

Schools Forum

MINUTES OF THE SCHOOLS FORUM MEETING HELD ON 12 DECEMBER 2024 AT COUNCIL CHAMBER - COUNTY HALL, BYTHESEA ROAD, TROWBRIDGE, BA14 8JN.

Present:

Aileen Bates, Helen Carpenter, Stella Fowler, John Hawkins, Toni Hayzen, Brett Jouny, Georgina Keily-Theobald, Nick Norgrove, Lisa Percy (Chair), Ed Powe, Giles Pugh, John Read, Graham Shore (Vice-Chair), Adam Smith, Trudy Srawley, and Nicola Whitcombe

Also Present:

Cllr Nabil Najjar (Virtual) and Cllr Sam Pearce-Kearney

Grant Davis (Schools Strategic Financial Support Manager)

Kathryn Davis (Director – Education & Skills)

Daryll Freeman (Director – Children & Education)

Lisa Fryer (Head of SEND and Inclusion)

Ellen Ghey (Democratic Services Officer)

Louise Lewis (Head of Targeted Education)

Lucy Moses (High Needs Sustainability Mitigation Lead)

Lisa Pullin (Democratic Services Officer)

Ben Stevens (Sustainability Strategic Lead – High Needs Block)

Marie Taylor (Head of Finance – Children & Education)

Liz Williams (Finance Lead – High Needs Block Sustainability)

48 **Apologies, Substitutions and any Changes of Membership**

Apologies for absence from Members were received from:

- Lyssy Bolton
- Councillor Ross Henning
- Jo Grenfell
- Ros Sutton
- Karen Venner
- David Whewell

The Chair welcomed Adam Smith to the Schools Forum as a Maintained Primary Representative.

49 **Minutes of the Previous Meeting**

The Chair raised Minute Item 37, Public Participation, and it was confirmed that officers had provided a response to the question submitted.

Following which, it was:

Resolved:

The Schools Forum approved and signed the minutes of the previous meeting held on 17 October 2024 as a true and correct record.

50 **Chair's Announcements**

There were no Chair's announcements.

51 **Declaration of Interests**

There were no declarations of interest.

52 **Public Participation**

There were no questions or statements submitted.

53 **Updates from Working Groups**

The Chair raised the updates from the last meeting of the Early Years Reference Group held on 26 November 2024, and the previous joint meeting of the School Funding Working Group and SEN Working Group held on 28 November 2024.

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

Resolved:

The Schools Forum noted the updates from the previous meeting of the Early Years Reference Group held on 26 November 2024, and the previous joint meeting of the School Funding Working Group and SEN Working Group held on 28 November 2024.

54 **Dedicated Schools Budget - Budget Monitoring 2024-25**

Marie Taylor, Head of Finance – Children & Education, introduced the report which presented the budget monitoring information against the Dedicated

Schools Grant (DSG) for the financial year 2024-25 as at September 2024. The following was then highlighted:

- It was noted that an overspend of £14.942m was forecast against the overall schools budget after the transfer of £28.254m from the deficit reserve, agreed at budget setting, and in line with the Council's Safety Valve Agreement. Furthermore, the overspend against the High Needs Block (HNB) was projected to be £17.489m.
- Paragraphs 4 to 6 of the report, including Table 1, reminded Members that the Central Government's three-year statutory override in 2020 to separate Local Authorities' (LA) DSG deficits from their wider financial position had been extended until 2026.
- Each of the individual Blocks were then raised, in the order that they were detailed in the report.
- It was noted that the Early Years Block budgets were projected to underspend by £2.311m. Paragraphs 7 to 8 of the report highlighted the Department for Education's (DfE) introduction of an extension to the entitlements for 9 months to 2-year olds and the universal 2-year old offer, resulting in a higher budget based on the DfE's introductory assumptions on take-up, however as parent take-up was largely unknown, forecast variances could still vary from the report.
- The HNB budgets were then detailed, and it was noted that the projected overspend was £17.489m, with the budgets being increases by the planned drawdown from the DSG reserve to facilitate improved budget monitoring, target setting, and methods of measuring success in respect of recovering planning.
- Paragraphs 11 to 13, including all tables, were then explained.
- The DSG reserve and Safety Valve Agreement were then detailed as per Paragraphs 15 to 17 of the report.

There being no questions or comments, it was then:

Resolved:

The Schools Forum noted the forecast budget monitoring position including the balance on the DSG reserve at the end of September 2024, together with the reports later in the Agenda on the SEND Transformation Programme.

55 **Dedicated Schools Grant Consultations 2025-26**

Grant Davis, Schools Strategic Financial Support Manager, introduced the report which updated Schools Forum with 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*

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.
- Members were thanked for promoting the consultation amongst colleagues.

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.
- Finally, it was highlighted that 3 of the Secondary Schools as per the tables under Paragraph 12 were considering converting to Multi Academy Trusts.

There being no questions or comments, it was then:

Resolved:

The Schools Forum:

- a) **Noted the local consultation responses in relation to the schools delegated budget for the 2025-26 financial year.**
- b) **Made the 'in principle' decisions in accordance with the consultation responses as below:**
 - **De-delegation of central services for Maintained Schools:**
 - **FSM – *Primary and Secondary***
 - **Licenses – *Primary and Secondary***
 - **Trade Union – *Primary and Secondary***
 - **Maternity – *Primary and Secondary***
 - **Ethnic Minority Support – *Primary Only***
 - **Traveller Education – *Primary Only***
 - **Behaviour Support – *Primary Only***
 - **De-delegation of funding to support school improvement services for Maintained Primary Schools. To continue to fund**

at the rate of 100% loss in funding for Primary Schools only (£391k), recognising that Secondary Schools would prefer to source their own support.

56 Allocation of Funding for Pupil Growth 2025-26

Grant Davis, Schools Strategic Financial Support Manager, introduced the report which sought agreement on the methodology for allocating funding for pupil growth from the School's Block Growth Fund in 2025-26. The following was then highlighted:

- The Department for Education's (DfE) School Funding Operational Guidance for 2025-26 as per Paragraphs 4 to 5 of the report 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 2023 and October 2024 school census data. It was confirmed that Wiltshire was separated into 62 MSOA's, with an average of 4 schools in each MSOA.
- Paragraph 10 listed the 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 Wiltshire allocation for 2025-26 being announced in December 2024 as part of the Schools Funding Announcement.
- 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 2025-26 was then detailed.
 - Firstly, New School Allowance was briefly detailed as per Paragraphs 18 to 21 of the report, but it was confirmed that as no new schools were planned for 2025-26, 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, 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 establishing a Falling Rolls Fund, accounting for its previous decisions on the topic and the additional pressures being placed upon the Schools Block. However, it was emphasised that no decisions would need to be made until the full Dedicated Schools Grant settlement had been confirmed.

In response to a question, it was acknowledged that the birth rate in Wiltshire was continuing to drop despite previous expectations of an uplift post-pandemic, and Members were informed that officers in the School Place Planning Team were researching the whole school estate across Wiltshire by community area to determine surplus places which would then be presented to the DfE and used as a basis for further contingency plans and strategies. Furthermore, officers were having conversations with school leaders to further explore the data and understand the surplus place situation across whole community areas to then collaborate on solutions.

Members emphasised the importance of involving schools in those discussions as early as possible due to the emotive nature of the topic and impact that it could have on school staff and residents' lives.

At the conclusion of the discussion, it was then:

Resolved:

The Schools Forum:

- a) **Approved the criteria for allocating Pupil Growth Fund in 2025-26.**
- b) **Agreed that the budget for the Growth Fund be set at its meeting in January 2025, when the full Dedicated Schools Grant had been confirmed for the 2025-26 year.**
- c) **The Schools Forum gave consideration to the establishing of a Falling Rolls Fund and any criteria befitting such a Fund.**

57 **National Funding Formulae for Schools - 2025-26**

Grant Davis, Schools Strategic Financial Support Manager, introduced the report which updated the Schools Forum on the National Funding Formula (NFF) for 2025-26. Furthermore, officers were seeking 'in principle' decisions from the Schools Forum with regards to Wiltshire's local school formula for the 2025-26 year. The following was then highlighted:

- The background to the report was detailed as per Paragraphs 5 to 8.
- It was noted that following the General Election and the appointment of a new Government in July 2024, the key funding arrangements for the 2025-26 year were still awaited and were anticipated to be published by

the end of November 2024, but that the Department for Education (DfE) had published three other papers as listed in Paragraph 3.

- Paragraph 10 listed the changes between the formulas from 2024-25 to 2025-26, with the provisional 2025-26 NFF funding values being detailed in Appendix 1 and the movement in NFF funding since 2019-20 to the provisional 2025-26 values being set out in Appendix 2.
- The Minimum Funding Guarantee (MFG) was then discussed as per Paragraphs 11 to 15, and it was explained that unlike previous years where the NFF rate had been mandated between 0% and 0.5%, for the 2025-26 year, Schools Forum could set the rate between -0.5% and 0%. However, officers were proposing setting the MFG at 0.0% to ensure that all schools received a guarantee that their per pupil funding would at least be consistent with previous years, if not higher.
- Members were reminded that the Government had stated its intention to move to a single direct NFF by 2027-28 and to determine every school's budget centrally. However, 2025-26 was confirmed to be another 'soft' year, with local Schools Forums continuing to retain their role in determining school funding allocation methodologies, subject to any NFF requirements and constraints.
- The budget setting process for 2025-26 was briefly detailed as per Paragraphs 19 to 20, with initial modelling of the Schools Block demonstrating that the NFF was affordable and could be fully implemented based upon the October 2023 census data.
- 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 2025 meeting of the Forum.

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

Resolved:

The Schools Forum made 'in principle' decisions for the following formula factors to enable school budgets to be prepared ready for the January 2025 meeting:

- a) The apply all the National Funding Formula factors in full.**
- b) To set the Minimum Funding Guarantee between -0.5% and 0%, in line with the National Funding Formula and subject to affordability.**

58 Schools Block Transfer 2025/26 - Consultation Outcome Report

Liz Williams, Finance Lead – High Needs Sustainability, updated the Schools Forum on the outcomes of the consultation on the proposal to transfer 1% from the Schools Block to the High Need Block (HNB) in 2025-26. The following was then highlighted:

- The background to the report was detailed as per Paragraphs 2 to 4 of the report, with the decision process being explained as Members considering the outcome of the consultation and deciding on a recommended level of block transfer for 2025-26 which would then be considered by the High Needs Sustainability Board during their meeting on 19 December for their final decision before updating the draft disapplication request to the Department for Education (DfE).
- The results of the consultation were explained as per Paragraphs 5 to 12 of the report, and officers thanked Members for promoting the consultation and acknowledged the feedback received regarding accessibility issues which they would review ahead of any other future consultations.
- Paragraph 13 listed a number of considerations for Members to take into account when reaching a decision, and highlighted that since the closure of the consultation, the DfE had issued provisional funding settlement information for the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG), as discussed under the previous Agenda Item, and that the DfE expected LAs to revisit block transfer requests in light of the higher HNB settlement.
- Finally, it was emphasised by officers that the views of schools within the consultation responses were taken seriously and that they would be taken into account when determining the appropriate method forwards.

When finalising which option to undertake, it was explained that any further consultations would be impractical given the short timescale before the next meeting of the Forum in January 2025. However, it was emphasised that the recommendation made by Members at the meeting was provisional. It was further clarified that in previous years, the Council had generally been able to afford a 0.5% transfer without impacting on the National Funding Formula (NFF), but without confirmation of the funding settlements and census data for 2025-26, officers could not make the same assumption until such time. Therefore, if Option C was recommended by Members, there was a possibility that the value may be lower than 0.5%, but it would also ensure that there would not be an impact on the NFF pending final funding figures.

Finally, Members thanked officers for considering the views of schools and for their continued hard work and emphasised the importance of continuing these conversations with colleagues across the County to best support all parties involved.

At the conclusion of the discussion, it was then:

Resolved:

The Schools Forum considered the proposed level of transfer from the Schools Block to the High Needs Block in 2025-26 and recommended that Option C be implemented: a transfer of the maximum value affordable without impacting National Funding Formula values.

In line with Department for Education requirements, please find a record of the votes of all eligible voting Schools Forum Members below:

For	Against	Abstain
16	0	0

59 **Updates from SEND Transformation Programme**

Ben Stevens, Sustainability Strategic Lead – High Needs Block, provided the Schools Forum a verbal update on the SEND Transformation Programme. The following was highlighted:

- Members were informed that a revised version of the sustainability plan, subject to Cabinet approval, had been drafted for submission to the Department of Education (DfE) in response to the fact that the Council was not on track to meet Agreement Condition 2 to reduce the cumulative deficit.
- It was explained that the plan needed to provide a level of confidence to the DfE that the Council could return to a balanced position within the High Needs Block (HNB). Due to the significant backlog and unexpected increases in Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) post-pandemic skewing the initial modelling, significant revisions to the plan were necessary and as such, the plan was now over a 7-year period as opposed to a 5-year period.
- Members were reassured that nothing within the revised plan conflicted with the values that were set out at the start of the process and that supporting children and young people with SEND in Wiltshire was still at the heart of the transformation programme.
- It was noted that the consultation on EHCP Top-Ups was ongoing, and strong attendance was reported at two of the schools focused consultation events that had been undertaken in the two weeks preceding the meeting. Members were encouraged to promote the consultation with colleagues and those who had attended the events were thanked.
- Officers raised the judgement that had been given by Inspectors from the Care and Quality Commission and Ofsted in early December 2024 and noted that they were proud of the work that had been undertaken to date and would be undertaken as part of the plan going into the future.
- It was confirmed that a more detailed report on the revised plan would be submitted to a future meeting of the Forum.

There being no questions or comments, it was then:

Resolved:

The Schools Forum noted the update.

60 **Confirmation of Dates for Future Meetings**

The date of the next meeting of the Schools Forum was confirmed as Thursday 23 January 2025 at 1.30pm and was scheduled to be held at County Hall, Trowbridge.

Future meeting dates were confirmed as below:

13 March 2025 – 1.30pm

12 June 2025 – 1.30pm

9 October 2025 – 1.30pm

61 **Urgent Items**

There were no urgent items.

(Duration of meeting: 1.30 - 2.45 pm)

The Officer who has produced these minutes is Ellen Ghey of Democratic Services,
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