

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, 11 MARCH 2024

Present: Reverend Mark Bennet (Church of England Diocese), 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), Keith Harvey (Maintained Primary 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 (Roman Catholic Diocese) and Lindsay Wood (Academy School Headteacher)

Also Present: Avril Allenby (Early Years Service Manager), Rose Carberry (Principal Adviser for School Improvement), AnnMarie Dodds (Executive Director - Children and Family Services), Melanie Ellis (Acting Head of Finance and Property), Nicola Ponton (SEN Manager), Jane Seymour (Service Manager, SEN & Disabled Children's Team) and Jessica Bailiss (Democratic Services Officer)

Apologies for inability to attend the meeting: Nicolle Browning (Academy School Headteacher), Michelle Harrison ((Maintained Primary School SBM), Jon Hewitt (Maintained Special School Headteacher), Chris Prosser (Maintained Secondary School Headteacher), David Ramsden (Maintained Secondary School Headteacher), Campbell Smith (Academy School Governor), Phil Spray (Maintained Primary School Governor) and Charlotte Wilson (Academy School Headteacher)

PART I

1 **Minutes of previous meetings date 19th December 2023 and 22nd January 2024**

The Minutes of the meetings held on 19th December 2023 and 22nd January 2024 were approved as true and correct records and signed by the Chair.

2 **Actions arising from previous meetings**

All actions were in hand or completed.

3 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest received.

4 **Membership**

Jess Bailiss provided the following membership updates:

SCHOOLS FORUM - 11 MARCH 2024 - MINUTES

- Following an election for a maintained primary governor, Jay Armstrong, who was a Governor at Hungerford Primary School, had joined the Forum.
- An academy governor election was also held but no nominations were submitted so this would be repeated at a later stage.
- Primary Headteachers had been consulted to seek a new representative for the Forum. Hopefully this position would be filled in time for the next round of meetings in June 2024.
- The Early Years Funding Group had sought nominations for a Private, Voluntary and Independent Early Years representative to join the Forum however no nominations had come forward. This would be raised again at the next meeting.
- No Forum members were approaching the end of their term of office at the present time.

5 Work Programme 2024/25 (Jessica Bailiss)

The Chair drew attention to the work programme on page 17 and asked if Forum members had any questions.

Reverend Mark Bennett commented that the High Needs Block (HNB) was currently facing challenges and queried if the proposed work programme would be sufficient in tackling the issues faced. Rose Carberry reported that six additional meetings of the Heads' Funding Group (HFG) had been scheduled to focus in detail on the area of high needs and it was expected that this should be sufficient.

It was proposed and seconded that the work programme for 2024/25 be approved. 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 2024/25.

6 Final High Needs Block Budget 2024/25 (Jane Seymour)

Jane Seymour introduced the report (Agenda Item 7) that sought approval for the proposed 2024-25 High Needs Block (HNB) deficit budget and for a decision to be reached on how the Schools' Block transfer of 0.25 percent in 2024/25 should be used.

Jane Seymour reported that the HNB had been an area of challenge for some time and the range of reasons for this were set out in the report. The table under section 4.1 of the report showed that there had been an increase in Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) in West Berkshire by 58 percent between 2019 and 2024. The pressure for additional EHCPs had been exacerbated by the Covid pandemic. The pandemic had also exacerbated a pre-existing issue with rising incidence of Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA).

Jane Seymour drew attention to section 4.4 of the report, which set out the deficit budgets set for the HNB over the last eight years. This was an issue being faced nationally. Jane Seymour reported that, as a result, 55 Local Authorities (LAs) had been placed in the Government's Delivering Better Value Programme (DBVP) and 20 LAs with the highest level of overspend were now part of the Government's Safety Valve Programme (SVP). West Berkshire was in tranche three of the DBVP.

Jane Seymour explained that the criteria for EHCPs was applied robustly in West Berkshire however increases were still being seen. The creation of more local provision for children with SEMH and autism had alleviated some pressures, as local maintained provision was more cost effective than independent and non-maintained provision. Further detail on this was included in section 4.7 of the report.

Section 4.10 of the report summarised the current position. In summary, the total net shortfall in the 2024-25 HNB budget was £17,784,394. This included a predicted 2023/24 overspend of £4,793,622 and carried forward overspends of £5,070,384 from previous

SCHOOLS FORUM - 11 MARCH 2024 - MINUTES

years, totalling £9,864,006 in overspends. Without the carried forward overspends, the shortfall in 24-25 would be £7,920,388.

Section 4.12 of the report set out the areas that cost increases in the estimated budget requirement for 2024-25 related to. The most significant increase related to independent and non-maintained school placements. Details of the services paid for from the high needs budget and the corresponding budget information was set out in Appendix A of the report.

Jane Seymour drew attention to section five of the report, which detailed the impact of the DBVP in West Berkshire and how it sought to move the area to a more sustainable position.

To conclude, Jane Seymour highlighted the proposals set out in section seven of the report, which included a recommendation to agree the deficit budget, whilst work continued to reduce costs through the DBVP and work carried out by the Heads' Funding Group (HFG) on non-statutory spend at its additional meetings.

Gemma Piper referred to the additional meetings of the HFG and commented that the first meeting had provided some context however, what actually needed to be achieved still needed to be set out. In terms of approving the HNB Budget, Gemma Piper commented that it had been clear at the last meeting of the HFG that approving the HNB Budget at the current stage felt like an arbitrary process, because the budget proposed did not include the savings that would need to be realised over the next year. Gemma Piper queried the process going forward in terms of how saving proposals formed by the HFG would feed into the Schools' Forum. It was confirmed by Officers that any proposals formed at additional meetings of the HFG would need to then go to the Forum to be considered. Gemma Piper noted that the key meeting dates were the gateway to change and it would be helpful to have this mapped out ready for the next additional HFG meeting.

Gemma Piper reported that at the HFG the point had been raised about monitoring other LAs that were also in DBV and SVP and this had been added as an ongoing action. Gemma Piper requested that this also be added as an ongoing action for the Schools' Forum to be reported on at each meeting. Rose Carberry reported that an updated DBV presentation, including the information requested by heads, would be provided in time for the next additional HFG meeting.

Trevor Keable voiced concern that no information had come forward yet from the additional HFG meetings to the Forum regarding what was proposed. He was concerned that Forum members were not being kept informed. The Chair suggested that a special meeting of the Schools' Forum was likely required.

Trevor Keable queried what the implications were if the proposed HNB budget set out in the report was not approved.

Trevor Keable referred to the current steer being taken by the Department for Education (DfE) and that schools were becoming increasingly difficult to manage. Staff in schools were exhausted due to having to care for children when the LA had needed to withdraw some support. Situations were occurring where pupils required further support than what could be offered in mainstream schools and this was making it particularly stressful for staff. The Forum needed to understand how to work with the LA and schools given the real issues being faced.

Keith Harvey noted the increase in EHCPs in West Berkshire of 36 percent between 2019 and 2023, whilst the increase in funding was only 30 percent. In his view, this immediately showed where the deficit was coming from. Keith Harvey asked West Berkshire Councillors if there was anything they could do to lobby the Government on the

SCHOOLS FORUM - 11 MARCH 2024 - MINUTES

matter. He was concerned that even with the mitigations proposed as part of DBVP, the deficit was still going to increase.

Councillor Iain Cottingham referred to the guidance coming from the DfE. The £17m deficit was 10 percent of the LAs revenue budget for 2024/25 and was a huge amount of money. He referred to the Government's budget announcement and that Departments were receiving cuts in real terms to fund tax cuts. It was noted that if there was a change in Government it was unlikely that new funding would come forward for LAs. Councillor Cottingham reported that it was recognised that the system was broken and he had stated as part of his budget speech for the LA that the Government needed to get a grip on adult and children social care funding where costs and demand were rising.

Keith Harvey queried if Councillor Cottingham was in touch with the local Members of Parliament who could potentially lobby the Government. Councillor Cottingham was not confident about the impact lobbying would have however, he and Councillor Heather Codling agreed to lobby local MPs on the matter.

Gemma Piper commented that the additional HFG was due to meet for a second time and it was hoped that at this meeting it would become clear what needed to be saved by when. No proposals had yet been formed however, Officers had gone away from the last meeting to carry out the necessary work in time for the next scheduled meeting and heads were keen to understand what needed to be achieved and what levers were available to help pull back spend. Gemma Piper stated that there was an envelope that they needed to work within and felt lobbying should be taking place and the reality should be shared. Gemma Piper felt that all members of the Forum should individually lobby the local MP, whilst offering to children within communities the very best they could offer, which was currently within an envelope that there was little control over.

Keith Harvey stated that he had sent a letter via his local MP to the Secretary of State and he had received a response, which had provided little information. Councillor Cottingham agreed they needed to do as much as possible with a collective voice. Rose Carberry agreed that there was a risk that if issues were not raised it would be assumed everything was fine.

Rose Carberry explained that the private meeting with Forum members had been cancelled because at that point discussions regarding what needed to be achieved were no further forward. Detail would shortly be provided to the HFG and it was proposed that an action be taken away to set up an extraordinary Schools' Forum meeting prior to the next scheduled meeting in June, to ensure members were up to date.

Paul Davey referred to a point he had raised at the last Forum meeting regarding a lack of clarity concerning what levers were available and what information would be available to Forum members in order to be able to understand what could be done. Paul Davey noted that this information had not yet been brought to the Forum however, now understood this was because it was shortly to be shared with the HFG. Paul Davey felt that following the next additional HFG, the information would need to be shared with the Forum fairly quickly so they were all working from the same page. He was conscious that it was a large amount of money that needed to be recouped and he was conscious they were still in the hopeful stage rather than the planning and organisation stage.

Rose Carberry reported that there was a process in place to facilitate robust discussions. The background work was currently being undertaken and when a position was reached where there was clarity around what could realistically be saved, it would be brought to the Forum for consideration. It was noted that there were savings in relation to DBVP being viewed at the same time as wider savings.

Reverend Mark Bennet referred to use of language used in terms of being robust in the evaluation of EHCPs and what this did in terms of relationships with parents. Every

SCHOOLS FORUM - 11 MARCH 2024 - MINUTES

EHCP that a parent had to fight for through an appeal was a lost relationship with a parent and someone who felt distanced from the system. It represented a huge amount of energy that had been placed into something other than educating their child. Reverend Bennet stressed that the partnership with parents was really important and although criteria needed to be applied robustly it also needed to be applied fairly. He was concerned that parents with less resource to fight through the system were put at a disadvantage. It was felt that the system might need rebalancing to maintain positive relationships with parents.

In response to Reverend Bennet's comments, Jane Seymour voiced that relationships with parents were really important and clarified that those attending the Panel did not resent having to make an EHCP. The reason why the area was so overspent was because need was being met where it was identified. An EHCP could not be refused on the ground of the budget. It was also important to be clear that because there was only an 'envelope' available it was not possible to give out everything that was requested and there were controls within the system. Jane Seymour apologised for the use of the word 'robust' and clarified that this had only been used to demonstrate that these controls were in place. Jane Seymour expressed that whilst Officers were very aware of the envelope they needed to work within, the most important aim was to meet the needs of children.

Richard Hand referred to the relaunched website called [School Cuts](#), which was a useful tool for schools. Richard Hand reported that concerningly the message from the DfE was that schools were adequately funded, and teaching and education staff were well rewarded. The NEU was currently carrying out an electronic indicative ballot with its members for strike action. This would not go to a full postal ballot unless the threshold of 60 percent was reached. The national picture was currently 28 percent voting and West Berkshire was at about 24 percent. Richard Hand reported that there was fatigue amongst staff members and the worry was that the threshold would not be reached, indicating there was not an issue. The primary focus for the strike action was school funding rather than solely about pay. Richard Hand suggested that members of the Forum remind their staff to vote if possible. Voting was extremely important otherwise there would be little leverage with any Government in place.

In terms of savings, Richard Hand felt that good will needed to be demonstrated. It was unlikely the deficit would be offset completely, so it was about how much could be achieved and what would be enough for the DfE to accept.

Richard Hand referred to the rise in EHCPs and commented that there was an issue in that the areas was unregulated. There needed to be reform of EHCPs and the providers.

Lesley Roberts agreed that lobbying needed to take place to avoid the Government thinking everything was ok. The NAHT were very good at collecting information from headteachers. Lesley Roberts reported that due to the location of her school she had the disparity of three LAs, which all operated very differently in terms of funding and how easy it was to access. If lobbying did not happen then it was difficult to justify complaining about the situation. Lesley Roberts referred to the agreed 0.25 percent transfer of funding and was concerned about this not making a difference when schools would be left with fewer services but the same number of children. Lesley Roberts commented on the negativity of the meetings taking place and asked for assurance that additional meetings would make a difference. It was felt that working with the local MP and unions would support the process.

Reverend Bennett queried if it would be worth inviting the MP Laura Farris or other candidates with the election on the horizon to meetings of the Forum, so that Forum members could express to them their concerns on the state of the education service. It was noted that there was more than one MP for the district.

SCHOOLS FORUM - 11 MARCH 2024 - MINUTES

The Chair asked Jess Bailiss to look into whether local MPs could be invited to attend meetings of the Schools' Forum, as it was felt that there was a great need to communicate to the people in power how the Forum felt. Jess Bailiss agreed to check the Schools' Forum regulations however, was aware that there were very strict rules regarding who was permitted to speak at meetings of the Forum.

The Chair asked if LAs communicated with each other about the situation faced. Jane Seymour reported that there was an active South East SEND Leads Regional Group, and information was shared at this group about DBV and SVP. Information on local areas' HNB budgets was available publicly through information shared as part of meetings of Schools' Forums. Jane Seymour confirmed that the DfE also attended the SEND Leads Regional meetings however, they were often not very open to narrative about there not being enough money in the system and were of the view that money was not being spent appropriately, despite rising demand and open ended statutory duties.

Councillor Cottingham referred to comments about staff morale and turnover due to increasing pressure. He felt it would be helpful to know what the turnover rate was and details of how long members of staff had been employed and the reasons for them leaving. He queried if this information was something that could be coordinated and consolidated as this could help form a case for lobbying the Government.

Gemma Piper reported that this information was available in different forms publicly and she was keen to protect the workload of headteachers and avoid further data collection. Gemma Piper provided some data from the School Teachers Review body (STRB) which demonstrated under met targets on teacher recruitment nationally. Councillor Cottingham queried how West Berkshire compared to these figures and it was voiced that there had always been an issue with recruitment in West Berkshire and this had been exacerbated by the rise in the cost of living. Richard Hand reported that issues faced nationally were raised with the Children's Secretary of State continuously however, were not listened to.

Gemma Piper queried what the implications would be if the HNB Budget was not agreed by the Forum. Melanie Ellis reported that this issue had also been raised at the recent HFG meeting and it had been set out that the budget could be set as a starting point and the additional HFG meetings would then look at ways to save money over the longer term, some of which might be achieved in year but the majority would likely be afterwards.

Rose Carberry commented that they had to provide for children in the district and this requirement had resulted in the large deficit. Statutory duties had to be delivered and alongside this there was a large amount of extra work taking place. It would be a much worse situation if a decision was required on the budget without this mitigation in place however, the difficulty of the situation was acknowledged.

Councillor Cottingham recognised that to not approve the HNB budget would send a message to the government that not enough funding had been set aside for high needs. A budget was a representation of what the strategic plan was and Jane Seymour had detailed a number of children that the HNB budget would support. He queried if the demand was going to be greater than what was proposed in the budget in 2024/25.

Paul Davey added that there was also not sufficient clarity on what levers were available to make savings and what the negative impact would be of these levers on those receiving the benefit of services. He was concerned that the Forum was being asked to make a decision when there was no clarity regarding what the impact would be.

Councillor Codling was concerned that if the budget was not agreed, the message sent would be a negative one and this could result in West Berkshire being placed in the SVP. If this happened control would be largely removed. Councillor Codling felt that currently

SCHOOLS FORUM - 11 MARCH 2024 - MINUTES

effort could be demonstrated in working together to solve the issues faced. The DBVP was about to start and she felt it would be a mistake to not approve the budget.

Keith Harvey commented that the HFG had recommended that the Schools' Forum approve the budget with the caveat that the end point would change. Keith Harvey concurred with Councillor Codling that the budget needed to be approved. Councillor Codling agreed that the end figures would be different by the end of 2024/25 however, it was important to make a start and try to work together.

Gemma Piper agreed that the figures would be different at the end of 2024/25 due to the change in need, but also because the HFG/Forum were going to actively try to reduce the deficit through the body of work carried out at the additional meetings. Gemma Piper stated that it was important to voice publicly that whilst the Forum might be willing to approve the budget, there was a caveat that the additional work would take place alongside this that recognised that the cost of services needed to be reduced and savings needed to be delivered where possible.

Jane Seymour concurred that not agreeing the budget would send an unhelpful message to the DfE and would put the LA at greater risk of being placed on the SVP. From the great deal of detailed work that had taken place so far it was known that the proposed budget would meet the identified statutory needs, including those that were predicted. Jane Seymour explained that making a decision on the current budget was not a decision that would cause damage to children. The additional meetings would look at what could be reduced whilst minimising damage. The recommendation would be formed collectively by the HFG and would need to be approved by the Forum.

Keith Harvey queried if there were any examples of LAs where the SVP had improved the situation for children. Jane Seymour confirmed that she did not yet have enough information to be able to answer the question. Jane Seymour reported that she did know that LAs in the SVP were awarded funding to help settle their deficit however, this was with tight expectations, which in some cases had been deemed unrealistic. Gemma Piper reiterated the importance of having information on other LAs in DBVP and SVP brought to each meeting.

It was noted that AnnMarie Dodds had experience of working at another LA that had been placed in the SVP and therefore her guidance and knowledge was key in answering questions. It was noted that Hester Collicut also had experience of other LAs in the programmes and it would also be helpful to have her present at Forum meetings.

The Chair drew attention to the recommendations set out in section two of the report as follows:

- 2.1 To agree the HNB deficit budget for 2024-25.
- 2.2 To agree the use of Schools Block transfer for deficit reduction.
- 2.3 To include the current Invest to Save initiatives in the HNB budget for now, with the caveat that their continuation would be reviewed at a later stage alongside other non-statutory spend in the HNB.

It was proposed and seconded that the recommendations above be approved, whilst acknowledging that an extraordinary meeting of the Forum was required. The Chair invited the Forum to vote on the proposal and at the vote the motion was approved.

RESOLVED that:

- An Extraordinary meeting of the Schools' Forum be set up prior to the next round of meetings in June 2024.
- Timescales and key dates of additional HFG and Forum meetings to be mapped out in time for the next additional HFG.

SCHOOLS FORUM - 11 MARCH 2024 - MINUTES

- The impact of other LAs in DBV and the SVP to be monitored. This to remain as an ongoing action for Schools' Forum meetings.
- Councillor Heather Codling and Councillor Iain Cottingham to lobby local MPs regarding funding for high needs. Other School Forum Members also to lobby where possible.
- Jess Bailiss to look into whether local MPs could be invited to participate/observe at meetings of the Forum.
- The recommendations set out in section two of the report, including approval of the HNB budget for 2024/25, were approved.

7 Final Early Years Block Budget 2024/25 (Avril Allenby/Lisa Potts)

Avril Allenby introduced the report (Agenda Item 8), which set out the proposal for the Early Years Budget 2024/25, which was based upon the recommendations of the Early Years Funding Group (EYFG). Avril Allenby explained that early years was a complex budget to manage and pointed out that the permeameters had changed over the last five years.

A number of new entitlements were being introduced in 2024-25, which would complicate the area further and were set out in section 4.2 of the report in detail. A lot of work had gone on in the background in anticipation of these changes and detailed discussions had taken place by the EYFG.

Avril Allenby reported that the good news was that the additional funding had been provided for the new entitlements. Recommendations within the report were as follows:

2.1 That the Early Years DSG budget for 2024/25 be set at the level detailed in the budget model and agreed. Thus increasing the 3 and 4 year old rate, the 2 year old rate, the quality rate and deprivation along with an increase in the SEN Inclusion Funding.

2.2 That there remained a focus on deficit recovery and lowering of the pass-through rate.

Avril Allenby reported that the recommendations had been discussed and supported by the EYFG.

Avril Allenby passed over to Lisa Potts to provide information on the deficit. It was about a balance of ensuring the budget and rates for 2024-25 worked well for providers whilst managing the deficit down.

Lisa Potts drew attention to the table under section 4.3 of the report, which showed West Berkshire had received an increase in rates in 2023/24. The table under 5.6 showed the forecast based on the current hours. A slight over spend of £30k was expected, which was positive compared to the much larger overspend seen in previous years.

Lisa Potts explained that the overall deficit was expected to increase in the current year however, the pass through rate for the new year was being brought in line with what was necessary to support the 95 percent pass through rate. When it had been investigated why the deficit recovery plan had not recovered as much as originally hoped, it was noticed that the centrally managed funds were more than five percent of the allocated budget. This was something that would need to be addressed in future years.

Lisa Potts reported that when the budget had been set there had been a pass through rate of 98 percent for three and four year olds. This had reduced with the actual figures received. For 2024/25, rates had been discussed with early years providers and a figure

SCHOOLS FORUM - 11 MARCH 2024 - MINUTES

had been proposed that would reduce the pass through rate, whilst ensuring providers were catered for.

Lisa Potts drew attention to the extra funding streams for 2024/25 which would increase the overall budget from about £11m to £17m. By applying the new rates it was hoped there would be an in year surplus of about £200k. This would help to bring the overall deficit down.

Keith Harvey commented on the complexity of the budget and noted the good news about the deficit being brought down. He raised concern as to whether the deficit was being reduced fast enough and if this would have consequences for future years. Avril Allenby reported that one of the issues was that the LA had to pass through a set amount to providers, which was 95 percent and this was based on estimated figures. Avril Allenby reported that going forward, it was expected that the Government would be asking LAs to pass through 97 percent. Lisa Potts clarified that this would be 97 percent of the £17m. Lisa Potts reported that historically the LA had been passing through too much however, this had been reduced.

Avril Allenby reported that going forward the local model could be relooked at. There was some flexibility around areas such as deprivation and the quality rate. Locally in West Berkshire, the aim historically had been to reward settings and schools that had qualified teachers or equivalent. As a result, there were a large number of settings and schools that were entitled to the quality rate. It was an expense locally but it meant there was better quality early years provision. This was something that had to be balanced but in the future was an area that might need reviewing.

Reverend Mark Bennet noted that the discussion was focused on money however, the other question was the impact and whether the disadvantaged within the community were being reached. He queried if metrics were being benchmarked to see if life was being made better for children and families locally. Avril Allenby reported that there was some tension in this area because vulnerable two year olds had previously been a standalone group and there had been success in increasing the uptake amongst this group. Going forward some competition would be created in this area because there would also be working parents with two year olds seeking these places. Avril Allenby provided reassurance based on local sufficiency data, that there were enough places in the area. Avril Allenby reported that currently West Berkshire was quite rich in terms of places.

The Chair drew attention to the recommendations set out in section two of the report as set out above. It was proposed and seconded that the recommendations be approved. 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 recommendations set out in section two of the report.

8 **Permanent Exclusion Policy (Lisa Potts)**

Lisa Potts introduced the report (Agenda Item 9), which aimed to set out the process for excluded pupils and those with managed moves. It was a policy that had been in place for a number of years however, some areas required updating. The data had been updated to ensure the correct regulations were included.

Lisa Potts reported that some queries had been raised at the Heads Funding Group (HFG) and briefly went through each of them:

SCHOOLS FORUM - 11 MARCH 2024 - MINUTES

- A member of the HFG had queried the language used for 'managed moves' as it gave the impression it could be stopped after six weeks when this was not the intention: Lisa Potts confirmed that the wording on this had been updated.
- A member of the HFG had queried the matter of when money should move and felt this needed adding to the policy. It had not been felt that money should move instantly as there were potentially appeals/IRPs/PPPs taking place: Lisa Potts reported that this would normally be actioned at least eight weeks after the exclusion due to it being known that appeals often took place. This would be checked with the exclusion officer to ensure the decision was upheld. If there was an individual review panel outstanding, the funding would be removed after this meeting decision.
- A member of the HFG had queried the detail on year 11 learners and money transferring at the end of the year: Lisa Potts reported that it was set out in the Schools operational guidance 24-25 that the 'only exception to using the number of weeks remaining in the financial year is where the exclusion takes place after 1 April, in a school year where the pupil would normally have left at the end of that school year.' Lisa Potts reported that it was not stated if this was June or July however, confirmed that funding would be removed at the end of July because this was what the AWPU was based on.
- A member of the HFG had felt that there was a perverse incentive through the policy for schools to permanently exclude just before the end of the financial year: Lisa Potts reported that the operational guidance set out that 'the local authority must deduct from the school's budget in-year the amount within the formula relating to the age and personal circumstances of that pupil, pro rata to the number of complete weeks remaining in the financial year from the relevant date'.
- A member of the HFG had queried managed moves and whether all schools that signed up to the Fair Access Protocol also signed up to managed moves: Lisa Potts reported that the fair access protocol was managed by a different team to that which managed exclusions, but having spoken to both teams, reported that it was felt that schools would have signed up to both the managed moves and Fair Access Protocol.

Jacque Davies stated it was important to note that the policy was an exclusion funding policy and not an exclusion policy. Jacque Davies referred to the query about when funding for year 11 students transferred and commented that waiting until July would result in some funding going back into the High Needs Block.

RESOLVED that the Schools' Forum noted the report.

9 Deficit Schools (Melanie Ellis)

Melanie Ellis introduced the report (Agenda Item 10), which provided details of the most recent financial forecasts received from each of the nine schools with a licensed deficit and the two schools that had informed West Berkshire Council they expected to end the 2023/24 financial year with an unlicensed deficit balance.

The table under section 4.2 showed the positions when the licenses were approved. A key point to note was that in the column 2023/24, the total approved deficit was £524k. The table under 4.3 showed that the forecast deficit as at period nine had increased to a combined deficit of £691k. This meant that the profile of recovery would likely need to be extended. All but one of the schools were forecasting a worsening position.

The Local Authority (LA) had been made aware that two schools expected to end the year with an unlicensed deficit. The deficit for these schools amounted to £91k as shown

SCHOOLS FORUM - 11 MARCH 2024 - MINUTES

under section 4.2 of the report. The table in the conclusion to the report showed how the deficits were growing, with an increase from five to 11 schools in deficit over the past four years with the average deficit increasing from £15k to £71k. More schools were expected to fall into deficit in 2024/25.

Reverend Mark Bennet noted that there was some intelligence around budget setting. He raised concern about the pressure on school business managers from the current financial situation and stressed that caring for staff was extremely important. He queried what capacity there was to support business managers. Melanie Ellis reported that there was a dedicated school resource in LA staff member Sarah Reynard, who supported all deficit schools. Melanie Ellis stressed however, that the workload was increasing significantly. Melanie Ellis reported that she was now supporting Sarah Reynard with this increasing workload and they were looking at a risk based profile for schools. Some schools required much more support.

Melanie Ellis further explained that there was still a LA School Accountancy Team and on a risk based approach some schools would be supported by this team, with the more challenging cases to be supported by Sarah Raynard. Rose Carberry and Melanie Ellis attended termly meetings with schools facing the most challenging situations. It was felt that business managers felt supported by the process however, it was often clear the amount of stress these members of staff were under.

Reverend Bennet asked if there was a way that it could be checked that business managers were being adequately supported by governing bodies. Rose Carberry reported that Sarah Reynard had a close working relationship with schools, which were either receiving termly or bi-annual meetings. Some schools also had a school advisor attached. More regular meetings were also taking place with finance governors.

Gemma Piper referred to section 3.2 of the report, where it detailed that the LA possessed the power to remove a deficit schools' delegation and queried what this meant in reality. Rose Carberry reported that a meeting was due to take place soon to speak about this in more detail because currently no schools had required a Notice of Concern to be issued. Any case of this happening would need to be approved by the LA.

Lesley Roberts commented that headteachers were taking on more and more in an attempt to stay out of deficit. Lesley Roberts commented on the importance of lobbying in relation to the pressure facing school finance staff.

Gemma Piper asked what the consequences were if the deficits highlighted in the report were not resolved. Melanie Ellis reported that schools overall were in surplus by about £13m, so currently there was not a deficit against the block. It was noted however, that this could change to a deficit in the future.

Councillor Cottingham noted that the table under section 4.2 showed the annual surplus and deficit, and queried the cumulative position. Melanie Ellis confirmed the information in the table was cumulative data for each school. The Chair highlighted that the information provided forecasts at the current stage.

Rose Carberry referred to further discussion that was due to take place with AnnMarie Dodds shortly regarding the process for schools that were struggling to reduce deficits within the five years provided. The LA was aware of how hard schools were working to try and manage deficits.

RESOLVED that the Schools' Forum noted the report.

SCHOOLS FORUM - 11 MARCH 2024 - MINUTES

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

Lisa Potts introduced the report (Agenda Item 11), which provided a forecast of the 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.

Lisa Potts reported that a slight improvement had been seen in the High Needs Block at month ten of £15k. The additional income for early years had been reflected in the figures. There was nothing further to add at this stage as there had not been a great deal of change since quarter three.

RESOLVED that the Schools' Forum noted the report.

11 Contract Forward Plan

RESOLVED that the contract forward plan was noted.

12 Date and format of the next meeting

The next scheduled meeting of the Schools' Forum was due to take place on 17th June 2024 however, an extraordinary meeting would be scheduled to take place prior to this date.

(The meeting commenced at 5.00 pm and closed at 6.43 pm)

CHAIR

Date of Signature