

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
SCHOOLS FORUM
HELD ON 17 MARCH 2021 FROM 10.30 AM TO 12.15 PM**

Schools Representatives

Carol Simpson	School Business Manager - Colleton Primary
Emma Clarke	Primary Head - Farley Hill Primary
Corrina Gillard	Primary Head - Emmbrook Infant
Brian Prebble	Primary Head - Rivermead Primary - Vice Chairman
Luke Henderson	Primary Academy Head - Sonning C of E Primary
Julia Mead	School Business Manager - St Sebastian's CE Primary
Ben Godber	Academy Head - Bohunt School
Derren Gray	Academy Head - Piggott School
Paul Miller	Governor - St Crispins - Chairman
Shirley Austin	Academy Head - Forest School
Sian Lehrter	School Business Director - The Holt School
Sara Attra	Special School Head - Addington School
Liz Woodards	School Business Manager - Hawkedon Primary
Amanda Woodfin	Headteacher - Bulmershe School
Iain Thomas	Pupil Referral Unit Deputy Headteacher - Foundry College

Non School Representatives

Kerrie Clifford	Maintained Nursery Head - Ambleside Centre
Ian Morgan	Early Years Representative
Graham Howe	Wokingham Borough Council
Sal Thirlway	Assistant Director Learning Achievement and Partnerships

Also Present

Luciane Bowker, Democratic & Electoral Services Specialist
Carol Cammiss, Director of Children's Services
Sarah Morgan, Head of Development, Commercial Property
Lynne Samuel, Senior Finance Specialist
Katherine Vernon, Schools Finance Manager

40 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were submitted from Ginny Rhodes and Amanda Woodfin. Amanda was able to join the meeting for the last item and was substituted during the meeting by Chris Coniam.

The Chairman expressed sadness that Jay Blundell had recently passed away. He stated that she had been a much valued member of Schools Forum and would be missed by all.

41 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 13 January 2021 were confirmed as a correct record and would be signed at a later date by the Chairman.

41.1 Matters Arising Update

Insurance for maintained schools

Lynne Samuel, Senior Finance Specialist stated that the insurance arrangements for maintained schools had been revised for the 2021/22 financial year and was no longer a de-delegated item. She pointed out that the Risk Protection Arrangement (RPA) was offered by the Department for Education (DfE) and the Council was not able to offer a cheaper option through its commercial arrangements.

Lynne Samuel stated that insurance previously funded through the de-delegated route has been rolled together with contents insurance to offer a 'core' offer to maintained schools. This had not altered the insurance options available to schools in any way but had allowed a per pupil charging basis. Pupil numbers used were as per the October 2020 census.

Lynne Samuel stated that passing on the actual charge would have offered a per pupil cost to the 2021/22 financial year of around £38, a slight reduction for most schools on current equivalent charge, but still a higher cost than if schools chose to join the RPA. If a significant number of schools choose an alternative insurance, this will have financial implications for the Council, since the current contract runs until 2023. In view of this, an agreement has been reached so that a lower cost would be offered to schools, with the Council effectively subsidising the rate for the next two years through the use of insurance reserves. A charge of £26 per pupils has been set for the new 'core' insurance offer. Whilst this is still higher than the RPA, it is hoped that this gives schools a more cost effective offer, particularly where they value the support of the Council on insurance matters. It was not yet known how many schools were going to take up the Council's insurance, but it looked likely to be 50% of schools.

The Chairman expressed concern that the Council's insurance would be out of funds until 2023, he recommended that an effort be made to at least recover some of the funds to be paid to the insurance company. Lynne Samuel agreed to look at options around this issue.

School Admissions Task and Finish Group

Sal Thirlway, Assistant Director Learning Achievement and Partnerships stated that the first meeting had taken place and the Terms of Reference had been agreed with minor tweaks. He would circulate the Terms of Reference to Schools Forum members.

The work programme was being developed and would include a timeline of the cyclical work undertaken by school admissions and Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) process for school admissions arrangements.

Sal Thirlway stated that a review of the Fair Access Protocol was currently being undertaken and a consultation was open for comments until 12 April.

Sal Thirlway informed that a School Admissions and School Transport Manager had recently been appointed.

SEND Strategy

The Chairman stated that questions in relation to the SEND Strategy had been collated and sent to Children's Services. Sal Thirlway acknowledged receipt of the questions and would be circulating the answers to Schools Forum.

42 DECLARATION OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

43 2020/21 REVENUE MONITORING REPORT

The 2020/21 Revenue Monitoring report was presented by Katherine Vernon, Schools Finance Manager.

Katherine Vernon stated that an in-year deficit of £2.86 million was projected, with the budget pressure continuing to be within the High Needs Block (HNB). Taken with the brought forward deficit of £3.36 million, a forecast cumulative deficit of £6.22 million was projected to 31 March 2021.

Katherine Vernon confirmed that this represented an adverse movement of £109k on that reported at the last meeting of Schools Forum. The main movements were due to:

- An update to forecast to reflect uplifted Children and Young People In Therapy (CYPIT) contract cost; and
- Other costs such as cost of tutoring, Direct Payments and Personal Budgets being higher than previously forecast. A review of expenditure in this area continues to be part of understanding the impact of Covid.

RESOLVED That the report be noted.

44 2020/21 CONTINGENCY UPDATE

Katherine Vernon presented the 2020/21 Contingency Update report and stated that there had been no activity this year, with no allocation made.

Katherine Vernon stated that this fund would be carried forward to the next year and that schools would not have to contribute to the fund in the next financial year.

Katherine Vernon stated that the head count for Early Years had just been received for this term so it would now be possible to say how much of the provider fund had been used, this would be reported at the July meeting.

Ian Morgan asked what was the potential recoupment figure for this year. Katherine Vernon stated that whatever hours were used for this year would be paid for. It was anticipated that the hours had gone down so there may be a large recoupment.

The Chairman pointed out that it had been agreed that the Contingencies report would always include Early Years. He also suggested including the Growth Fund contingency for regular review during the year.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) The report be noted; and
- 2) Future contingency reports would include information about Early Years and Growth Fund

45 2021/22 EARLY YEARS BLOCK BUDGET

Ian Morgan stated that the Early Years Task and Finish Group had met and discussed the 2021/22 Budget. Concerns had been raised that the 2020 census data was being used to calculate the Budget for 2021/22, however the latest head count was likely to be significantly lower. He was concerned therefore that this was not a realistic Budget if the head count proves to be lower than the 2020 census data.

Katherine Vernon offered to go through the figures in more detail with Ian Morgan outside of the meeting.

Kerry Clifford stated that the Early Years Task and Finish Group had agreed in principle to the 5% top slice, however she pointed out that some providers may find it difficult to budget.

The Chairman suggested that the Task and Finish Group discuss further information as it becomes available and provide Schools Forum with an update at the next meeting.

Ian Morgan wished it be recorded that he expressed concern over a potential overspend because the Budget was not balanced. He recognised the additional difficulties this year due to the pandemic.

Ian Morgan also wished to it be recorded that he questioned the 5% top slice, he wondered if this was required and if it could be less.

Lynne Samuel stated that the Council was trying to minimise risks as much as possible, however there were no guarantees and these were unusual times. She also stated that the Council used the 5% top slice to enhance and fund its services to the children.

Upon being put to the vote Schools Forum approved the recommendations contained in the report, including the centrally retained element of 5% of the 2021/22 Early Year's Budget.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Schools Forum approves the centrally retained element of 5% of the 2021/22 Early Year's Budget, in line with the current year, which will be used to fund the associated statutory duties of the Local Authority;
- 2) Schools Forum notes the proposals to increase the current hourly rates paid to all providers by 8p per hour for 2 year olds, and 6p per hour for 3 and 4 year olds; and
- 3) The Early Years Task and Finish Group will discuss further information when this becomes available and report back to Schools Forum.

46 2021/22 HIGH NEEDS BLOCK BUDGET

Lynne Samuel presented the 2021/22 High Needs Block (HNB) Budget report. Some of the points made during her presentation are listed below:

- The report contained detailed information to enable Schools Forum to understand the activity within the HNB, in order to make a decision on the 2021/22 Budget;
- There had an uplift in funding from the DfE which had increased the HNB allocation by £2.28 million. In addition, there was the transfer of 0.5% from the Schools Block into the HNB;
- In line with the national context, in Wokingham demand for services continued to outstretch resources;
- The plans to develop and increase the number of placements within the borough continued;

- It was recognised that the funding for mainstream schools had remained static for a number of years and had been raised to support schools;
- Post-16 funding had remained the same and was going to be reviewed during the summer to ascertain if it was still appropriate;
- The review of resource bases continued;
- Special Schools funding was being reviewed yearly and incorporated inflation increases.

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

- Derren Gray asked that the figures relating to the take up of resource spaces (page 54 of the agenda) for this year and previous years be included in future reports; Lynne Samuel agreed to circulate this information with the minutes
- Lynne Samuel stated that the current position was as stated in appendixes B and C;
- The funding model for Chiltern Way School was detailed in the report;
- Lynne Samuel stated that the biggest challenge continued to be the financial cost to independent and non-maintained special schools, work was ongoing to develop more in-borough provision;
- Lynne Samuel stated that a review of Foundry College which aimed to ensure a strategy and delivery model were aligned with financial planning was ongoing;
- Lynne Samuel stated that in recognition of the significant financial challenges faced by Foundry College, and the timeline of the review to inform longer term budget planning, £400k has been earmarked from the 2021/22 HNB to support the revised operating model at Foundry. Drawdown of the funds would be overseen through programme governance in line with recommendations from the project group. However, the objective of this budget was to directly protect Foundry from falling into significant deficit as the year progresses;
- Lynne Samuel stated that the hospital education factor had increased by 8% for the 2021/22 financial year. Willow House was fully funded from the HNB;
- Lynne Samuel stated that the funding of £150k for the Inclusion Group was being retained for the 2021/22 financial year;
- Lynne Samuel stated that £300k had been earmarked from the HNB to support the SEND Innovation and Improvement Programme, this was being match funded by the Council's improvement programme;
- Lynne Samuel emphasized that reaching a balanced HNB Budget remained a challenge, with the number of EHCPs predicted to increase, a potential deficit of £2.54 million was being projected;
- Lynne Samuel stated that the report contained a link to a DfE consultation on the funding formula for 2022/23;
- In response to a question Lynne Samuel agreed to include the number of EHCPs and how much they cost in future reports.

The Chairman explained that the DfE did not allow for an unbalanced Budget to be submitted, therefore, column A of the report would be submitted to the DfE. However, it was known that a deficit of over £2 million was projected for the year.

Carol Cammiss confirmed that the senior leadership within the Council recognized the complexity of the HNB and seriousness of the deficit, and the responsibility in trying to reduce it. Carol Cammiss also confirmed that the Council had been made aware of the HNB deficit planned for 2021/22 and that the Council's Finance Director would write to Schools Forum confirming that understanding.

Derren Gray asked if there was an income from children out of the borough who were placed in our resource places. Lynne Samuel explained that this funding was received by resource spaces directly.

Members were pleased with the quality and format of the report, and in particular the non-finance data that reported planned and actual activity levels.

Due to the complexities involving HNB, Lynne Samuel offered to deliver a training session for members, this was agreed and would be organised at a later date.

Upon being put to the vote Schools Forum members voted in favour of the recommendations contained in the report and approved the 2021/22 High Needs Block Budget to be submitted to DfE.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Schools Forum approves the 2021/22 High Needs Block Budget as presented in the report; and
- 2) Schools Forum will continue to monitor the High Needs Block using the Forecast as the benchmark for the 2021/22 year.

47 2021/22 CENTRAL SCHOOL SERVICES BLOCK BUDGET

Katherine Vernon presented the 2021/22 Central School Services Block Budget.

Katherine Vernon stated that this fund had gone up by £9k. The increase was to cover the Teachers Pay and Pension Grant for centrally paid teachers that had been rolled out into the baseline funding. This was a contribution to the services provided and it covered under half of the total cost.

Upon being put to the vote Schools Forum was in favour of the proposal.

RESOLVED That Schools Forum approves the 2021/22 Central School Services Block Budget.

48 OAK TREE SEND SCHOOL, WINNERSH

Sarah Morgan, Head of Development Commercial Property presented the Oak Tree SEND School report.

Sarah Morgan stated that progress was being made in the development of the new SEND school. The site identified for the school was in Winnersh and this would be a shared provision between Wokingham and Reading. The school was expected to open in September 2022. There was a consultation open to the public about the school which would run until September.

RESOLVED That the update on the development of the new SEND School be noted.

49 FORWARD PROGRAMME

The Forum considered and noted the Forward Programme of work and dates of future meetings as set out on Agenda page 93.

Corrina Gillard asked that a review of the de-delegated item, which was scheduled for a decision at the December meeting, be started in good time with maintained schools.

Luciane Bowker, Democratic and Electoral Services specialist informed that the Coronavirus Act 2020 provision for virtual meetings was due to come to an end in May. Currently, it was not certain if the July meeting would be held virtually, face to face or in a hybrid format; Schools Forum would be informed as soon as possible.

50 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Amanda Woodfin expressed concern over the school admissions allocations for this year and submitted the following questions:

1. A formal response regarding why we have found ourselves in this position with admissions, the week before the national offer day, when a primary bulge has been noted by Piers Brunning in the last academic year and this.
2. For transparency, an explanation of the decision making around as to which schools and why were requested to take additional students when not all schools were full.
3. Please can the LA confirm that they met their statutory deadline of EHCP placement, if not, please can the LA confirm that all EHCP in year 6 have now been placed for September 2021?
4. It is critical that schools understand the population data in order to financially plan, as we know financial planning impacts everything. Without the regular consultation of an Admissions group there has been a general lack of information and therefore lack of working in partnership. Please can the LA provide the Primary admissions data as soon as possible in order to support schools budget planning going forward and assure that the sharing of data will be one of its top priorities going forward.
5. Sadly, the local media seem to be inferring that Academies are to blame for the current admission issues. Obviously the LA are not responsible for media coverage however, please can schools be reassured that Elected Members have been brief accurately.

Shirley Austin asked to add the following question:

6. Please can the LA explain why Wokingham choose to delay the sharing of names and contact details of students immediately after National Offer Day.

Sal Thirlway agreed to submit a response to these questions by Easter.

Response to questions raised at the Schools Forum meeting on 17 March 2021

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