



## Schools Forum minutes

Minutes of the meeting of the Schools Forum held on Tuesday 5 December 2023 in The Paralympic Room, Buckinghamshire Council, Gatehouse Road, Aylesbury HP19 8FF, commencing at 1.30 pm and concluding at 3.45 pm.

### Members present

Mrs G Bull, Mr A Gillespie, Ms S Barcock-Wood, Ms R Chapman, Ms C Glasgow, Mrs J Male, Mr A Sherwell, Ms E Stewart, Mr B Taylor, L Morel, J Talbot and C Whitehead

### Others in attendance

Ms S Bayliss, J Carter, Ms C Marriott, G Drawmer, C Gray, C Saunders, C Duffy and S Fogden

### Agenda Item

#### **1 Welcome**

Mr A Gillespie (co-chair of the Schools Forum) and chairman for the meeting, welcomed everyone to the meeting, including a number of people who had been recently elected onto the Schools Forum. All present briefly introduced themselves to the meeting.

#### **2 Apologies for absence**

Apologies were received from Councillor A Cranmer, J MacIlwraith, C Beevers, S Best, M Foster and N Lovegrove.

#### **3 Declarations of interest**

There were none.

#### **4 Minutes of the meetings held on 21 March and 27 June 2023**

RESOLVED –

That the minutes of the Schools Forum meetings held on 21 March 2023 and 27 June 2023 be approved as correct records.

#### **5 Schools Forum Constitution and Membership**

The Forum discussed its Constitution and membership, especially the vacancies and the representation of different groups on sub-Committees. One of the sub-committees, the maintained schools de-delegation committee, was also the subject of a request from the trade unions to have more input and communication with the

committee.

Democratic Services provided an update on membership, with a number of vacancies being filled through the elections held in November 2023. There had been no further resignations although there were 3 vacancies for Grammar School representatives, Secondary Academy and Early Years representatives. The chairman stated that he would highlight the vacancies to the Secondary Headteachers at the BASH meeting.

Gaynor Bull (co-chair) stated that the Forum also needed to look at the membership of the sub-committees and explained the composition and function of each sub-group. More representation was needed on the DSG Spending Review Group (currently focusing on Delivering Better Value for pupils with SEND).

Claudie Glasgow requested that more Trade Union representation be provided for on the Maintained Schools De-Delegation Committee and was informed that the Trade Unions could make representations to that Committee through their meetings with the Local Authority. An updated Membership list including sub-committees would be circulated.

## **6 National Funding Formula and Operational Guidance and Schools Budget Proposals 2024-25**

The Forum received a report on the modelling of the local funding formula for 2024-25. Updated modelling was provided for the Central Schools Services Block. Work continued on the development of the SEND Delivering Better Value project and this would inform the future model for demand against high needs budget to be considered by the Schools Forum in January 2024.

The Forum discussed the following main matters and impacts on Schools Budget proposals for 2024-25:

- **National funding formula and operational guidance on schools budget proposals for 2024-25:** The document covered the assumptions, factors, and allocations of the national funding formula for schools in Buckinghamshire for the year 2024-25.
- **Schools block funding:** Funding had increased by 5% compared to the previous year, but this included the mainstream school additional grant that was previously a separate grant. The minimum funding guarantee was set at 0.5%.
- **Changes in formula factors:** These included the removal of the exceptional small schools premises cost factor (as instructed by the DFE), the increase in the split site factor, and the introduction of the falling rolls fund.
- **Other blocks funding:** The Central Schools Block had a further reduction, the high needs block had a minimum increase of 3%, and the early years block funding had been announced recently.

RESOLVED –

- (1) That the information set out in the report, including the accompanying appendices, showing indicative allocations for 2024-25 be NOTED.  
(Note: modelling was based on October 2022 census data, with final DSG allocations due in December 2023 based on the October 2023 census data).
- (2) That the allocation for the Central Schools Services Block and the increased allocation for the High Needs Block for 2024-25 be NOTED.

## **7 Special School Top Up Values - request to disapply the Special School Minimum Funding Guarantee**

The Schools Forum was informed about the disapplication request for Special Schools minimum funding guarantee, which affected only one school in the Council's area. The Council had requested an extension to submit the disapplication request and been assured that submitting it later than other schools was fine.

## **8 De-Delegation from Maintained Schools 2024-25**

The Forum received a report for consideration that set out the proposals for existing de-delegations and former ESG funded services de-delegations 2024-25 for consideration by the Schools Forum. The DfE Operational Guide published in July made no changes to the De-delegation definition or guidance. The guidance includes provision to allow the de-delegation of funds to support core and additional school improvement activity.

The Maintained Schools Committee had met on 30 November 2023 with an open invitation to representatives from maintained schools. The recommendations from that meeting were attached to this report. The notes of that meeting were at Appendix A to the report. Supplementary information had been provided to the Committee including expenditure in previous years and a further update on trade union facilities costs and educational visits service. All of this information had been taken into account in the discussions in the group.

A separate report on proposals for the de-delegation of funding for school improvement activity was also presented to the meeting. This was at Appendix B to the report and had also been considered.

Based on all information, the Maintained Schools Committee had made the following proposals and recommendations for de-delegation in 2024-25:

### **Existing De-delegated Services – across primary and secondary schools:**

- Contingency fund for schools in deficit - that there was no de-delegation in 2024-25 due to the amount that had been rolled forward from previous years. This would be reviewed on an annual basis.
- Contingency for deficits of closing schools –that there was no de-delegation in 2024-25 and that this should be reviewed on an annual basis.
- Trade union facilities – that funding be de-delegated at 50p per pupil. A Union Representative asked for it to remain at 70p per pupil. It was agreed

that if the spend increased next year an increase would be considered but that currently it should be 50p per pupil.

- Supply cover for small schools –that there be no de-delegation in 2024-25 in view of the current carry forward balance. This would be reviewed on an annual basis.

#### **Former ESG Funded Services**

- Finance support for schools in financial difficulties – £2.75 per pupil primary and secondary/ £11 per place Special and PRU.
- Educational Visits Service –£ 1.22 per pupil for primary and secondary / £4.88 per pupil Special and PRU.

**School Improvement Activity** – that there be a de-delegation of £3.48 per pupil for 2024-25. This would have been £4.00 if the decision remained in line with the stepped plan increase in school contributions discussed at School Forum in December 2023. The lower figure reflects the proposed removal of funding for Liaison Group Projects. As the representatives attending the Maintained Schools De-delegation Committee had been evenly split on this proposal, a vote was taken on whether the Forum wanted to support the full amount at £4.00 and this was agreed.

RESOLVED –

- (1) That the de-delegation proposals for 2024-25 for Existing De-Delegated Services and former ESG Funded Services detailed above be AGREED.
- (2) That the de-delegation for School Improvement Activity be £4 per pupil for 2024-25.

#### **9 Proposal for change of Contingency Panel date**

The Forum received a report setting out the proposal to change the terms of reference for the Schools Specific Contingency Fund (SSCF) to allow a change of the panel meeting date. The SSCF terms of reference were published on Schoolsweb and were applicable only to maintained mainstream schools.

The current terms of reference allowed for mainstream maintained schools to be awarded up to 50% of significant unforeseen costs incurred up to the date of the SSCF panel meeting. The proposed changes to terms of reference recommended would allow the SSCF Group to meet in May after schools' year end outturns have been confirmed. Therefore, eligibility for awards would be determined by full costs incurred and the actual outturn position and rather than partial costing and forecast outturns. The effect of this change would result in funds being awarded in the following financial year rather than the current position where the award was made in year. A revised Terms of Reference for the Schools Specific Contingency Fund was attached at Appendix 1 to the report.

RESOLVED –

That the updated terms of reference (Appendix 1) for the Schools Specific Contingency Fund (SSCF) be AGREED, to allow the date for the Schools Specific Contingency Panel Meeting to be moved from February to May.

## **10 Revenue Budget Monitoring Report**

The Schools Forum received an update on the current forecast for the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) budget for FY 2023-24, based on the spend to 31 October 2023 (Period 7).

The overall Dedicated Schools budget was currently projected to overspend by £3.14m. The main reason for this was a forecast overspend on the High Needs block of £2.964m. A summary of the high needs block current forecast was attached as an appendix to the report. It included an additional £1.002m of independent special schools spend, reflecting an 8.5% increase in budget forecast in pupils in those schools compared to budget.

The meeting was informed of some of the challenges and pressures that the local authority faced in meeting the needs of SEND pupils, such as insufficient places in special schools and gaps in provision for some cohorts. Information was also provided on some of the measures and interventions being taken to address the overspend and improve the outcomes for SEND pupils, such as developing more specialist places locally, reviewing the designation of alternative provision, and providing early intervention and support for early years pupils.

Top-ups in Early Years and Mainstream (for both those with plans and without plans) showed an increase in spend of £2.994m reflecting the expansion in the numbers supported. Offsetting this were underspends of £0.497m in Integrated therapies due to delays in recruiting staff to deliver the contract and a reduced forecast for Post 16 which reflected last year's outturn. The mitigating actions within the 2023-24 High Needs budget had overall delivered the reductions expected but increased demand had negated any financial benefit resulting from the mitigating actions.

The Forum was informed that it was likely that the forecast in future months would include further pressures on top-ups and for Special school places. Further information would be brought to the next Forum meeting on the number of places available. The Schools block was currently projected to break even. The Central schools services block was projected to overspend by £0.177m due to pressures against the budget for Premature Retirement Costs as costs continued to exceed the available budget.

Any variance against the DSG was managed through the DSG reserve which was ringfenced. At the start of the 2023-24 financial year the Council had a deficit of £1.6m against its DSG reserve. The current projected overspend would increase the deficit at the end of the year to £4.7m.

RESOLVED –

That the revenue budget monitoring forecast at the end of October 2023 (Period 7) be NOTED.

## **11 Report of the DSG Spending Review Group**

The Schools Forum received a report on the work of the DSG Spending Review Group including an update on Delivering Better Value (DBV). The DBV programme aimed to support local areas to address the three key challenges facing the SEND system with a focus on both achieving better outcomes for children and young people and achieving greater efficiency within the system.

The work to date had been intensive and had included a robust review of both activity and financial data which had then been triangulated by case audits, surveys to schools, parents and young people and deep dives into the key areas that emerged from both the data and case audits.

The key theme's emerging from the financial and activity review highlighted the need to:

- Strengthen mainstream support.
- Reduce pressures on maintained special schools.
- Reduce the dependence on independent specialist provision.

The data work had identified the need to explore further parents and young people's views and experiences of Inclusion, variational analysis to understand the differences in numbers of pupils supported through SEN Support or EHCP's across schools, process mapping work in relation to annual reviews and placement decisions and some further case audits in relation to post 16 transitions and provision.

Considering both the key data areas identified and the findings of the case audits and the deep dive work, the following group work streams have been identified and form the basis of the projects for the grant application:

- Supporting the aspirations of children and young people without EHC Plans.
- Provision and Decision Making.
- Meet the needs of children and young people with complex needs.
- Preparation for Adulthood.

Throughout the DBV work in Buckinghamshire there had been strong engagement with a wide range of partners throughout the local area, including schools, parents and young people. The DSG spending review group has also met monthly throughout the Autumn term in order to monitor the work.

A critical area of the work has also been to understand the financial forecast for the High Needs Block for the coming years and demonstrate the necessity to drive forward work to intervene early in order to improve outcomes for children and young people and enable further mitigations to reduce pressures on the High Needs Block.

The Council was now in the process of finalising our grant application for £1m for one year to support activity to progress the priority workstreams as outlined above. These workstreams closely aligned with the workstreams of the wider SEND Improvement work in Buckinghamshire.

In response to questions, the meeting was informed that the majority of the programme focussed on the next 12-18 months. The Council had been in contact with the Department of Education to get confirmation on what funding had to be spent in-year and what could be carried over to future years. The Government recognised the difficulties faced by local authorities and was looking at bringing in legislative change to allow this grant to be carried forward into the next year although this was not yet confirmed.

The DSG Group would continue to focus on monitoring the effectiveness of the existing mitigations alongside the work of the additional mitigations being identified through DBV. As the demand and subsequent financial pressures continued to grow it was vital that this Group continued to meet, drive forward work and report back to the Schools Forum.

RESOLVED –

That the work of the DSG Spending Review Group and update regarding Delivering Better Value be NOTED.

## **12 Exclusion of the Press and Public**

RESOLVED –

That under Section 100(A)(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 the public be excluded from the meeting for the following item(s) of business on the grounds that it involves the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Part I of Schedule 12A of the Act.

Agenda Item number 13 – Schools Support Pay Award

Paragraph 3: Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information).

## **13 Schools Support Pay Award**

The meeting discussed the factors that would impact on the Schools Support Pay Award for 2024-25, and was informed that the Council's Senior Appointments and Pay Committee were very keen for feedback on this issue from schools.

The Forum discussed opportunities to increase school feedback before the December deadline.

## **14 Date of Next Meeting**

1.30pm on Tuesday 16 January 2024 at the Buckinghamshire Council's Gateway

offices, Gatehouse Road, Aylesbury.