

Schools Forum

MINUTES OF THE SCHOOLS FORUM MEETING HELD ON 17 OCTOBER 2024 VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS.

Present:

Aileen Bates, Lyssy Bolton, Helen Carpenter, Stella Fowler, John Hawkins, Toni Hayzen, Brett Jouny, Georgina Keily-Theobald, Nick Norgrove, Lisa Percy, Ed Powe, Giles Pugh, John Read, Graham Shore, Ros Sutton, David Whewell, and Nicola Whitcombe

Also Present:

Grant Davis (Schools Strategic Financial Support Manager), Daryl Freeman (Director – Children & Education), Ellen Ghey (Democratic Services Officer), Lisa Pullin (Democratic Services Officer), Ben Stevens (Sustainability Strategic Lead - High Needs Block, Marie Taylor (Head of Finance – Children & Education), Simon Thomas (FACT Programme Lead), Liz Williams (Finance Lead – High Needs Block Sustainability) and Cllr Suzanne Wickham

31 **Election of Chair for 2024-25**

Nominations were sought for a Chair for the forthcoming year. On the nomination of Graham Shore, seconded by Georgina Keily-Theobald, it was:

Resolved:

The Schools Forum elected Lisa Percy as Chair of the Schools Forum for the forthcoming year 2024-25.

32 **Election of Vice Chair for 2024-25**

Nominations were sought for a Vice-Chair for the forthcoming year. On the nomination of Lisa Percy, seconded by John Read, it was:

Resolved:

The Schools Forum elected Graham Shore as Vice-Chair of the Schools Forum for the forthcoming year 2024-25.

33 **Apologies, Substitutions and Changes of Membership**

Apologies for absence from Members were received from:

- Councillor Ross Henning
- Emily Mullord
- Adam Smith
- Trudy Srawley

- Karen Venner

Further apologies were noted from:

- Councillor Jane Davies
- Kathryn Davis (Director – Education & Skills)
- Councillor Nabil Najjar

The Chair announced the following Membership changes:

- Emily Mullord and Toni Hayzen were welcomed to the Schools Forum as Primary Academy Representatives.
- Ed Powe and Adam Smith were welcomed to the Schools Forum as Maintained Primary Representatives.
- Brett Jouny was welcomed to the Schools Forum as a Secondary Academy Representative.

The Chair also welcomed Daryl Freeman to the meeting as the new Wiltshire Council Director for Children and Education.

34 **Minutes of the Previous Meeting**

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 27 June 2024 were presented for consideration.

Members were informed that a question had been submitted to officers with regard to Minute 24, Annual Schools Consultation – Transfer of funding from Schools Block to High Needs Block 2025-26. In response, officers confirmed that a transfer of 1% from the Schools Block to the High Needs Block could not be undertaken without consulting all schools and the Schools Forum. Despite this, it was clarified that Local Authorities were able to submit a request for disapplication to the Secretary of State if an agreement could not be reached with the Schools Forum. However, it was further noted that the consultation provided comprehensive details on how the additional funds would support the High Needs Block and the indicative impact based on the 2024-25 figures.

Members were reassured that all consultation responses would be considered when deciding upon any transfer, and Members were encouraged to both submit their views and to also promote the consultation to other colleagues in order to better understand the opinion of Wiltshire schools and make the right decision for all.

Following which, it was:

Resolved:

The Schools Forum approved and signed the minutes of the previous meeting held on 27 June 2024 as a true and correct record.

35 **Chair's Announcements**

The Chair informed Members that the order of the agenda would be amended to accommodate conflicting work commitments. Therefore, Agenda Number 13, Update on FACT Partnership Transformation Programme, would be brought forward and considered before Agenda Item 10, Schools Revenue Surplus and Deficit Balances 2023-24.

36 **Declaration of Interests**

There were no declarations of interest.

37 **Public Participation**

It was noted that a question had been received but had not met the deadlines as set out in the agenda. As such, officers had agreed to provide a response after the meeting.

38 **Updates from Working Groups**

The Chair raised the updates from the last meetings of the Early Years Reference Group held on 27 September 2024, and the previous joint meeting of the School Funding Working Group and SEN Working Group held on 23 September 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 27 September 2024, and the previous joint meeting of the School Funding Working Group and SEN Working Group held on 23 September 2024.

39 **Wiltshire Schools Forum Proportionality, Membership and Terms of Reference**

A report on the Wiltshire Schools Forum Proportionality, Membership, and Terms of Reference was presented by Lisa Pullin, Democratic Services Officer.

Members were reminded that the Membership of the Schools Forum was reviewed on an annual basis, with all those who make appointments of named representatives being asked to confirm those persons for the ensuing academic year. As such, it was confirmed that on 13 June 2024, officers had conducted a review of the balance of Membership being Maintained Primary Schools, Maintained Secondary Schools and Academies, and Special School Members. This showed that the current Membership would not need to be amended as it reflected the current breakdown of the total numbers on roll in schools as at the October 2023 census and updated for Academy conversions.

Furthermore, the Terms of Reference of the Schools Forum were last reviewed by the Forum at their meeting on 6 October 2022, and subsequently approved by the Cabinet Member for Children, Education, and Skills on 4 January 2023. As there were no changes to the proportionality, it was proposed that no changes to the Terms of Reference were required.

Following which, it was:

Resolved:

The Schools Forum:

- a. **Noted that the proportionality of the Forum had been reviewed and that no changes were recommended.**
- b. **Noted that no changes to the Terms of Reference as at 4 January 2024 were recommended.**
- c. **Noted the current Membership details of the Forum.**
- d. **Noted that there were no current vacancies for the Schools Forum, although if any arose, that they be appointed to as soon as possible.**

40 **Schools Revenue Surplus and Deficit Balances 2023-24**

Grant Davis, Schools Strategic Financial Support Manager, introduced the report which presented the position of revenue balances for Wiltshire Maintained Schools as at 31 March 2024, and identified those in surplus and deficit. The following was then highlighted:

- The net surplus balances for the financial year 2023/24 were confirmed as £11.3m with 95 schools holding surplus balances of £13.1m and 14 schools in deficit to a value of £1.9m.
- When comparing the figures to those of last year, it was highlighted that there had been a slight reduction in the net surplus balances of £0.9m. However, the number of Local Authority (LA) Maintained Schools had decreased from 116 to 109 over the period of 31 March 2023 to 31 March 2024. Furthermore, it was highlighted that the data did not include those schools which had converted to academies during the financial year.
- Paragraph 5 of the report was highlighted which presented a breakdown of the movement of net revenue balances over the last 3 financial years and showed that the balances were generally coming down across Primary, Secondary, and Special Schools over that period.
- Appendix 1 of the report was then highlighted which showed a breakdown of all individual Maintained Schools' revenue surplus and deficit balances. It was noted that there were two trigger points in which

the Department for Education (DfE) could request further information from LAs and these were detailed in Paragraph 8 of the report.

- Appendix 2 of the report was then raised alongside Appendices 3 and 4 which noted that an investigation could be triggered by the DfE as per Paragraphs 8a and 8b of the report, as there were 9 schools that have held a revenue balance of 15% or more of their school budget share over the past 5 years, and 4 schools that have held deficit balances of more than 2.5% and £10,000 over the past 4 years.
- Paragraphs 12 through 16 of the report were then noted as the key points for the Forum to consider, with Paragraph 17 detailing the indicative position for 2024-25.
- Finally, it was highlighted that the report presented data from Maintained Schools, which represented approximately 50% of the total schools in Wiltshire.

During the discussion, points included:

- It was confirmed that Wiltshire was not in a dissimilar position to comparable LAs and it was noted that some neighbouring LAs had considered reintroducing a clawback scheme for surplus balances. However, it was highlighted that Wiltshire Council had not had such a scheme in place for approximately 12 years, but that it could be considered in the future. It was further highlighted that schools often retained surplus balances in order to fund specific projects such as refitting or erecting new buildings.
- Following from this, Members queried if a further review of the surplus and deficit balances could be undertaken, if any neighbouring LAs had conducted similar reviews, and if the data on surplus balances was correlated with school effectiveness information. In response, officers confirmed that regular discussions were undertaken between School Finance and School Effectiveness officers in order to understand the broader picture of individual school's budgets. Furthermore, it was noted that the DfE would be aware of the financial positions but had not intervened with Wiltshire Council or any other neighbouring authorities to officers' knowledge with regard to these balances.
- It was clarified that those schools in deficit were in that position for a number of reasons, be that legacy debts with the new school leadership teams working to recover the situation, a drop in pupils on roll, or due to schools receiving a higher number of SEND pupils than expected and subsequently implementing additional support.
- It was noted that differences between individual schools' financial positions could be due to factors such as staffing/class structures, school popularity or dated Planned Admission Numbers (PAN).
- Officers agreed to continue the discussion with Members in other relevant forums such as the School Funding Working Group.

Following which, it was:

Resolved:

The Schools Forum noted the report.

Members took a comfort break from 14.55pm to 15.00pm.

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

Marie Taylor, Head of Finance – Children & Education, referred to the report which presented the budget monitoring information against the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) for the financial year 2024-25 as at June 2024. The following was then highlighted:

- It was noted that an overspend of £9.983m across all four Blocks of the DSG was forecast against the overall schools budget, with the main driver for the forecast variance being the ongoing pressures on the High Needs Block (HNB). This was noted as being after the transfer of £28.254m from the deficit reserve in line with the Council's Safety Valve Agreement.
- 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 £4.487m. Paragraphs 7 to 8 of the report highlighted the DfE's introduction of an extension to the entitlements for 9 months to 2-year olds and the universal two-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 were significant.
- The HNB budgets were then detailed, and it was noted that the projected overspend was £14.658m, with the budgets being increased by the planned drawdown from the DSG reserve to facilitate improved budget monitoring, target setting, and methods of measuring success in respect of recovery 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:

Resolved:

The Schools Forum noted the forecast budget monitoring position including the balance on the Dedicated Schools Grant reserve at the end of June 2024, together with the report later in the agenda on SEND Transformation.

42 **Core Schools Budget Grant**

Grant Davis, Schools Strategic Financial Support Manager, introduced the report which updated the Schools Forum on the recently announced Core Schools Budget Grant (CSBG). The following was then highlighted:

- The background to the CSBG was detailed as per Paragraphs 2 to 5 of the report.
- Paragraphs 6 to 9 explained how the CSBG funding would be allocated, with Paragraphs 10 to 14 explaining that the Department for Education (DfE) had stated that the Teachers' Pay Award of 5.5% would be fully funded through the CSBG. However, officers clarified that after calculating allocations for Wiltshire schools, they believed that the CSBG would instead represent a contribution to the additional cost pressures in schools. As such, analysis of the impact of the pay awards and the CSBG grant was detailed in Appendix 1, with Paragraph 14 outlining the key points from the analysis.

There being no questions or comments, it was:

Resolved:

The Schools Forum noted the content of the report and the impact on the Core Schools Budget Grant on individual school budgets.

43 **Update on FACT Partnership Transformation Programme**

An update on the FACT Partnership Transformation Programme was delivered by the FACT Programme Lead, Simon Thomas, and Paul Holdsworth from the Targeted Education Team. The presentation was split into the two projects underway in Wiltshire, where the following was then highlighted:

Early Intervention, Prevention and the FACT Project:

- Members were reminded of Wiltshire's multi-agency Family Help arrangements, with Members being informed that although the project formally closed at the end of March 2025, the core elements had been delivered across Wiltshire.
- The Warminster and Westbury pilot scheme was then briefly detailed, and it was reiterated that the scheme had been created to explore if working together in geographically defined areas in different ways could provide better and more effective early intervention and prevention.
- A graphic was then shown which outlined the different aims of the project and key pieces of feedback received such as ability to self-navigate, improved family dynamics, and engagement of agencies.
- The different approaches implemented were noted, alongside the quantitative impact, key success factors, and extracts of feedback from families and partners.

School and Family Support:

- The core functions and activity of the service was detailed, with it being noted that the overall aims were to increase the use of the Early Support Assessment (ESA) process, develop confidence within schools for using the ESA, and make positive impacts for individual children and young people through early help. Further aims were noted as being to support change for the child holistically through the ESA process and plan; working with lead professionals to build confidence and expertise at implementing ESAs; working in the home with families, children, and young people individually; with school staff to support the needs of the children; and to develop confidence and understanding of thresholds, risks, and support action.
- Members were shown the support and early successes so far, alongside data on school staff confidence ratings, initial data captures for impact measuring, and correlations between children and young people with SEND and ESA, and attendance and ESA.
- Officers presented explanations as to the various successes, such as consistency of practitioners with schools to build relationships, working with other Council services and knowing how to sign post effectively, and the ability to offer support in the home.
- Finally, the project's next steps were detailed, including actions such as quality assurance activity of ESAs to develop knowledge of needs for future planning and sharing key messages with schools, linking with the new Mainstream Inclusion School Advisor (MISA) Team, and developing a practice where school staff can support work in family homes.

During the discussion, points included:

- Members queried if there was a correlation between the two projects and the reduction in the number of fixed-term exclusions. In response, officers noted that although the projects did not explicitly seek to capture such data, they had the ability to retrospectively analyse the data and see if there were any learnings to be taken forward and then presented to the Forum at a future date.

Resolved:

The Schools Forum noted the update.

44 **SEND Transformation Update**

Liz Williams, Finance Lead – High Needs Block Sustainability, alongside Ben Stevens, SEND and Alternative Provision Lead, updated the Schools Forum on the SEND Transformation Programme. The following was then highlighted:

- Paragraphs 2 to 4 were briefly detailed, and it was confirmed that the new SEND and AP Strategy “Meeting Needs Together – Ambitious for All” was approved by Cabinet on 17 September 2024, with the strategy document attached as Appendix 1 to the report.
- Appendix 2 outlined the second Safety Valve monitoring report sent to the Department for Education (DfE) at the end of August 2024 which

covered the activity and data from June to August 2024. It was emphasised that it was a requirement of the agreement with the DfE for the Council to report against the key conditions of the agreement and on the progress to deliver capital projects associated with the agreement, with Paragraph 8 listing the conditions themselves, and Paragraph 13 listing the status of the conditions.

- Although significant steps had been taken, and much of the planned 'activity' being on track, Members were informed that the time from implementation of the project to realisation of the benefits was greater than anticipated. As such, the Council was not on track to meet Agreement Condition 2 and would exceed the forecast £84.5m cumulative deficit in the financial year 2024/25 (excluding Safety Valve payments).
- Paragraphs 15 to 16 noted the impacts of the increased commitments in the system from activity in the current year, the further mitigations that needed to be implemented in order to reduce spend by the 2028/29 financial year, and the profile of the revised forecast.
- Paragraphs 17 to 19 detailed further financial considerations and confirmed the successful bid for the additional High Needs Provisional Capital Allocations grant made available to Council's on the Safety Valve Programme. Therefore, an additional £5.7m of funding had been secured in order to accelerate the delivery of additional Special School capacity.

During the discussion, points included:

- Members expressed concern at the misjudged perception of timings and confirmation that the Council was not on track to meet the condition to reduce the cumulative deficit. Officers drew attention to the fact that more Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) were issued than forecast by this stage of the plan which was driving the increase in spend. On the other hand, this demonstrated the positive action that had been undertaken to clear the backlog of assessments which had resulted in generated plans entering the system quicker than projected.
- Officers noted that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic had affected the EHCP data more than expected, with the sharp incline in requests post-COVID skewing the initial modelling. However, Members were reassured that since January 2024, the level of EHCP requests had stabilised, giving a more accurate representation of demand for officers to confidently benchmark against.
- Officers emphasised the significant amount of work that was needed to meet the conditions of the agreement, reiterated the need to be transparent on the progress of the plan to date, and highlighted the importance of including all schools, parents, carers, and the Forum as partners in the process.
- Members highlighted early intervention and prevention, and it was confirmed that by being both a key priority and condition within the agreement, officers were focussing on developing increased support in this area so that schools and families could start to see the changes more quickly.

Following which, it was:

Resolved:

The Schools Forum noted the update on the SEND Transformation Programme.

45 **Review of EHCP Top-Up Funding**

Liz Williams, Finance Lead – High Needs Block Sustainability, updated the Schools Forum on the progress to date of the review of top-up funding that schools receive for pupils with Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) to ensure that top-up funding was sufficient to meet need, predictable for both a school and the Local Authority (LA), and affordable within the budget envelope. The following was then highlighted:

- Officers had identified that the banded funding values had not kept pace with increases in costs, which could be a driver for the increased number of re-banding requests and requests for additional support over and above band values, with Paragraph 6 outlining the two key reasons in support of the review.
- Paragraph 9 detailed the workstream progresses to date since the June 2024 meeting of the Schools Forum.
- It was confirmed that officers were now proposing to have all EHCPs on their new funding value from September 2025, giving time to accurately allocated children and young people to their new funding level. It was also proposed that all new EHCPs granted from April 2025 would be allocated their new funding value based on the new Descriptors and Guidance, and that the process to allocate all existing EHCPs onto the new values would begin as soon as the model received sign-off from the School's Forum and Cabinet which was due to be determined in February 2025.
- As per Paragraphs 16 to 30, officers noted that they were seeking the views of the Forum on a number of key principles including the Primary Needs Descriptors, funding mechanism, and consultation. However, officers highlighted that the consultation would not include the funding values as schools funding was not confirmed and further work was required with mainstream schools to understand costs.
- Finally, officers drew attention to Paragraph 31, which outlined the next steps for the Autumn term.

During the discussion, points included:

- Members queried if placement funding would increase in line with inflation and actual cost, to which officers clarified that the review was looking at having a Primary Need element which would focus on banding descriptors, and then a Placement element which would recognise the increase of costs. Thus, ensuring a more flexible approach that would stay fit for purpose within the economic climate.

- Members welcomed the review, thanked officers for their hard work, and noted their anticipation of the results of the consultation in due course.

Following which, it was:

Resolved:

The Schools Forum:

- a. Noted the update and next steps for the EHCP Top-Up Review.**
- b. Considered the proposed principles for consultation with stakeholders on a funding mechanism for EHCP Top-Ups.**

46 **Confirmation of Dates for Future Meetings**

The date of the next meeting of the Schools Forum was confirmed as Thursday 12 December 2024 at 1.30pm and was scheduled to be held at County Hall, Trowbridge.

Future meeting dates were confirmed as below:

23 January 2025 – 1.30pm

13 March 2025 – 1.30pm

12 June 2025 – 1.30pm

47 **Urgent Items**

There were no urgent items.

(Duration of meeting: 1.30 - 3.40 pm)

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