

Schools Forum

MINUTES OF THE SCHOOLS FORUM MEETING HELD ON 5 DECEMBER 2023 AT CONFERENCE SUITE, 1ST FLOOR, COUNTY HALL, TROWBRIDGE.

Present:

Andy Bridewell, Helen Carpenter, Rebecca Carson, Stella Fowler, John Hawkins, Cllr Ross Henning, Georgina Keily-Theobald, Graham Nagel-Smith, Nick Norgrove, Lisa Percy (Chair), Giles Pugh, John Read, Graham Shore (Vice-Chair), Trudy Srawley, Ros Sutton, Mike Thomas, David Whewell, and Catriona Williamson

Also Present:

Adam Smith (Primary Heads Forum), and Cllr Suzanne Wickham

Sharon Buxton (School Support Accountant)
Grant Davis (Schools Strategic Financial Support Manager)
Kathryn Davis (Head of Targeted Education)
Ellen Ghey (Democratic Services Officer)
Lisa Pullin (Democratic Services Officer)
Liz Williams (Finance Lead – High Needs Block Sustainability)
Lloyd Williamson (Data Analyst – Children’s Services)

46 Apologies/Substitutions and Changes of Membership

Apologies for absence from Members were received from:

- Aileen Bates
- Angela Brennan
- Michele Chilcott
- Jo Grenfell

Further apologies were noted from:

- Councillor Jane Davies
- Richard Hanks (Co-Director – Education & Skills)
- Helean Hughes (Co-Director – Education & Skills)
- Marie Taylor (Head of Finance – Children and Education)

The Chair announced the following Membership changes:

- Helen Carpenter was welcomed to the Schools Forum as the Chair of WASSH (Wiltshire Association of Secondary and Special School Heads) and Secondary Academy Representative, taking over from Ian Tucker.

- Karen Venner was welcomed to the Schools Forum as an Early Years Representative, taking over from Emma Osmund.

It was confirmed that Angela Brennan was standing down as the Chair of the Children & Families Voluntary Sector at the end of December 2023. The Chair thanked Angela for her contributions while a part of the Schools Forum and informed Members that notification of her replacement would be received in due course.

47 **Minutes of the Previous Meeting**

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 5 October 2023 were presented for consideration.

Following which, it was:

Resolved:

The Schools Forum approved and signed the minutes of the previous meeting held on 5 October 2023 as a true and correct record.

48 **Chair's Announcements**

The Chair made the following announcement:

- It was noted that upon publication of the Agenda, Item 11 – Update on Safety Valve Plan, was due to be discussed under Part I of the meeting. However, in the time since publication, it was explained that Cabinet had requested that the Agenda Item be considered as a Part II item in which the public and press be excluded due to the meeting of the Schools Forum being held before the 12 December 2023 Cabinet meeting. As such, it was noted that the order of the Agenda would be amended to facilitate this.

49 **Declaration of Interests**

There were no declarations of interest.

50 **Public Participation**

There were no questions or statements submitted.

51 **Updates from Working Groups**

The Chair raised the updates from the last meeting of the Early Years Reference Group and the last joint meeting of the School Funding Working Group and SEN Working Group held on 29 September and 27 November 2023 respectively. There being no questions or comments on the updates, it was then:

Resolved:

The Schools Forum noted the updates from the last meeting of the Early Years Reference Group and the last joint meeting of the School Funding Working Group and SEN Working Group held on 29 September and 27 November 2023 respectively.

52 **National Funding Formulae for Schools and High Needs - 2024-25**

Grant Davis, Schools Strategic Financial Support Manager, referred to the report which updated the Schools Forum on the National Funding Formula (NFF) for 2024-25, following the notification received from the Department for Education (DfE) on 6 October 2023, of an error made during the NFF calculations. Furthermore, officers were seeking 'in principle' decisions from the Schools Forum with regards to the Wiltshire's local school formula for the 2024-25 year. The following was then highlighted:

- The background to the report was detailed as per Paragraphs 5 to 7.
- It was noted that at the last meeting of the Schools Forum on 5 October 2023, the key funding arrangements as published by the DfE were presented. However, in light of the DfE error made in the NFF calculations, those proposals were revised for the 2024-25 year.
- Paragraphs 9 to 11 detailed where the NFF calculation error lay and how it would impact Wiltshire's Schools Block; namely, a £3.3m reduction in proposed funding, equivalent to 0.9%.
- Paragraph 12 listed the changes between the formulas for 2023-24 and 2024-25, and Appendix 2 set out the funding values from previous years alongside the revised values.
- The Minimum Funding Guarantee (MFG) was then discussed as per Paragraphs 13 to 18, and it was explained that officers were proposing setting the MFG between 0.0% and 0.5% to be consistent with previous years and to ensure that all schools received a minimum uplift in their per pupil funding of 0.5%.
- As Wiltshire's local school formula already mirrored the NFF, it was emphasised that any tightening of the formula would have a minimal impact on Wiltshire schools. Furthermore, the initial modelling of the Schools Block demonstrated that the NFF was affordable and could be fully implemented, based upon the October 2022 census data.

- The budget setting process for 2024-25 was briefly detailed as per Paragraphs 22 and 23, and it was highlighted that all schools would be notified of their allocated funding by 28 February 2024 to support schools in their financial planning for the academic year 2024-25.
- It was emphasised that the decisions made by the Schools Forum in this meeting would be 'in principle', with final approval being made at the January 2024 meeting of the Forum.

There being no questions or comments on the report, it was:

Resolved:

The Schools forum made 'in principle' decisions for the following formula factors to enable school budgets to be prepared ready for the January 2024 meeting.

- a) To apply all the National Funding Formula factors in full.**
- b) To set the Minimum Funding Guarantee between 0.0% and 0.5%, in line with the National Funding Formula and subject to affordability.**

53 Allocation of Funding for Pupil Growth 2024-25

Grant Davis, Schools Strategic Financial Support Manager, referred to the report which sought agreement on the methodology for allocating funding for pupil growth from the School's Block Growth Fund in 2024-25. The following was then highlighted:

- The Department for Education's (DfE) School Funding Operational Guidance for 2024-25 as per Paragraphs 4 and 5 were listed and it was confirmed that Wiltshire's Growth Fund Criteria was fully compliant.
- The funding methodology and growth allocations were detailed; namely, that the DfE measured growth within Local Authorities (LAs) by middle layer super output areas (MSOA) which could be defined as small geographical areas to detect pockets of growth within LAs by counting the increase in pupil numbers in each MSOA between the October 2022 and October 2023 censuses. It was confirmed that Wiltshire was separated into 62 MSOA's, with an average of 4 schools in each MSOA.
- Paragraph 10 listed growth allocations used for each LA; however, it was explained that LAs generally allocated growth funding using local arrangements by applying local knowledge and intelligence as there was not a national method adopted for allocating growth funding. In Wiltshire, it was confirmed that this would continue to be the responsibility of the Schools Forum with the 2024-25 growth funding being set in the January 2024 meeting of the Forum.

- The requirements with regard to allocating funding from the Growth Fund were listed in Paragraph 14, with officers explaining the calculation applied as per Paragraph 15.
- The proposed criteria for funding pupil growth within the local Wiltshire funding formula for 2024-24 was then detailed.
 - Firstly, New School Allowance was briefly explained as per Paragraphs 18 to 21 of the report, but it was confirmed that as no new schools were planned for 2024-25, officers would not be applying that funding.
 - Secondly, Class Expansion for Basic Need was briefly explained as per Paragraphs 22 to 23 of the report, with officers confirming that the Wiltshire criteria was fully compliant.
 - Thirdly, Infant Class Size Increases was briefly explained as per Paragraphs 24 to 25 of the report.
 - Finally, the Falling Rolls Fund was explained in more detail as per Paragraphs 26 to 38 of the report. It was confirmed that LAs would continue to have discretion over whether to operate a Falling Rolls Fund, but officers would not be able to estimate the level of funding that could be received until the October 2023 census data was published. It was highlighted that less than 30 LAs across the country had set Falling Rolls Funds and although Wiltshire had previously resisted the establishing of such a Fund, and there being no pressure from schools or other groups to establish one, officers were asking Members to consider that the setting of such a Fund would place additional pressures upon the School's Block. However, it was emphasised that no decisions would need to be made until the full Dedicated Schools Grant had been confirmed.

In response to a question, it was clarified that despite there being many new developments being built in areas such as the North of Wiltshire, there were no plans for the development of any additional schools as there was sufficient capacity in existing schools. Further discussions were had on the declining birth rate across the County and the impact that this had on the long-term viability of smaller, more rural Primary Schools. As such, Members noted that future discussions on the topic would need to focus on how to attract potential pupils to those smaller Primary Schools.

Following which, it was:

Resolved:

- a) **The Schools Forum approved the criteria for allocating pupil Growth Fund in 2024-25.**
- b) **The Schools Forum agreed that the budget for the Growth Fund be set at its meeting in January 2024, when the full Dedicated Schools Grant had been confirmed for the 2024-25 year.**

- c) The Schools Forum gave consideration to the establishing of a Falling Rolls Fund and any criteria befitting such a Fund.**

54 **Dedicated Schools Grant Consultations 2024-25**

Grant Davis, Schools Strategic Financial Support Manager, updated the Schools Forum on the results of the recent Autumn consultations relating to:

- De-delegation of central services – *Maintained Schools Only*
- De-delegation in support of the former Local Authority Monitoring and Brokering (LAMB) Grant – *Maintained Schools Only*
- Transfer of funds from the Schools Block to the High Needs Block – *All Schools*

The following was then highlighted:

De-delegation of Central Services

- Paragraph 3 was briefly reiterated alongside the list of services consulted on as part of the process as per Paragraph 4 of the report.
- The full set of questions and responses could be seen in Appendix 1 of the report, with a breakdown of the responses and the conclusions drawn detailed for Members as per Paragraphs 6 and 7.

De-delegation in Support of the Former LAMB Grant

- The context behind the consultation was briefly recapped as per Paragraphs 8 to 10 of the report.
- Paragraphs 11 to 13 were then detailed which included a breakdown of the responses and conclusions drawn. Officers noted that it was widely recognised that there was a lower response rate due to the majority of Wiltshire schools' confidence in the decisions being made by the Schools Forum on their behalf.

Transfer of Funds from the Schools Block to the High Needs Block

- Paragraphs 16 to 20 of the report were detailed, which noted past transfers from the past 5 financial years, the agreement of the Schools Forum to allow for the flexibility of moving up to 0.5% of the School's Block funding, and the current Safety Valve agreement in place.
- The full set of questions and responses could be seen in Appendix 2 of the report, with a breakdown of the responses and the conclusions drawn listed in Paragraphs 22 to 25. It was emphasised that any decisions in relation to any transfer from the School's Block to the High Needs Block

would need to be considered in the context of the Council's Safety Valve agreement which would be discussed under Agenda Item 14.

In response to a question, it was confirmed that approximately 104 Maintained Schools could have responded to the consultations, thereby giving a response rate of roughly 25%. Despite this, officers emphasised that as the Schools Forum was comprised of elected Members, many Maintained Schools were confident with the decisions being made by the Schools Forum on their behalf and therefore did not feel the need to respond to the consultation as they were happy with the direction of travel. However, Members associated with the Primary Heads Forum and WASSH (Wiltshire Association of Secondary and Special School Heads) noted that they would raise the topic at relevant future meetings.

Members discussed the transfer of funds from the School's Block to the High Needs Block and stressed that affordability was the key criteria in order to ensure that schools could continue to be funded at the National Funding Formula.

Finally, it was highlighted that with regard to central services, some of the services had changed over the years across the County which at times, had led to reduced basic support on the ground for schools.

At the conclusion of the discussion, it was:

Resolved:

- a) **The Schools Forum noted the local consultation responses in relation to the Schools Delegated Budget for the 2024-25 financial year.**
- b) **The Schools Forum made 'in principle' decisions in accordance with the consultation responses as below:**
 - a. **De-delegation of central services for Maintained Schools**
 - i. **FSM – *Primary and Secondary***
 - ii. **Licences – *Primary and Secondary***
 - iii. **Trade Union – *Primary and Secondary***
 - iv. **Maternity – *Primary and Secondary***
 - v. **Ethnic Minority Support – *Primary Only***
 - vi. **Traveller Education – *Primary Only***
 - vii. **Behaviour Support – *Primary Only***
 - b. **Delegation of funding to support school improvement services for Maintained Schools. To continue to fund at the rate of 100% loss in funding (£459k).**

- c. Block transfer between the Schools Block and the High Needs Block, subject to affordability when school funding for 2024-25 had been confirmed:**
- i. In principle, transfer of 0.5% of the Schools Block to the High Needs Block, the maximum allowable without Secretary of State approval, which equates to approximately £1.8m**
 - ii. To support the transfer of 0.55% of the Schools Block to the High Needs Block, subject to both affordability and approval from the Secretary of State. Such a transfer would equate to £2m and would require the submission of a disapplication request to the Secretary of State.**

55 **Additional Support for Maintained Schools in Financial Difficulty in 2023-24**

Grant Davis, Schools Strategic Financial Support Manager, referred to the report which set out the details behind the additional support funding for Maintained Schools in the 2023-24 year, and sought agreement from the Schools Forum for the distribution of the support funding to Maintained Schools currently in a financial deficit. The following was then highlighted:

- Officers explained Paragraphs 3 to 7 of the report, which noted the reasons behind the additional funding and the methodology used to determine allocation eligibility. It was emphasised that the funding was 'one-off' and there were no plans for the Department for Education (DfE) to make similar additional funding available again in 2024-25.
- It was noted that the DfE were giving Local Authorities (LAs) significant flexibility over how the funding could be used in order to best support their schools in the individual circumstances in which they found themselves. Furthermore, the conditions of the grant would allow the funding to be used for the purposes of eliminating deficit balances and to prioritise those schools in greatest need on a case-by-case basis depending on the severity of their financial position.
- Reference was made to the table in Paragraph 13 of the report alongside each of the 3 options presented in Paragraphs 14 to 17.

It was highlighted that the Schools Funding Working Group had discussed the same 3 options and had concluded that as the funding was a 'one-off' injection of cash, Option 1 seemed the most equitable as it would ensure that all schools with a deficit would receive an allocation of the funding.

It was suggested that the funding be used to support those relevant schools in developing robust, long-term financial planning management to ensure that their individual deficit positions would not reoccur. In response, the different circumstances that could lead to a school entering into deficit were noted, and

Members were reassured that officers were already working with those relevant schools to support them in making extensive and bespoke contingency plans and strategies to ensure long-term financial viability. It was then suggested that as that support was already in place for each individual school, there was scope to instead focus on those in a more severe position, therefore maximising the impact of any additional funding and ultimately benefitting those communities and pupils on roll. Members debated the merits of that suggestion with regards to fairness and the complications of using the funding for additional resources.

Members acknowledged that officers held an extensive knowledge of the local areas across the County, and therefore agreed that as officers were recommending that Option 1 was the most objective and equitable choice, their suggestion should be trusted and implemented as such.

Following which, it was:

Resolved:

The Schools Forum adopted Option 1 as the most equitable approach for the distribution of funding on behalf of Maintained Schools.

56 **Urgent Items**

There were no Part I urgent items.

57 **Confirmation of Dates for Future Meetings**

The date of the next meeting was confirmed as Thursday 18 January 2024 at 1.30pm and was planned to be held in person at County Hall, Trowbridge.

Future meeting dates were confirmed as below:

14 March 2024 – 1.30pm
27 June 2024 – 1.30pm
10 October 2024 – 1.30pm
12 December 2024 – 1.30pm

58 **Exclusion of Press and Public**

The Schools Forum considered the recommendation to exclude the public. Following which, it was:

Resolved:

To agree that in accordance with Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 to exclude the public from the meeting for the business specified in Item Number 14-15 because it is likely that if members of the public

were present there would be disclosure to them of exempt information as defined in paragraph 3 of Part I of Schedule 12A to the Act and the public interest in withholding the information outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information to the public.

59 **Update on Safety Valve Agreement**

Liz Williams, Finance Lead – High Needs Block Sustainability, delivered a presentation which updated the Schools Forum on the draft High Needs Block Sustainability Plan to be submitted to the Department for Education's (DfE) Safety Valve Programme.

Resolved:

- a) **The Schools Forum supported the submission of the draft Safety Valve Plan to the Department for Education on 15 December 2023.**
- b) **The Schools Forum supported the submission of a final Safety Valve Plan to the Department for Education on 12 January 2024, subject to approval from the Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Education, and Skills, and the Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care, SEND, and Inclusion.**
- c) **The Schools Forum agreed that a written paper be brought to the Schools Forum meeting on 18 January 2024, to set out any changes made to finalise the Safety Valve Plan.**
- d) **The Schools Forum noted the proposals in relation to transfers from the Schools Block to the High Needs Block as contained in the draft plan, and supported the proposed transfer of 0.55% (£2m) for 2024-25.**

60 **Urgent Items**

There were no Part II urgent items.

(Duration of meeting: 1.30 - 4.30 pm)

The Officer who has produced these minutes is Ellen Ghey Democratic Services, direct line 01225 718259 , e-mail committee@wiltshire.gov.uk

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