

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
SCHOOLS FORUM
HELD ON 7 DECEMBER 2022 FROM 10.00 AM TO 11.34 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
Ali Brown	Primary Head - Nine Mile Ride Primary
Julia Mead	School Business Manager - St Sebastian's CE Primary
Derren Gray	Academy Head - The Piggott School
Andy Hinchcliff	Academy Head - St Crispin's School
Paul Miller	Trustee - The Circle Trust - Chairman
Shirley Austin	Academy Head - The Forest School
Debra Briault	Secondary Academy School Representative
Sara Attra	Special School Head - Addington School
Phil Sherwood	Primary Head - Sonning C of E Primary
Chris Connian	School Business Manager – Bulmershe School

Non School Representatives

Morag Malvern	Wokingham Borough Council
Sal Thirlway	Assistant Director for Learning and Partnerships

Also Present

Luciane Bowker, Democratic & Electoral Services Specialist
Lynne Samuel, Finance Business Partner - Children's Services
Carole Vernon, Acting Principal Education Welfare Officer
Katherine Vernon, Schools Finance Manager
Jonathan Wilding, Programme Manager SEND

13 APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was submitted from Paul Gibson and Amanda Woodfin. Amanda Woodfin was substituted by Chris Connian.

14 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 12 October 2022 were confirmed as a correct record and would be signed by the Chair at a later date, subject to the amendment below.

Amendment: That Chris Connian be added to the list of attendees.

Matters arising

Consultation with schools – Katherine Vernon, Schools Finance Manager informed that a consultation with schools took place in November. Meetings with the Schools Block Task and Finish Group had taken place to agree the wording of the consultation.

There had been a glitch with the consultation, which schools were made aware of, 14 schools had already responded by the time the glitch was identified and seven responded again after the correction was made.

There had been a greater rate of response this year at 58%, compared to last year with a 43% rate of response.

The Chairman urged Officers to be prepared for the consultation and ready with the results in time for the July meeting next year, so to avoid the situation that happened this year.

The Chairman asked that an effort be made to improve schools participation in the consultation next year.

Early Years Clawback – the Early Years Task and Finish Group was still to meet and discuss the potential establishment of a Hardship Fund. Lynne Samuel, Finance Business Partner – Children’s Services confirmed that the allocation for Early Years for the next year was not yet known, but this would be considered as part of the Budget setting process.

The Chairman expressed frustration that the Early Years Task and Finish Group had not met yet, and urged Officers to organise a meeting as soon as possible, ahead of the January meeting when the Budget was going to be approved. He added that although the allocation was unknown, the Hardship Fund could be discussed. Lynne Samuel agreed to prioritise this work.

Ian Morgan informed that providers were indeed asking for information about the Hardship Fund. He asked that the information about the Early Years allocation be passed on as soon as this was available. Officers agreed that they would contact Early Years colleagues with information as soon as they could.

Oaktree School – Sal Thirlway, Assistant Director for Learning and Partnerships informed that the school would not open for all year groups in September 2023. The school would initially open for KS1 (Early Years) and KS3, then incrementally year on year until full.

15 DECLARATION OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

16 HNB / DSG MANAGEMENT PLAN & SAFETY VALVE UPDATE

Sal Thirlway explained that the Designated Schools Grant (DSG) Management Plan and the Safety Valve were essentially the same plan. However, the continuation of the Safety Valve was dependent on the Council being able to reach an agreement with the Department for Education (DfE).

Jonathan Wilding, Programme Manager SEND presented the report and highlighted the following points:

- Wokingham was one of a number of local authorities with a significant deficit in the High Needs Block (HNB);
- The first meeting of the Safety Valve took place in October, when an initial management plan was presented to the DfE;
- There had been differing opinions between Wokingham and the DfE with regards to the growth in demand projections. The DfE believed that Wokingham’s projections were overly pessimistic. Consequently, the projections were readjusted, but even with the more optimistic projection (lower rate of growth in demand), a still significant growth was anticipated;
- Mitigation focussed on:
 - Demand reduction – support for SENCOs, early intervention

- Demand management
- Cost management
- SEND sufficiency
- Cessation of plans and planning for adulthood
- There were currently 17 different work streams being developed;
- There had been a meeting with the DfE in early December, where progress had been made and a proposal was presented. However, there was still some work to be undertaken to address an in-year deficit of between £2.6 million - £3.8 million by the end of the five year period (2027-28);
- Discussions were underway with WBC Health team to support the mitigation arrangements, especially in relation to early intervention;
- A Vulnerable Learners Panel was being piloted – this was to address short term financial support needs at an early stage (potentially reducing the need for escalation to an application for an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP));
- Review of banding framework – currently there was no clear and consistent methodology in the levels of plans. The plan was to work with schools to agree the levels of plans to avoid the need for top-ups.

Jonathan Wilding informed that the Council was asking the DfE to agree to a five or six year plan, as it was unachievable to reach a balanced Budget in three years as they had proposed.

The Chairman asked what were the direct implications for the 2023/24 Budget and what was the trajectory of the Budget before 2027/28. Jonathan Wilding explained that most of the more immediate impact was in relation to early intervention, improved and enhanced outreach offer. Creating more capacity within the borough would take more time to achieve. The opening of Oaktree School would start to have an impact from September 2023.

In response to a question, Jonathan Wilding explained that a lot of the short term work was in relation to suppressing demand, any significant decrease in the deficit would be seen at a later stage in the plan. Creating more provision in the borough would require investment – invest to save. He emphasized that it was important not to cut back on essential services as this could backfire.

RESOLVED That the report be noted.

17 2022/23 REVENUE MONITORING REPORT

Katherine Vernon presented the 2022/23 Revenue Monitoring report. She informed that there had been an increase in the in-year deficit of £714k since the last meeting of the Forum. There had been a reduction of £210k in the Schools Block and an increase of £925k in the HNB. The overall predicted cumulative deficit was now £16.5 million.

Most of the reduction in the Schools Block was related to the Growth Fund, classes that there were anticipated to open had not opened in this financial year. The classes were expected to open in the next financial year.

The following points were highlighted during the presentation:

- An increase in the mainstream schools top ups for SEND was expected;
- An increase in the funding for the Impaired Hearing Unit at Emmbrook had been agreed, following a cost review with the school;

- There had been an increase in the number of pupils being placed in specialist out of borough settings;
- There had been a reduction in the number of post-16 places;
- There was further risk in relation to a large number of pupils currently placed in mainstream schools who were waiting for specialist provisions;
- It was possible that there would be an increase of between £200k and £400k in the HNB before the end of the financial year.

The Chairman noted that this represented an in-year activity deficit of around £2 million which had not been possible to be predicted one year ago.

Katherine Vernon added that there was no variance in either the Early Years Block or the Central Block.

Lynne Samuel thanked the Chairman for allowing, on this occasion, for the reports to be circulated after the publication of the agenda. She shared Appendix C, which contained details of the activity, this would be circulated with the minutes.

Lynne Samuel informed that Wokingham had responsibility for funding 1,650 EHCPs, of those, 1,400 attracted top-ups. The breakdown with various graphs was shown in the appendix (attached).

Work was being undertaken with the Business Change Team to use the Power BI tool. This tool would enable better use of the data, and a more dynamic presentation of cost and activity data to Forum. In particular, taking into account the different levels of banding and not just the number of pupils.

The Chairman asked that a Christmas tree chart be included in the next report for the cost elements.

RESOLVED That the report be noted.

18 2023/24 HIGH NEEDS BLOCK BUDGET UPDATE

The 2023/24 HNB Budget update report was presented by Lynne Samuel. She explained that discussions had taken place early in the Budget setting process, in particular with settings that were fully funded by the HNB.

The Safety Valve programme had informed the Council that an additional £1 million would be allocated for the HNB for the next year, as a result of the Autumn Statement, over and above the provisional allocation announced in the summer.

The key Budget setting considerations were as listed in the report. Inflation was one of the very important considerations - creating pressures for settings.

As previously mentioned, a review of the funding for Emmbrook's Hearing Impairment Unit was being undertaken, recognising the additional costs of the unit.

In relation to Addington, it was recognised that the school had not been receiving inflation uplifts. The school was requesting an uplift of 8% to make it financially sustainable.

The Foundry review was continuing, with a particular focus on working out a model of funding primary aged pupils with the changes in the de-delegated Budget.

Further discussions would take place with the HNB Task and Finish Group with more details to be shared from the work of the Safety Valve.

The local authority had submitted a request for disapplication of 0.5% from the Schools Block to transfer to the HNB. The result of this was not yet known, however the plan which was submitted to the Safety Valve assumed that the disapplication was confirmed.

In response to a question Lynne Samuel stated that, based on the current best estimate, the projected deficit for next year would likely not fall below £6 million.

Sara Attra informed that the increase in the cost of support staff pay came as a surprise, and cost Addington an additional £377k for the year. This was on top of the teachers' salary increase which cost the school £176k. This represented additional costs of over half a million pounds which were unexpected.

Sara Attra expressed concern that the HNB Task and Finish Group had not yet met and the Budget setting date was fast approaching. Lynne Samuel ensured that she would be sending a timeline of dates for meetings very shortly.

The Chairman pointed out that the use of the word 'share' did not convey the desire to co-produce and work together. He emphasised that the Task and Finish Group was established to co-operate and use the expertise of the school leaders taking part in it. Lynne Samuel apologised and stated that was not the intention of the language used, and agreed that the intention was very much to work together with school leaders.

RESOLVED That the report be noted.

19 2023/24 DRAFT SCHOOLS BLOCK BUDGET

The 2023/24 Draft Schools Block Budget report was presented by Katherine Vernon. She informed that significant work had been undertaken with the Task and Finish Group to find affordable models. The models had been presented for consultation in November.

Four academies had not shared their data with the local authority, as a result there had been a delay in receiving the final October census data. This data was necessary in order to work out the final allocation. This data had now been received, through the DfE, and the work could be finalised. The Task and Finish Group would meet to discuss the final allocation and the results of the consultation.

Based on the previous data, the assumption had been that Wokingham would be in receipt of £1.5 million of Growth Funding for 2023/24, with £320k held in reserves.

The results of the consultation were as stated in the report. It was recognised that more work was needed in explaining to schools what certain concepts meant, as questions had been submitted asking for further clarifications.

Katherine Vernon explained that there would be fewer choices next year as the local authority moved further towards the National Funding Formula.

In response to a question Katherine Vernon stated that there were four academy schools with whom there was no sharing agreement with the local authority. The Chairman offered to help with this issue outside of the meeting.

Lynne Samuel pointed out that all schools had submitted informal information in September when asked, it was important to note that it was the official October census information that had been lacking from some academies. She thanked all schools for sending the early information in September.

In response to a question Officers informed that as part of the disapplication process, the DfE was informed of Schools Forum's views and the consultation with schools.

RESOLVED That the report be noted.

20 2023/24 PROPOSED DE-DELEGATION BUDGET

Katherine Vernon presented the 2023/24 Proposed De-delegation Budget report. She informed that following a review in line with that agreed through the Task and Finish Group last year, the recommendation was to retain the Maternity Cover and the Contingencies fund of the De-delegation Budget.

The same methodology used last year was used for next year. Basing the calculation on a 4-year rolling average for maintained schools, the per pupil rate came out at £26.50 per pupil. It was recommended to hold the rate for 2023/24 at £27.06 which allowed for an element of inflation.

Therefore, the proposed De-delegated Budget for 2023/24, based on £27.06 per pupil, was £218k for Maternity Cover. No further de-delegation was requested for Contingencies, however £55k would remain held in reserves.

In response to a question Katherine Vernon clarified that it was the same cost for primary and secondary pupils.

Maintained primary and secondary schools only were asked to vote on this item, and there was unanimous approval.

RESOLVED That the 2023/24 Proposed De-delegation Budget be approved.

21 DRAFT 2023/24 CENTRAL SCHOOL SERVICES BLOCK BUDGET

Lynne Samuel presented the Draft 2023/24 Central School Services Block Budget report. She stated that she would adjust the report when the final amount was confirmed.

The final amount for licences, which was retained centrally by the ESFA was not yet known, an assumption of an uplift of 3% from the current amount had been made for the calculations. Based on this assumption there would be an additional £15k available from the Central Schools Block towards the cost of statutory duties undertaken.

The allocation received from the DfE was not sufficient to cover all the costs, and the Council used its general funds to cover the difference.

Schools Forum was being asked to note the draft proposed Central Schools Budget which, with the current assumptions, was £1,014,700. This would be distributed in the same way as last year with the balance of £15k applied to Statutory and Regulatory Duties. Should the final allocation and licence figure differ, then the corresponding adjustments would be made from the figure allocated to Statutory and Regulatory Duties.

Upon being put to the vote, members voted unanimously in favour of the recommendations.

RESOLVED That Schools Forum:

- 1) Notes the provisional 2023/24 budget allocation for the Central School Services Block (CSSB) of £1,014,700;
- 2) Notes the planning assumption made of a 3% uplift on government arranged licences to £149,600;
- 3) Approves the proposed budget allocation from the remainder of the CSSB as follows:
 - a. Statutory and Regulatory Duties £463,100
 - b. Education Welfare £117,000
 - c. Asset Management £49,000
 - d. Other Ongoing Duties £236,000
- 4) Approves that any further adjustment required following notification of the final CSSB allocation and licences for 2023/24 will be amended from (a) above.

22 SCHEME FOR FINANCING SCHOOLS

Katherine Vernon presented the Scheme for Financing School report. She explained that the changes were in line with national guidance and not as a result of local discretion, maintained schools only were required to vote to note the content of the report.

The three key sections of the Wokingham Scheme which had been updated were as follows:

- 1) The requirement for LA maintained schools to submit a 3-year budget forecast to the Local Authority by 31st May each year;
- 2) The requirement for LA maintained schools to submit a recovery plan to the Local Authority when their deficit rose above 5% at 31st March of any year;
- 3) Instead of taking out insurance, LA maintained schools may join the Secretary of State's Risk Protection Arrangement (RPA) for risks that are covered by the RPA.

Upon being put to the vote, maintained schools unanimously voted to approve the revised guidelines.

Subsequently it was recognised that the Special Schools, as maintained schools in the borough, were entitled to votes on maintained schools matters. Luciane Bowker, Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist would amend the presentation of the membership list to reflect this and avoid any future confusion.

RESOLVED That Schools Forum approved the amendments in the guidelines as described in the report.

23 EDUCATION WELFARE SERVICE

Sal Thirlway apologised for the delay in the delivery of the Education Welfare Service report.

Carole Vernon, Acting Principal Education Welfare Officer presented the report and highlighted the following points:

- The Education Welfare Service (EWS) was no longer a traded service, the EWS now worked with all schools in the borough, including independent schools;
- The EWS was currently holding two vacancies, and this presented challenges, the work had to be re-distributed and staff were holding large workloads;
- Each school had one allocated Education Welfare Officer (EWO), whom they could contact any time;
- This year there was a focus on persistent absenteeism, suspensions and pupils at risk of permanent exclusions, children missing in education and children on part-time timetables;
- The EWS took part in multi-agency work;
- Quick link guides to all the areas of EWS expertise were sent to schools over the summer. There were also webinars and network meetings;
- A new referral process had been put in place;
- The EWS did not have access to schools attendance data and there was no system in place to track attendance, this presented a challenge;
- There had been an increase in the number of Elective Home Education and children missing from education;
- It was difficult to find alternative provision and funding for pupils at risk of permanent exclusion;
- Work was ongoing to address the challenges, in particular the staff shortage.

The Chairman asked for clarification on the mention of 'studios' in the report. Carole Vernon explained that there were around 17 film studios in the area, with new ones opening too. This industry attracted young actors to work who required licences to be issued.

Members asked if the EWS charged for licences and whether this could fund the service. Carole Vernon informed that the EWS was exploring this idea, however this would be a nominal fee and wouldn't cover the service. This was because the majority of licences were for volunteers.

RESOLVED That the report be noted.

24 FORWARD PLAN

The Chairman asked that for the 11 January 2023 meeting:

- The word 'final' be changed to 'draft' for the HNB Budget and Early Years Budget;
- The Central School Services Block Budget was for information.

RESOLVED That the Forward Plan be noted and amended as agreed during the meeting.

Councillor Malvern informed that Wokingham had signed up to a lobbying group called F40, which was comprised of the lowest funded local authorities in the country. She agreed to bring an update on this at the next meeting.

The Chairman asked that a page be included in future agendas with the membership list of the various Task and Finish Groups.

Matters arising

- To include a Christmas tree chart for cost in the Revenue Monitoring report
- To move Special Schools in the membership list to make it clear that they are maintained schools
- To receive an update from Councillor Malvern on the work of the F40 lobbying group
- To include Task and Finish Groups membership lists in future agendas.

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