

SCHOOLS FORUM

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON MONDAY, 22 JANUARY 2024

Present: Nicolle Browning (Maintained Secondary School Headteacher), Councillor Heather Codling (Executive Portfolio Holder: Children, Education and Young People's Services), Councillor Iain Cottingham (Executive Portfolio Holder: Finance and Corporate Services), Paul Davey (Maintained Primary School Governor), Jacquie Davies (Pupil Referral Unit Headteacher), Richard Hand (Trade Union), Jon Hewitt (Maintained Special School Headteacher), Trevor Keable (Academy School Governor), Jo Lagares (Maintained Primary School Headteacher), Maria Morgan (Maintained Nursery School Headteacher), Gemma Piper (Academy School Headteacher), Lesley Roberts (Maintained Primary School Headteacher), Graham Spellman (Chair (Roman Catholic Diocese)), Phil Spray (Maintained Primary School Governor) and Lindsay Wood (Academy School Headteacher)

Also Present: Rose Carberry (Principal Adviser for School Improvement), Melanie Ellis (Acting Head of Finance and Property) and Jane Seymour (Service Manager, SEN & Disabled Children's Team) and Jessica Bailiss (Democratic Services Officer)

Apologies for inability to attend the meeting: Avril Allenby, Reverend Mark Bennet, AnnMarie Dodds, Michelle Harrison, Keith Harvey, Richard Hawthorne, Lisa Potts, Chris Prosser, David Ramsden, Michelle Sancho, Campbell Smith and Charlotte Wilson

PART I

The Chair thanked Melissa Cliffe (Maintained Primary Representative), who had stood down from the Forum, for her commitment to both the Heads' Funding Group and Schools' Forum over the last two years. Following discussion with representatives from the Downs Federation regarding the setting being over represented on the Forum, it had been felt that this was the most appropriate action to ensure the membership remained balanced in line with the Constitution.

The Chair also thanked Gemma Duff (Maintained Primary Governor Representative), who had needed to stand down from the Forum due to personal reasons.

The Chair explained that agenda 10 (Growth Fund Payments 2023/24) was for decision rather than discussion and therefore would be brought forward on the agenda and considered after agenda item 6 (Central Schools Services Block Proposals).

1 Minutes of previous meeting dated 4th December 2023

The Minutes of the meeting held on 4th December 2023 were approved a true and correct record and signed by the Chair.

2 Actions arising from previous meetings

All actions from the previous meetings were in hand or completed.

3 Declarations of Interest

Lindsay Wood declared an interest in Agenda Item 10 regarding the Growth Fund 2023/24 payments, due to being a headteacher of a school that formed part of the Newbury Academy Trust. As her interest was a prejudicial and pecuniary interest Lindsay Wood would leave the meeting for the duration of the item and not take part in the vote.

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4 Membership

Jess Bailiss provided the following Membership updates:

- Primary Head teachers were being consulted to seek a new representative for the Forum, following Melissa Cliffe standing down.
- Maria Morgan's term of office was due to end in April 2024. Maria Morgan had confirmed that she was happy to continue but would consult on this with the new Hungerford headteacher when they were due to start in April.
- Gemma Duff had recently stood down from the Forum and an election would be held shortly for this maintained primary governor position.

5 Final Central School Block Budget Proposals 2024/25 (Lisa Potts)

Melanie Ellis introduced the report (Agenda Item 6), which set out the budget proposal for services funded from the Central Schools' Services (CSSB) block of the DSG.

Melanie Ellis reported that there had been a small reduction in the funding compared to last year (£12k).

It had been possible to make a saving as a result of the Capita System moving to the Cloud and this made it possible to balance the block for 2024/25.

Trevor Keable referred to the provision of education data, which had been reduced by 16 percent and queried what implications this would have. Melanie Ellis confirmed that this related to the cost saving from the Capita System and therefore was only a reduction in the cost and not the service provided.

It was proposed and seconded that the CSSB budget for 2024/25 should be agreed. The Chair invited the Forum to vote on the proposal and at the vote the recommendation was approved.

RESOLVED that: The Schools' Forum approved the 2024/25 CSSB budget in line with the recommendation in section 2.1 of the report.

6 Growth Fund 2023/24 (Melanie Ellis)

(Lindsay Wood left the meeting)

Melanie Ellis introduced the report (Agenda Item 10), which aimed to inform the Schools' Forum of payments recommended to be made to schools from the Growth Fund budget in 2023/24. It was noted that one payment was recommended to Trinity School for £105.3k.

Melanie Ellis reported that following the release of the October 2023 census data, applications were invited from schools who felt they might qualify for growth funding. Melanie Ellis reported that only one application had been received, from Trinity School, and as detailed in the report, it had been assessed that the school met the requirements of the fund and it was therefore recommended that the payment should be agreed by the Forum.

Trevor Keable queried what the criteria was for the funding as he noted it was not detailed within the report. Melanie Ellis confirmed that the criteria was quite detailed and had been subject to a previous report, where the criteria for 2024/25 was agreed. Melanie Ellis commented that she would send a copy of the criteria to Trevor Keable.

It was proposed and seconded that the payment to Trinity School should be agreed as set out in the recommendation in section 2.1 of the report. The Chair invited the Forum to vote on the proposal and at the vote the recommendation was approved.

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RESOLVED that:

- Melanie Ellis would forward a copy of the Growth Funding Criteria to Trevor Keable following the meeting.
- The Schools' Forum approved the payment of £105.3k to Trinity School from the Growth Fund.

7 Final DSG Funding Settlement Overview 2024/25 (Melanie Ellis)

(Lindsay Wood re-joined the meeting)

Melanie Ellis introduced the report (Agenda Item 7), which set out the final Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) allocation for 2024-25.

Melanie Ellis reported that the final allocations for the DSG had been received in December 2023. These allocations were set out in the table under section 4.1 of the report and comparisons to the previous year were provided.

Trevor Keable noted the political conversations that had been taking place regarding the amount of money LAs received from central funds and he queried if West Berkshire was acting within this. In response, Councillor Iain Cottingham reported that he had attended a Local Government Finance Conference with the S151 Officer in Westminster and there had been no mention or commitment to extra money being available. The situation facing DSGs had been raised and a number of LAs were facing a deficit. There had been no commitment made that overspends against DSGs, which was prevalent across the majority of LAs in the country, would be called in during 2026. There was a consultation document out currently regarding the flexible use of capital receipts, which was hoped would be a positive move. In conclusion, Councillor Cottingham stated that as far as he was aware there was no extra money available and they were administering in line with the rules of the scheme and central government formula. It was noted that it was an election year.

RESOLVED that the Schools' Forum noted the report.

8 Final School Funding 2024/25 (Melanie Ellis)

Melanie Ellis introduced the report (Agenda Item 8), which set out the final school funding formula allocations for 2024/25 for information.

Melanie Ellis reported that the table on page 30 of the agenda pack would be of most interest to schools as it showed the individual school funding allocations for the year ahead. This was subject to political ratification and following this the information would be circulated to schools.

RESOLVED that the Schools' Forum noted the report.

9 High Needs Block Budget Proposals 2024/25 (Jane Seymour)

Jane Seymour provided a verbal update on the High Needs Block (HNB) Proposals for 2024/25. Normally, at the current stage of the year, a detailed report would be provided on budget proposals however, further work was required by officers and members of the Heads Funding Group (HFG) on the finer detail of proposals for 2024/25. Jane Seymour confirmed that it would be a deficit budget as expected however, through this further work the aim was to contain the deficit as much as possible. A special meeting of the HFG was due to take place on 7th February to begin this work and a full report setting out the HNB Budget proposals would be brought to the next Schools' Forum in March. This would include proposals around the invest to save projects, which had been discussed as part of the previous report.

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The Chair noted that there was a lot of work and discussion taking place. Trevor Keable queried if there was concern about the result of this process and what it would mean for schools. Jane Seymour reported that schools did not currently need to do anything and did not need to be concerned. The HNB was always an area of concern because a deficit budget had been set for several years and it was increasing. Ways to contain this, in a way that protected children's statutory needs, were being looked at. Further detail would be brought to the next Forum meeting.

RESOLVED that the Schools' Forum noted the update.

10 DSG Monitoring 2023/24 Month 9 (Lisa Potts)

Melanie Ellis introduced the report (Agenda Item 11), which aimed to report the forecast financial position of the services funded by the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG), highlighting any under or over spends, and to highlight the cumulative deficit on the DSG.

Melanie Ellis reported that West Berkshire's DSG allocation for 2023/24 was £167m. Some of this went straight to academies and high needs places, and the remaining balance following this was £115.7m. The budget was also set with a £3m efficiency target, which had not been met and therefore still stood as an overspend. There was also an additional overspend in the High Needs Block (HNB) of £1.5m. All other blocks had managed to break even. The table under section 4.5 of the report showed that the deficit balance from 2022/23 was £4.7m with the cumulative deficit expected to increase to £9.5m by the end of 2023/24.

The final table in the report under section 4.9 showed the balances broken down by each block and it could be seen that the Schools' Block had quite a large surplus, which was due to the Growth Fund.

Gemma Piper felt that it was important to note the body of work taking place with the HFG, targeted at deficit management. This work was extremely important and it was very clear what needed to be achieved. Melanie Ellis added that as well as this work taking place by the HFG, West Berkshire was also part of the Delivering Better Value (DBV) Programme, also designed to help reduce the overspend.

Richard Hand queried what the primary drivers were of the huge increase in SEND costs and how the increase compared with other LAs. In response Jane Seymour commented that the key drivers were a combination in the increase in the number of children requiring Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) in mainstream schools (maintained and academies) and also an increase in the number of children needing places in independent non-maintained special schools combined with an increase in the unit cost of external provision. Officers were unable to comment on increases compared to other LAs however, the increase was £9.5m compared to only £1.4m in 2021, indicating it was doubling each year.

Trevor Keable commented that the matter had been discussed recently with the Denefield School SEND Team and it had been found that more parents were undertaking private assessments, which were highlighting detailed needs, which they might not have got if the LA route had been taken. Concern had been expressed that this could be skewing the budget, because increased finances were required for these children and children were often identified as having a greater need compared to those going through the LA route. It was noted that waiting times with the LA were often long.

Richard Hand noted the work taking place however, there did not seem to be much cross LA consultation/discussion regarding one of the primary drivers, which was the costs charged by external private providers. He queried if there were any checks and balances on this element as it did not seem like it was being addressed. Jane Seymour reported one way they were trying to address this issue was through increasing local maintained

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specialist provision, so there was less reliance on independent non-maintained providers. This included the Castle at Theale (opened in 2022), Kennet Valley SEMH opening in September 2024 and there were further new provisions planned as part of the five year SEND Strategy. The other issue was the increase in unit costs and Jane Seymour explained that sometimes these could be justified but other times not and anything that could not be justified was always challenged. The DBV Programme would help with this issue as it would provide increased commissioning capacity to be proactive on this matter and in reviewing the costs of all placements.

Councillor Iain Cottingham commented on the wider issue of children's care plans, which had been debated at the conference he had attended. Regulating care plans had been raised as a way to help tackle the issue.

The Chair noted the complexity of the subject and looked forward to receiving a report with more information in March.

RESOLVED that the Schools' Forum noted the report.

11 Forward Plans

The Schools' Forum noted the forward plans.

12 Date of the next meeting

The next meeting of the Schools' Forum would take place at Shaw House on 11th March 2024 from 5pm.

(The meeting commenced at 5.00 pm and closed at 5.40 pm)

CHAIR

Date of Signature