**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE SCHOOLS FORUM HELD ON 11 OCTOBER 2023 FROM 10.00 AM TO 11.13 AM**

**Schools Representatives**

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| Carol Simpson | School Business Manager - Colleton Primary |
| Nicky Taylor-Dickens | Headteacher - Willow Bank Infants |
| Amanda Woodfin | Headteacher - Bulmershe School |
| Corrina Gillard | Academy Primary Head - Emmbrook Infant |
| Julia Mead | Academy Primary rep – CFO – The Keys Academy Trust |
| Derren Gray | Academy Head - The Piggott School |
| Andy Hinchliff | Academy Head - St Crispin's School |
| Shirley Austin | Academy Head - The Forest School |
| Sara Attra | Special School Head - Addington School |

**Non School Representatives**

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

**Councillors present**

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| Prue Bray | Executive Member for Children's Services |

**Also Present**

Luciane Bowker, Democratic & Electoral Services Specialist
Jamie Conran, Head of SEND
Emma Shrimpton, Finance Business Partner Children's Services
Katherine Vernon, Schools Finance Manager
Jonathan Wilding, Safety Valve / SEND Consultant

**1 ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN**

Brian Prebble was elected Chairman for the 2023/24 academic year.

**2 ELECTION OF VICE-CHAIRMAN**

Debra Briault was elected Vice-Chairman for the 2023/24 academic year.

**3 APOLOGIES**

Apologies for absence were submitted from Jenny Comber, Phil Sherwood and Liz Woodards.

**4 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 12 July 2023 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

Matters arising

The Chairman asked if Ian Morgan had been contacted about Early Years providers representation in the Borough Education Partnership (BEP). Ming Zhang, Assistant Director for Education and SEND would follow this up outside of the meeting.

**5 DECLARATION OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest.

## 6 MATTERS ARISING UPDATE

This item was covered during the discussions of other items in the agenda.

## 7 SCHOOLS FORUM MEMBERSHIP REVIEW 2023

This item was presented by Luciane Bowker, Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist and Brian Prebble, the Chairman.

An analysis of the number of pupils per schools and the types of schools had been undertaken, which showed that there had been an increase in the number of academy schools.

Schools Forum's membership should reflect the makeup of schools in the borough. As such, it was proposed that the number of maintained primary schools' representatives be reduced to three and that the number of primary academies representatives be increased by three.

It was generally agreed that the total number of 23 members should be retained and there were no other changes being proposed. It was highlighted that Schools Forum lacked a governor representative. Colleagues were urged to make an effort to approach governors with relevant expertise to join Schools Forum.

The Chairman welcomed the new members to Schools Forum, Nicky Taylor-Dickens, Jen Comber and Andy Hinchcliffe. He emphasised the need to recruit a governor representative to Schools Forum.

In relation to academies representation, Councillor Pittock suggested that there should be no over representation by one particular trust, there should be a variety of trusts with representation in Schools Forum.

Shirley Austin agreed with Councillor Pittock's suggestion and also asked that the name of the trust members represent be included in the membership list for clarity.

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

In relation to the Task and Finish Groups membership, the Chairman asked if members were willing to continue their participation. Those members that were present confirmed that they were willing to continue to work in the Task and Finish Groups. Members of the Early Years Task and Finish Group were not present and would be contacted to confirm their participation outside of the meeting.

In response to a question, it was clarified that the membership structure which was being adopted would continue for the entirety of the 2023/24 academic year.

**RESOLVED** That:

1) The new structure, as described in the report be adopted for the 2023/24 academic year;

2) Academy members will have the name of the trust they represent displayed in the membership list;

3) The membership of the various Task and Finish Groups will be retained as per the previous year; and

4) The Early Years Task and Finish Group members would be contacted to ascertain their participation in this year's work programme.

**8 2023/24 REVENUE MONITORING REPORT**

Katherine Vernon, Schools Finance Manager presented the 2023/24 Revenue Monitoring report. She introduced Al Moore, Finance Business Partner who would be working with schools' finance going forward.

Since the last report there had been an increase of £2m in the deficit, this was a movement caused by the High Needs Block (HNB). The reasons for the increase were outlined in the report.

Of note was the number of alternative provision for pupils still in mainstream schools who still required a special school place. There was an increase in the number of pupils that had to be placed in out of borough provisions and independent schools and two new expensive (Education Otherwise Than at School) EOTAS packages. In addition, the income received by the DfE was reduced due to the import/export adjustment.

The report also highted risks and opportunities, included in the Safety Valve programme. It was positive to note that the new Oaktree School had now opened and it had taken 25 Wokingham children, avoiding the need to send them to out of borough provisions. Also, the new Addington satellite school was due to open after the October half term and two new SEND schools were being planned to open in 2026. All those measures would increase local special school capacity.

In relation to the Early Years Block, the government had increased the funding by £0.44 for 3-4 year olds and by £2.59 for 2 year olds from September 2023. 100% of this additional funding will be passed to settings.

The clawback in the Early Years provider reserve fund had been much less than anticipated, and the difference would be passed on to settings this term.

There had been no variances in the Schools Block and Central Services Block.

Councillor Bray, Executive Member for Children's Services highlighted the fact that there was indication from the government that the HNB deficit would have to addressed in three years (despite the fact that this principle had not been applied in previous years). This was a difficult challenge, and one that had to be managed by schools and the Council together.

**RESOLVED** That the 2023/24 Revenue Monitoring report be noted.

**9 2024/25 DSG BUDGET UPDATE**

The 2024/25 Designated Schools Grant (DSG) Update report was presented by Katherine Vernon.

The DfE advised Wokingham Borough Council at the end of July 2023 what the primary and secondary units of funding for 2024/25 would be. The service was working on models of funding with this information.

There was a requirement to move closer to the National Funding Formula (NFF), as such there was less scope to move the budget locally to support schools. For example, in the past the lump sum had been kept artificially hight to support smaller schools, and this was become more difficult.

The report showed a comparison of the allocation for last year's with the next year. There had been an increase in the allocation for all blocks.

Carole Simpson asked for information about the recent reports in the media that had said that the government had produced wrong numbers to local authorities.

Katherine Vernon explained that from information received to date that it was the Minimum Per Pupil Funding that had gone down, not the other numbers as reported in the media. The tables contained in report (page 45 of the agenda) had been produced before this announcement. A new tool had been received to calculate the difference, it was anticipated that there would be a variance of 1% up or down for different schools.

Derren Gray asked if it was the least funded schools, those on the Minimum Funding Guarantee (MFG) that would be affected the most by the drop in the Minimum Per Pupil Funding? Katherine Vernon confirmed that this was the case, however she pointed out that they would be affected by only 1% or less.

Carole Simpson expressed concern that 1% was a large number for a school already running on a deficit budget. Katherine Vernon explained that everyone would still see an increase of 5% overall on average (rather than 6%). Carole Simpson stated that although this was an increase, costs had gone up.

Councillor Bray clarified that this was 1% of the increase, not the overall amount.

The Task and Finish Group had been working on models which assumed:

- Keeping the MFG at maximum allowable of 0.5%
- Not applying caps on gains, as there is no cap in the NFF
- The Free School Meals factor could be increased to £300

There results of the consultation were not yet ready for sharing, but there was an overall 80% agreement to the principles applied with the formula.

The disapplication request for the all-through school had to be submitted every year, and this would be actioned again this year.

As per Schools Forum request, Officers were looking at ways to help schools with falling roll numbers. This would be discussed with the Task and Finish Group and the findings would be presented to the December meeting.

Katherine Vernon asked schools to return the results of the October census as soon as possible to enable Officers to calculate the income for next year.

From September 2024 the Early Year’s free entitlement was going to extend to 9 months up to 2 year-olds. It was not certain what the new rate was going to be. The Early Years Task and Finish Group would work on modelling this later in the spring term.

A HNB Task and Finish Group would be set up for November to work on next year's budget.

**RESOLVED** That the 2024/25 Budget Update report be noted.

## 10 DSG MANAGEMENT PLAN / SAFETY VALVE UPDATE

Ming Zhang presented the DSG Management Plan / Safety Valve Update report.

During the presentation he made the following points:

- A two stage survey with schools had been carried out about the proposal to transfer 1% from the Schools Block to the HNB;
- The assumption of this transfer was part of the Safety Valve agreement with the DfE;
- There was a risk that the DfE may not continue its support with the Safety Valve programme, should this transfer not be agreed;
- There had not been a high number of responses received from the survey, however the results showed that schools were concerned about the potential negative effect of a 1% transfer in their own finances;
- The vast majority of secondary schools were in favour of the 1% transfer, but the majority of primary schools were against it;
- Schools had expressed that they understood the pressures and the reason for the request but were concerned about their financial situation. They asked that alternative solutions be sought;
- The Safety Vave programme had been agreed by the DfE with the assumption that there would be a 1% transfer from the Schools Block to the HNB, and a contribution from the Council. The DfE reviewed the programme every three months and they could withdraw from the agreement if the 1% transfer was not agreed;
- If the HNB deficit was not eliminated, through joint effort, it could escalate to £56 in the next five years, and the negative consequences to all involved would be enormous;
- A pragmatic solution needed to be found, and this challenge was to be addressed in partnership with schools, the local authority and health;
- In view of the fact that schools were unlikely to agree to a 1% block transfer, the possibility of reaching a compromise with a smaller contribution was being considered.

Jonathan Wilding, Safety Valve/SEND Consultant explained that since the publication of the agenda, conversations with colleagues had taken place which indicated that Schools Forum was unlikely to vote against the schools' consultation survey results. It was now understood that this option was not acceptable to schools, mainly because of affordability issues.

Taking into account the above mentioned issues, the local authority was reviewing the proposal and would be asking for 0.5% Schools Block transfer. It was believed that a bit more dialogue with schools was needed to secure schools' support before a decision could be made. It was suggested that an extraordinary Schools Forum meeting be set up in early November to decide this matter.

Councillor Bray explained that the local authority was asking for 1% transfer because that was the expectation placed on the local authority by the DfE (not because the local authority thought that schools could afford it). The Safety Valve programme included a £28m contribution from Council tax, £20m from the DfE to write off debt (this £20m could

only be used to write off debt) and the 1% transfer from the Schools Block for the next five years.

Councillor Bray expressed frustration that this situation had been caused by historical insufficient funding, Wokingham was the lowest funded local authority in the country. However, the DfE did not take this fact into account.

Councillor Bray went on to explain the potential consequences of the collapse of the Safety Valve programme. She explained that in three years' time the Council could be in a position to have to declare S114 if the Council was asked to pay the HNB deficit. Should that happen, commissioners would be sent in, and all the statutory services would stop, including all the help given to schools. Also, assets would have to be sold off, staff would have to be reduced, and the Council tax would have to go up.

She emphasised that the local authority was fully aware of the financial struggle that some schools were facing. However, the proposal would improve the SEND offer for the future, to the benefit of all schools.

Ming Zhang emphasised that it was important to demonstrate to the DfE that the schools and the Council were working in partnership to find a solution to this challenge.

Derren Gray believed that the Council contributed £1m towards Central Services, he asked if those services would be stopped or be significantly reduced if the Council declared S114?

Katherine Vernon confirmed that the Central Services Block did not fully cover the cost of the services provided, the Council covered the gap. She offered to find out the exact number for a better understanding of the implication of having the fund withdrawn. Derren Gray stated that having this information would help schools make an informed decision.

Carol Simpson stated that she understood the situation and agreed with the principles of the proposal. However, there were schools which had significant difficulties with their budgets and could not manage with less money.

Ming Zhang stated that there were 24 schools in the borough with MFG, and they were protected.

The Chairman stated that careful consideration should be taken, as the proposal would affect the next five years.

Katherine Vernon explained that there was a disparity in the system, in that some schools carried forward a surplus and others were in deficit; there was money in the system as a whole, but not where it was needed.

Emma Shrimpton, Finance Business Partner Children's Services stated that Officers were working with schools that were in financial difficulties to help them to find solutions. It was important, where possible, to identify challenges early to avoid going into a deficit position.

Carole Simpson stated that Katherine Vernon had met with her school and there had been no further suggestions to find a solution. The problem was the way the school was funded, the school had been on MFG for a number of years. Carole Simpson expressed

serious concern and stated that the school had to provide a minimum number of staff to teach the children.

Nicky Taylor-Dikens stated that her school was not under MFG but had been in deficit almost every year. They had just undertaken a re-structure and reduced the number of staff. She pointed out that infant schools needed a higher ratio of staff to children due to the children's age. The excel spreadsheet that she had received had asked her school for 1.4%, more than the 1% being discussed. She could not afford to accept this reduction in funding for her school. She also did not believe that Officers would be able to find ways to reduce the school's budget. She pointed out that there were some schools with large carry forward sums and this situation was not fair in her opinion.

Ming Zhang offered to meet with Nicky Taylor-Dickens and discuss her school's situation outside of this meeting. Nicky agreed and invited Ming to visit her school.

Councillor Pittock pointed out that in a S114 scenario, there would be no extra curriculum activities available for children, and less support for families in the borough, and he worried that schools would have to deal with the additional stress of children coming to school in not the best possible frame of mind to learn. He understood the financial struggles being faced by schools but urged schools to consider the 0.5% transfer proposal as there was no other solution to this funding problem. He worried about the consequences of not reaching an agreement.

Corrina Gillard stated that due to pay raises she had had to find an additional £44k (which had not been budgeted for) this year in her budget, and as a result had had to lay off staff. She had a significant number of children with SEND needs in her school, and she worried that if she had to further reduce the number of staff to meet 1% or 0.5%, she would lose staff as they would not be able to cope with the work. She believed that the situation was desperate for many schools in the borough.

Ming Zhang offered to meet with Corrina Gillard outside of the meeting.

Councillor Bray stressed that she understood the schools financial struggles, as she had been a school governor for over 20 years. However, the measures being proposed would help the situation long term, by offering the support needed to SEND children. She stated that the situation would become worse if a solution was not agreed collectively.

Councillor Bray acknowledged that there had been a history of mistrust from schools towards the Council. She explained that this money would not be used to pay debt, but to invest in services which would benefit schools. She hoped to rebuild the schools' trust and asked schools to consider the 0.5% transfer proposal which would be discussed at the extraordinary meeting. It was really important to reach an agreement and to work together.

The Chairman spoke on behalf of primary schools and stated that schools understood the proposal, however there was an immediate need to provide for the education of children with a sufficient number of staff.

It was proposed and agreed by Schools Forum members that an extraordinary meeting would be set up either on 6 or 8 November 2023 to discuss the proposal of a 0.5% transfer from the Schools Block to the HNB. In the meantime, further dialogue with schools about

this proposal would be undertaken. *Subsequently the meeting was set up for 6 November 2023 at 10am via Teams.*

Carole Simpson stated that some schools were in a position of having large amounts of carry forward funds, more than what used to be considered acceptable. She asked if this was being considered?

Katherine Vernon explained that this had been considered, however the Council could only direct a clawback from maintained schools, any clawback from academies would have to be determined by Schools Forum.

Shirley Austin urged caution and felt uncomfortable with the suggestion of clawing back funds from schools. She believed that it was unfair to penalise the schools that had worked hard to achieve a balanced budget.

Ming Zhang agreed that careful consideration should be taken. The Chairman stated that the focus should be on considering the request for 0.5% transfer.

In relation to the question raised earlier about having an independent Early Years provider representative in the BEP, Ming Zhang stated that it should read Borough Education Partnership, not *Berkshire* as written in the agenda papers. He informed that this appointment had not yet been made, but he would be looking to find the right representative to join BEP.

**RESOLVED** That an extraordinary Schools Forum meeting to discuss and decide the proposal of 0.5% Schools Block transfer to the HNB would be set up in early November 2023.

**11 SCHOOLS FORUM FORWARD PLAN 2023/24**

The Schools Forum Forward Plan of work for 2023/24 was noted.