness in the system;
- The work was moving apace and had to be undertaken in partnership with schools;
- Neighbouring authorities were keen to take places in the new specialist schools, so it was important to ensure that the process to ascertain which children needed the places in specialist schools and which children could be supported in mainstream schools was thorough;
- It was hoped that the model would be ready by September;
- Wokingham was still under the Accelerated Progress Plan (APP) following the 2019 SEND Area Inspection;
- In relation to the development of the new SEND Strategy, two workshops with Health had been held which were helpful. The sign off was expected to take place in June.

Phil Sherwood asked what would happen with current EHCPs in relation to the change from hours led to needs led focus. Jonathan Wilding explained that this was still to be modelled, but there would not be any drastic changes as this would not be beneficial. Any changes would be agreed in partnership with schools.

Phil Sherwood stated that there was a general understanding amongst school leaders that a change was needed in order to guarantee financial sustainability in the future.

Amanda Woodfin, stated that her school had a high number of pupils with EHCPs and offered to join the group discussions. Officers welcomed her offer.

Sara Attra stated that Addington School had a simple banding system that worked very well. However, she expressed concern over the high number of tribunals relating to pupils from other local authorities, which could result in places going to out of borough pupils. She stated that schools currently did not have any legal support to prepare for these tribunals, and this was a risk in the system. She suggested that legal support should be given to schools to prepare for tribunals. It was important to make sure that the places being created would serve Wokingham pupils primarily.

Kerrie Clifford stated that more work was needed in relation to helping parents understand the changes and that the best way to support a child may not necessarily be in the form of 1-1 assistance. She believed that there were inconsistencies with the advice being given by case workers. She worried that these issues could cause more tribunal cases.

Jonathan Wilding explained that there had been a lot of churns in the SEND Team staffing recently, this was now stabilising. He agreed that enhancing communication with parents was essential.

Ming Zhang informed that the service was currently reviewing the Legal services commission, he would feed back to the Commissioning Team the comments raised for consideration in this review.

Members thanked Jonathan Wilding for his presentation and asked that it be shared with the secondary and primary schools federations. Officers agreed to share the presentation with school leaders.

Liz Woodards noted that hourly rate had not changed, however staff salaries was increasing (by 20% in the last 2 years and an expected 4% or more this year), and this would put pressure on schools' budgets. Officers acknowledged the difficulties and the budget pressures on schools.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) The DSG Management Plan and Safety Valve update be noted; and
- 2) The presentation would be shared with primary and secondary school leaders.

45 2024/25 FINAL EARLY YEARS BLOCK BUDGET

Al Moore presented the 2024/25 Final Early Years Block Budget report.

A key change was the new entitlement for 2 year-olds and nine month olds. 2024. The new rates were as stated in the report contained in the Agenda.

The Task and Finish Group met in December and agreed that to a 4.75% top slice. This equated to a contribution of £333K to the HNB. The total cost of the service was £545k.

Ian Morgan suggested that the report should include the compliance on each top slice collum. Al Moore agreed to look into that.

Ian Morgan pointed out that it was important to monitor the activity in this Block, as the amount of money would increase in the next few years and the ability to top slice and help the Early Years HNB would change.

Upon being put the vote, Schools Forum unanimously voted to approve the 2024/25 Early Years Budget.

RESOLVED That the 2024/25 Early Years Budget, as set out in the report be approved.

46 FORWARD PROGRAMME

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

The membership update was added to the July meeting.

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Actions following Schools Forum on 13 March 2024

- To receive an update on the progress of negotiations with Health about funding.

- To receive information about the top-slicing uplift in relation to neighbouring local authorities.
- In relation to the Early Years report - to include the top slice for each work stream.
- To add Schools Forum Membership Update to the July meeting.