

DRAFT

Note: These Minutes will remain DRAFT until approved at the next meeting of the Committee

SCHOOLS FORUM

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON MONDAY, 13 MARCH 2023

Present: Reverend Mark Bennet (Church of England Diocese), Clare Beswick (Maintained Primary School Headteacher), Melissa Cliffe (Maintained Primary School Headteacher), Paul Davey (Maintained Primary School Governor), Jacquie Davies (Pupil Referral Unit Headteacher), Gemma Duff (Maintained Primary School Governor), Richard Hand (Trade Union), Michelle Harrison (Maintained Primary Schools), Keith Harvey (Maintained Primary School Headteacher), Jon Hewitt (Maintained Special School Headteacher), Councillor Ross Mackinnon, Maria Morgan (Maintained Nursery School Headteacher), Gemma Piper (Academy School Headteacher), David Ramsden (Maintained Secondary School Headteacher), Ant Sizer (Maintained Secondary School Deputy Headteacher), Campbell Smith (Academy School Governor), Graham Spellman (Roman Catholic Diocese) and Lindsay Wood (Academy School Headteacher)

Also Present: Avril Allenby (Early Years Service Manager), Melanie Ellis (Chief Accountant), Nicola Ponton (SEN Manager) and Jane Seymour (Service Manager, SEN & Disabled Children's Team), Jessica Bailiss (Policy Officer (Executive Support)) and Michelle Sancho (Acting Head of Education Services)

Apologies for inability to attend the meeting: Councillor Dominic Boeck (Portfolio Holder for Children, Young People and Education), Rose Carberry (Principal Advisor for School Improvement), Richard Hawthorne (Academy School Headteacher), Chris Prosser (Maintained Secondary School Headteacher) and Phil Spray (Maintained Primary School Governor)

PART I

1 Minutes of previous meeting dated 23rd January 2023

The Minutes of the meeting held on 23rd January 2023 were approved as a true and correct record and signed by the Chair.

2 Actions arising from previous meetings

Actions Jan23-Ac1, Ac2 and Ac3 were in hand or completed and were therefore removed from the list of actions arising.

Dec22-Ac4 - Case study information from other local authorities in the Safety Valve or Delivering Better Value programmes: Jane Seymour confirmed that there were not yet any published case studies. These would be shared with the Forum as and when they became available.

Dec22-Ac4 – national data on EHCP inflation: Jane Seymour reported that in West Berkshire since 2014 the number of EHCPs had increased by 41 percent compared to the national increase of 97 percent.

3 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest received.

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4 Membership

Jess Bailiss reported that there were three vacancies on the Forum – a maintained primary representative, the early years private, voluntary and independent (PVI) representative and the post 16 representative. It was hoped these positions would be filled in time for when the Forum next met in June 2023.

5 Work Programme 2023/24 and Contract Timetable

Jess Bailiss drew attention to the proposed work programme for 2023/24 under Appendix A of the report. The work programme followed the same pattern as it had in previous years and was subject to change throughout the year. Included in Appendix B to the report was the contract information that had been requested at the last meeting of the Forum in January.

It was proposed that the Schools' Forum approve the work programme for 2023/24 and note the contract information.

Reverend Mark Bennet recalled that the grounds maintenance and cleaning contracts had been considered by the Forum in the past however, were not included on this list. He queried if this was because these contracts were now delegated to schools rather than handled centrally. Jess Bailiss reported that she would look into both of these contracts. Contracts were only required to be brought to the Forum if they were funded from the DSG or above the EU procurement thresholds.

Jon Hewitt proposed that the work programme for 2023/24 be approved and this was seconded by David Ramsden. The Chair invited the Forum to vote on the proposal and at the vote the motion was approved.

RESOLVED that:

- The Schools' Forum approved the work programme for 2023/24 and noted the contract information.
- Jess Bailiss would look into why the cleaning and grounds maintenance contracts were not included with the contract information.

6 Final High Needs Block Budget 2023/24 (Jane Seymour)

Jane Seymour introduced the report (Agenda Item 7), which set out the current financial position of the high needs budget for 2022/23 and the position as far as it could be predicted for 2023/24, including the likely shortfall.

Jane Seymour reported that the report would be very familiar to members of the Forum as the information had been presented on a number of occasions. The report set out the final position of the High Needs Block (HNB) for the next financial year as far as it could be predicted. It was possible that there could still be some changes. The net shortfall in the 2023-24 HNB budget, was £9,548,144. This included a predicted 22/23 overspend of £2,858,901 and carried forward overspends of £3,596,982 from previous years. Without the carried forward overspends, the shortfall in 23-24 would be £3,092,261.

Jane Seymour reported that the reason why these figures were slightly higher than at previous meetings was because there was a requirement, under the minimum funding guarantee, to passport an increase of 3.4 percent to special schools. There was also additional funding included for the pupil referral unit, in line with the proposal which was due to be discussed later on the agenda. There were also some additional costs in relation to additional placements since the figures were initially presented.

Gemma Piper queried how many additional placements had been awarded since November 2022, when the report was last presented, and since factored onto the figures. Jane Seymour reported that she would have to check the exact numbers. It was not a

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huge number however, it needed to be kept in mind that one placement could cost over £100k per annum so could make a significant difference.

Reverend Mark Bennet was aware that schools were under increasing pressure with regards to additional needs. He asked if there was any intelligence from schools that informed forward thinking on the number of places that might be required. Jane Seymour reported that this was being looked at as part of the SEND strategy review, which was taking place currently. The data gathered would be used to provide a pattern of provision needed going forward to meet needs over the next five years.

The recommendation was that the Schools' Forum approved the HNB budget for 2023/24. Catie Colston proposed that the HNB budget 2023/24 was approved and this was seconded by Maria Morgan. The Chair invited the Forum to vote on the proposal and at the vote the motion was approved.

RESOLVED that:

- Jane Seymour would check the number of placements that had been awarded since the last report was brought to the Forum in November 2022 and factored into the figures.
- The HNB Budget for 2023/24 was approved by the Schools' Forum.

7 iCollege Review (Nicola Ponton and Jacquie Davies)

Nicola Ponton introduced the report (Agenda Item 8), which aimed to confirm the funding method proposed for iCollege in March 2023 taking in to account the increased demand for iCollege since the Covid-19 pandemic.

Nicola Ponton reported that a decision was required on two items. The first item was seeking guaranteed upfront funding for iCollege as currently there was a lag each term, which made managing the budget particularly difficult. Jacquie Davies reported that this would bring iCollege in line with how mainstream schools were funded and prevent the roller coaster effect and anxiety amongst governors when it looked like iCollege was going into deficit when it was not. Jacquie Davies reported that the area had been spoken about the previous year however, had not come to fruition.

Nicola Ponton explained that the second area where a decision was required was for increased provision at the PRU for pupils in Key Stage Three. There had been a lot of work undertaken by secondary heads to lead on the area. It was proposed that the places be increased at the Pod Plus (for EHCP students) by six places to allow for year nine students. It was proposed that there be an additional 12 places at integration to enable year seven and eight learners to follow a bespoke intervention programme to enable them to reintegrate back into mainstream school and hopefully address some of the difficulties they had been facing with the emotional dysregulation.

Reverend Mark Bennet reported that in his role as Governor at Kennet School he had become aware of how positive some of the iCollege interventions were but also how challenging it was for schools to access places. It was good to see that more places were planned, however, considering the increased needs pupils were currently presenting with, Reverend Bennet queried if it was a sufficient number of places. Nicola Ponton reported that the increase was likely related to Covid and from young people recovering from the experience of being at home. The additional 12 places proposed was roughly in line with the extra demand being seen for iCollege. Nicola Ponton added that it was still unknown exactly how young people were recovering but based on the information available it seemed the most reasonable proposal. It was also important not to commit too much high needs funding if it was not needed.

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Catie Colston referred to section 2.1 of the report, which confirmed the upfront method of funding and asked if her understanding was right that the method of funding would stay the same but the timing would change. Nicola Ponton confirmed this was correct. Catie Colston further queried if, as a result of the change of timing, there would be any negative impact on other local authority services or schools that the Forum needed to be aware of. Nicola Ponton confirmed it was simply a change to timings to ensure iCollege was provided with funding in the same way as mainstream schools.

Keith Harvey commented that it was highly unlikely that there would be lower numbers of pupils needing increased support anytime soon. He felt that the number of children going through to primary school with significant difficulties was increasing in younger age groups and therefore it was likely there would be much higher need for a longer period of time as a result of Covid.

Gemma Piper felt that numbers needed to be captured earlier on, down to year four, to help identify where the priority cases were. There was data available, particularly in primary schools, regarding potential numbers and this would help to map for the future. It was felt numbers would not reduce for some time yet.

Maria Morgan agreed with Keith Harvey's comments and that increased levels of need were being seen at a much younger age. Until all the services that were in place prior to the pandemic were back in place, this increase would be difficult to manage.

Jacquie Davies reported that they already had an understanding of the primary level data because they knew about the current year sixes that would be moving through to secondary school. The Outreach Team was also already working with a number of pupils in years four and five. Jacquie Davies reported she did not have the data to hand but the resources were in place to capture the data.

Jacquie Davies reported that the increase in capacity at Key Stage Three would provide flexibility to be able to do more outreach work.

Keith Harvey proposed that the two recommendations set out in section two of the report were approved and this was seconded by Catie Colston. The Chair invited the Forum to vote on the proposal and at the vote the motion was approved.

RESOLVED that:

- The Schools' Forum approved the recommendation for a method of 'up-front' funding for iCollege.
- The Schools' Forum approved the recommendation for additional places at iCollege as set out in the report.

8 Final Early Years Block Budget 2023/24 (Avril Allenby)

Avril Allenby introduced the report (Agenda Item 9), which set out the proposal for the Early Years budget 2023/24, which was based upon the recommendations of the Early Years Funding Group (EYFG).

Avril Allenby reported that unlike reports for other budgets, the one for early years had to be brought to the Forum late in the year and this was because of the way the funding was calculated. They had to wait for a review of the number of places and hours that had been taken up.

Avril Allenby explained that when the report was pulled together in consultation with the EYFG, two areas needed to be taken into consideration. Firstly the deficit recovery and secondly how to work with local providers to provide a balanced and fair budget that could be passed through to providers to ensure they could continue to operate effectively for young children.

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Avril Allenby highlighted that much within the report was good news. There was increased funding for the various aspects of the early years grant. It was however still important to be mindful of the deficit, which was not being recovered as quickly as desired.

Lisa Potts reported that for the current years forecast, the number of hours taken up had decreased. The consequence of this was that a reduced level of grant funding would be received. The budget had initially been set with a high level of deficit (£368k) however, taking all factors into account, this was not expected to be as high (£65k). This was an improved position of £303k on the budget. Progress was also being made with the pass through rate which had been quite high historically and had reduced to 98.2 percent for 2023/24.

Lisa Potts highlighted that the table under 6.3 of the report showed the current base rate and what it should have been if the deficit recovery plan had been followed. Figures had been proposed for the hourly funding rate and had been agreed by the EYFG.

The table under section 6.7 of the report showed the budget for 2023/24. This was particularly difficult to pull together because the income estimate was based on schools census information from January 2023 and then also 2024. The key figure within the table was the in-year shortfall for 2023/24, which was £71k and much lower than expected for the current year.

Lisa Potts drew attention to section 6.8 of the report regarding the quality rate. In the past there had been a good level of quality across providers in terms of the standard of staff providing the service. The problem was that this also impacted on the pass through rate. The number of hours that were eligible for the quality rate had increased from 53 percent in 2019/20 to 62 percent in 2022/23. This was something that might need to be reviewed going forward.

Lisa Potts highlighted that for the centrally managed funds the budget for the SEN Inclusion Fund had been increased and some analysis for this was included within Appendix A to the report. It was hoped that the increase in the SEN Inclusion Fund would help support more children at a younger age.

The Chair commended the effort that had gone into trying to balance the budget, which was a great achievement.

Catie Colston referred to information on the quality rate and asked for this to be explained in more detail. Avril Allenby reported that a quality rate had always been provided in West Berkshire and when the national funding formula was introduced it had needed to be rationalised. The settings that attracted the quality rate had to have either a qualified teacher or a qualification that was equivalent. Avril Allenby reported that this was something that had been encouraged because it would be good for early years however, it had been encouraged so well that there was a much higher proportion of children attending settings that attracted the quality rate. There were also now more schools that provided nursery provision. Avril Allenby explained that going forward they would be looking into whether the quality rate could be differentiated depending on qualifications, but this would need to be consulted on.

Reverend Mark Bennet reported that there had been some information in the national press regarding the number of early years' providers reducing and he queried what was happening to the number of local providers. Reverend Bennet stated that one of the areas considered by the Forum in the past was its success in reaching disadvantaged pupils in early years, and he asked if there was any information to show how this area was progressing.

In response to Reverend Bennet's first question regarding providers, Avril Allenby reported that locally there had not been as many closures due to the cost of living crises,

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compared to that reported nationally. Those providers at risk had managed to re-assess their services and continue to operate. Business support was also provided to providers at risk of closure. Avril Allenby reported that there had been no closures in 2023/24 and in the previous year four very small providers had closed.

Regarding Reverend Bennet's second question on vulnerable children, Avril Allenby reported that the vulnerable two year old rates had dropped during Covid however, it was now steadily climbing back up. There would soon be a review of SEN places as it needed to be understood how well children with SEN were accessing their entitlements and to ensure there were sufficient places. Reverend Bennet stated that this was an area that would need focus going forward as the budget would come under increasing pressure from economic factors.

Keith Harvey proposed that the two recommendations set out in section two of the report were approved and this was seconded by Melissa Cliffe. The Chair invited the Forum to vote on the proposal and at the vote the motion was approved.

RESOLVED that The Schools' Forum approved the Early Years DSG budget for 2023/24 as set out in the report and that focus should remain on deficit recovery and lowering of the pass-through rate.

9 Schools Funding Formula 2023-24 Update (Melanie Ellis)

Melanie Ellis introduced the report (Agenda Item 10), which informed members of a change to the final school funding formula allocations for 2023/24 as a result of the Department for Education (DfE) review.

Melanie Ellis reported that the information had already been sent to schools. When West Berkshire had submitted its data, the DfE had come back with a query on the business rate estimates and requested an uplift be applied to ensure all schools had the best estimate for the 2023/24 position. This had been run through the funding formula and schools had been advised accordingly.

RESOLVED that the Schools' Forum noted the report.

10 Deficit Schools (Melanie Ellis)

Melanie Ellis introduced the report (Agenda Item 11) which sought to provide details of the most recent financial forecast of the five schools which had operated throughout 2022/23 with licenced deficit budgets and schools that had informed West Berkshire Council they now expected to end the 2022/23 financial year with an unlicensed deficit balance on their main school budget. The report also provided an overview of the School Resource Management Advisers (SRMA) deployment scheme that three of the five licenced deficit schools took part in during the autumn term 2022/23.

Melanie Ellis reported that two of the five schools in deficit were expecting to end the year with a surplus; one was expecting to have a slightly improved deficit position than budgeted; and the other two were expecting to have a higher deficit than planned. The reasons behind each school's position was detailed in the report. The Schools Accountancy Team would continue to work with all schools involved.

Melanie Ellis drew attention to section five of the report and highlighted that it was concerning that seven schools had submitted a P9 report that forecasted an unlicensed deficit on their Main School Budget at the end of the 2022/23 financial year. Further detail on this could be found in the report and Melanie Ellis reported that she would report on this again after year end when it would be known for certain how many more schools were facing a deficit.

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Melanie Ellis drew attention to section six of the report on the SRMA deployment. Melanie Ellis reported that the SRMA was an independent expert with experience of managing resources in the education sector. It was being provided through the DfE and was free support for schools.

In 2021, two West Berkshire schools had participated in the SRMA scheme and a year later another school had taken part. The feedback was included in Appendix A to the report along with details of the schools that had taken part and recommendations made by the SRMA. Melanie Ellis reported that the SRMA process had now been added as a condition for a school having a deficit licensed.

Melanie Ellis explained that the table under 7.1 of the report summarised the forecasts, with nine schools forecasting a total deficit of £489k, and three schools forecasting a surplus of £77k. Monitoring would continue until year end, and a report on the final position will be produced.

RESOLVED that the Schools' Forum noted the report.

11 **DSG Monitoring 2022/23 Month 10 (Michelle Sancho)**

Michelle Sancho introduced the report (Agenda Item 12), which provided the forecast financial position of the services funded by the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG), highlighting any under or over spends, and the cumulative deficit on the DSG.

Michelle Sancho reported that there were four DSG funding blocks, which were set out in the report. The funding for each of the blocks was determined by a national funding formula. The DSG allocation for 2022/23 was £157.4m, which included £48.4m that funded academies and post-16 high needs places, which was paid directly by the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) to schools. The DSG budget for 2022/23 had been built using the remaining grant of £109m.

The DSG expenditure budgets required for 2022/23 totalled £110.7m, which was £1.7m more than the funding available. As a result, a £1.7m in-year efficiency target had been set against this in order to balance the DSG budget.

The forecast position at the end of January 2023 was detailed in Table One of the report and more detailed information was included in Appendix A. The Month Ten forecast showed an in-year forecast deficit of £3.2m, against the in-year efficiency target in the High Needs Block. When added to the cumulative deficit of £2.96m, the forecast year end deficit on the DSG was £6.2m. The majority of the reported £1m overspend on the High Needs Block related to pressures on top up funding.

Gemma Piper stated that the Education Welfare Service (EWO) was becoming a statutory requirement and asked if the deficit included an increase in funding for this. Michelle Sancho reported that the EWO Service currently had a statutory element and a traded element however with new Government requirements this would change from September 2023. The change had not impacted on the current figures presented in the report. The service was currently reconfiguring how it was going to deliver its services going forward with regards to reducing the traded element and increasing the statutory element. The service was currently funded by the Schools' Block.

RESOLVED that the Schools' Forum noted the report.

12 **Date and format of the next meeting**

The next meeting of the Forum would take place virtually on 19th June 2023 at 5pm.

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(The meeting commenced at 5.00 pm and closed at 5.51 pm)

CHAIR

Date of Signature