



Schools Forum minutes

Minutes of the meeting of the Schools Forum held on Tuesday 21 March 2023 in The Oculus, Buckinghamshire Council, Gatehouse Road, Aylesbury HP19 8FF, commencing at 1.35 pm and concluding at 3.00 pm.

Members present

Mrs G Bull, A Cranmer, Ms J Freeman, Mr A Gillespie, Ms C Glasgow, Mr E Hillyard, Mr R Peters, Ms J Robertson, Mrs D Rutley, Mr A Sherwell and Ms E Stewart

Others in attendance

C Beevers, G Drawmer, S James, Ms C Marriott and E Williams

Apologies

Ms J Antrobus, Ms S Barcock-Wood, J Carter, Ms R Chapman, Ms N Lovegrove, Mrs J Male, Ms J Pearce, Mr K Shabbir, Ms F Smalley and Mr B Taylor

Agenda Item

1 Election of Chairman & Vice- Chairman

The meeting was informed that, as had been decided at the last meeting, there were co-chairs of the Schools Forum for the next round of meetings. Gaynor Bull would chair this meeting and the next meeting on 27 June 2023. Andy Gillespie would chair the meetings to be held on 10 October 2023 and 5 December 2023.

Janice Freeman had been appointed as the Deputy Chairman of the Schools Forum.

2 Apologies for Absence

Apologies had been received from Bradley Taylor, Jo Pearce, Jinna Male, Francesca Elam, Julia Antrobus, Sarah Barcock-Wood, Nicky Lovegrove and Khaiam Shabbir.

3 Declarations of Interest

There were none.

4 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

It was noted that one action from the Minutes relating to the terms of reference of the Schools Forum Funding Group would be reported to the June 2023 meeting.

RESOLVED –

That the Minutes of the meeting held on 17 January 2023 be approved as a correct record.

5 Revenue Budget Monitoring 2022-23

The Schools Forum received an update report on the current forecast for the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) budget for the 2022-23 financial year, based on the spend to 31 January 2023 (period 10). The overall Dedicated Schools Budget was currently projected to overspend by £0.29m as at the end of January, an adverse movement of £0.57m compared with the previous reported position.

The early years block was projected to underspend by £1.3m mainly due to reduced take up of places for 3 and 4 year olds. The reduced take up reflected children taking less hours and changes in working patterns of parents post Covid. The take up of places by vulnerable 2 year olds, however, had increased from 62% to 92%. It was likely that a proportion of this underspend would be clawed back by the DfE during the 2023-24 financial year. The amount clawed back would be determined by the number of children taking up places as at the January pupil census date.

A summary of the current forecast against the high needs block was attached as an appendix to the report. High needs budgets were forecast to overspend by £1.4m, an increase of £0.6m compared with the previous report. The forecast took into account the unallocated contingency of £1.7m and included pressures against the budgets for both independent and Buckinghamshire maintained and academy special schools, personal budgets and mainstream top ups, alternative provision and integrated therapies. The Schools block was currently projected to break even. The Central schools services block was projected to overspend by £0.13m due to pressures against the budget for Premature Retirement Costs as costs continue to exceed the available budget. There are also small overspends against the Admissions Team and the budget for copyright licences.

The meeting was informed that any variance against the DSG was to be managed through the DSG reserve which was ringfenced. The DSG deficit at the start of the 2022-23 financial year was £3.57m, the current forecast would cause the deficit to increase to £3.85m. Other adjustments to the DSG reserve including the drawdown of Growth Fund to fund pupils in new and expending schools, and a positive DfE adjustment to the Early Years block for 2021- 22, resulted in a forecast deficit of £4.12m at the end of the current financial year.

RESOLVED –

That the Revenue Budget monitoring forecast as at the end of January 2023 (Period 10) be NOTED.

6 Report of the Schools Specific Contingency Panel

The Schools Forum received an update report on the decisions of the Schools Specific Contingency Panel meeting held on 28 February 2023 for the FY 2022-23.

The budget for 2022-23 was £437,839 based on balances rolled forward from previous years. There was no de-delegation from schools in 2022-23. The group had considered applications from 13 schools totalling £421,974 and had agreed payments of £103,906. There was one claim where further evidence was required and this had been deferred to a future meeting.

All schools have been notified of the outcome of their requests. No appeal requests have been received, the Schools Forum would be updated of the outcome of any appeals in due course. Appendix 1 detailed anonymised applications and payments agreed for this financial year. Similar to previous years, successful bids included unforeseen staffing costs, pupil premium for traveller children and costs associated with additional pupils up to a maximum of 7/12 AWPU. Unsuccessful applications were those in which the case had not been made according to the Terms of Reference.

The meeting was also informed that the Schools Forum had previously agreed an amendment to the Terms of Reference for the contingency fund to enable claims for energy costs to be considered if schools are projecting an overall deficit for the financial year and were able to demonstrate that high energy costs had contributed to that deficit. 3 schools had submitted a claim for assistance with energy costs and 1 school had highlighted energy costs as a contributory factor in its forecast deficit but had not included energy costs within the claim. It was proposed that the minimum amount to be rolled forward for 2023-24 contingency claims should be £250,000 therefore the maximum amount to be available for the energy claims process would be £78,000 should the other unresolved claim be successful. Claims would be paid out at a maximum of 50% of the amount claimed however if the eligible claims exceeded the amount available the amounts would be scaled down.

The Forum considered the proposal for updating the terms of reference for the Schools Specific Contingency Fund, Appendix 3 to the report, and it was agreed that mention should be made in the TOR of what schools were doing to mitigate costs including taking a proactive approach to energy efficiency measures.

RESOLVED –

- (1) That the outcomes of the Schools Specific Contingency Fund meeting be NOTED.
- (2) That the proposed to hold a further meeting in May 2023 to consider claims for exception energy costs be AGREED.
- (3) That the updated terms of reference for the Schools Specific Contingency Fund for 2023-24 (Appendix 3) be AGREED.

7 High Needs Budget 2023-24

The Forum received a report on the allocation of the High Needs Block in 2023-24, which was £123.5m, an increase of £11.5m compared to 2022-23. The funding settlement included an additional allocation of £5.059m. Local authorities are required to pass on a 3.4% funding increase to maintained special and alternative

provision (AP) schools, and special and AP academies (including free schools), based on the number of places being funded in 2022 to 2023. Local authorities must separately identify these allocations for the schools and pay them directly to the school, or in the case of academies and free schools to the academy trust. The payments must be made in full during the financial year 2023 to 2024. This indicated that the payment of additional grant was outside of the banded top up values and was applied both to place and top up funding. The estimated cost of this increase was £1.6m.

The report also contained information on the proposed budget, pressures and opportunities that had been taken into account, information on estimated cost pressures and mitigations, and risks and mitigations that would be monitored throughout 2023-24.

Discussions covered a range of issues including on independent sector placements, increases in education personal budgets, increases in the number of children being home schooled and the costs/pressures on the provider who monitored arrangements, EHCP monitoring cost pressures, the increased demand projections for students in Bucks (largely due to housing growth in the north of the county) and how this growth would be funded, and on the profile of placement changes and the DSG Expenditure Review Group. The Forum was also informed that, unfortunately, the bid to Government for a new special school in the county had been unsuccessful. However, the learning from this process would not be lost and it was intended to submit another bid in the coming year.

RESOLVED –

That the updated budget for the High Needs Block in 2023-24 be AGREED.

8 Report of the DSG Expenditure Review Group

The Schools Forum received an update on the DSG Review Group that had met on 2 March 2023 to consider the following agenda items:

- Membership of the Group.
- High Needs Budget 2023-24.
- Early Years Inclusion Fund.
- Delivering Better Value (DBC) in SEND.
- Buckinghamshire Context and the next steps, including on the Buckinghamshire DSG Recovery Plan, which was in line with the 10 priorities highlighted by the DfE research and the local authority guidance on sustainable high needs systems. A data grant of £45,000 had been received in order to support the data preparation for the DBV Diagnostic, which needed to be spent by 31 March 2024.

The following issues were raised during discussions:

- How best to get further representation from Head Teachers (primary and secondary) onto the Group.
- Feedback on use of the inclusion fund.

- On how many of the schools struggling with high needs were also part of the fair funding group.
- On ordinary available provision, although it was explained that any plan(s) had to be deliverable locally.
- That it was anticipated that information on the diagnostics would be available next term, with further information then available by the end of the Summer term.

RESOLVED –

- (1) That the update on the work of the DSG Expenditure Review Group be NOTED.
- (2) That the information on the Delivering Better Value (DBC) in the SEND Programme be NOTED.

9 AOB

Three issues were discussed:

- (i) 5% Pay Award for support staff – it was explained that the Senior Appointments and Pay Committee (SAPC) had asked for further information on the whether a 5% pay increase was sufficient and at the same time affordable.
- (ii) Gender Pay Gap reporting – it was explained that schools needed to report back information to the Council, although there was only a requirement if the school had more than 250 employees. The deadline for the Council to collate the information received was 4 April.
- (iii) Energy procurement – it was agreed that information on energy procurement, possible buy out clauses if prices dropped be submitted to members of the School Forum and a report submitted to the next meeting. It would be important for schools to be able to consider this information as part of their budget setting processes.

10 Date of Next Meeting

1.30pm, Tuesday 27 June 2023, The Oculus, The Gateway offices, Aylesbury