

SCHOOLS FORUM

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON MONDAY 20 JANUARY 2025

Present: Jay Armstrong (Maintained Primary School Governor), Reverend Mark Bennet (Church of England Diocese), Nicolle Browning (Maintained Secondary School Headteacher), Councillor Heather Codling (Executive Portfolio Holder: Children and Family Services), Councillor Iain Cottingham (Executive Portfolio Holder: Finance and Resources), Paul Davey (Maintained Primary School Governor), Jacquie Davies (Pupil Referral Unit Headteacher), David Fitter (Academy School Headteacher), Richard Hand (Trade Union), Michelle Harrison (Maintained Primary Schools), Keith Harvey (Maintained Primary School Headteacher), Jon Hewitt (Maintained Special School Headteacher), Trevor Keable (Academy School Governor), Jo MacArthur (Maintained Primary Headteacher), Jamie Morton (Non School - Post 16 Providers), Chris Prosser (Maintained Secondary School Headteacher), Lesley Roberts (Maintained Primary School Headteacher), Graham Spellman ((Chair) Roman Catholic Diocese), Phil Spray (Maintained Primary School Governor), Chloe Summerville (Maintained Nursery School Headteacher) and Edwin Towill (Academy School Headteacher)

Also Present: Neil Goddard (Service Director - Education and SEND), Nicola Ponton (SEN Manager), Lisa Potts (Finance Manager), Jessica Bailiss (Democratic Services Officer) and Beth Kelly (Head of Early Years)

Apologies for inability to attend the meeting: Rose Carberry (Principal Adviser for School Improvement), AnnMarie Dodds (Executive Director - Children's Services), Jo Lagares (Maintained Primary School Headteacher), Julie Lewry (Academy School Headteacher), David Ramsden (Maintained Secondary School Headteacher) and Charlotte Wilson (Academy School Headteacher)

The Chair began the meeting by reflecting on the very sad news that Melanie Ellis, the West Berkshire Council lead for Finance, had passed away. He expressed that he felt it would be appropriate for the group to take a minute in silence to reflect upon their thoughts and prayers for Melanie and her family. He thanked everyone for their participation.

PART I

1 Minutes of previous meeting dated 2nd December 2024

The Minutes of the meeting held on 2nd December 2024 were approved.

2 Actions arising from previous meetings

The Chair addressed the actions from the previous meeting, noting that there was only one action item. A report addressing this was included under Agenda Item 13.

3 Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were received.

4 Membership

Jess Bailiss reported that there was only one membership update regarding Michelle Harrison's term of office, which was due to end in February 2025. Following consultation

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with the School Business Manager group, Michelle Harrison had confirmed her willingness to continue for a further term.

5 **Additional Funds Budget Requirement 2025/26 (Lisa Potts)**

Lisa Potts introduced the report (Agenda Item 6), which set out the proposed 2025/26 budgets for the Growth Fund and Additional High Needs fund. Lisa Potts explained that the report set out the proposed budgets for the growth fund and additional high needs fund for 2025-2026. Lisa Potts drew attention to the Growth Fund Criteria included within Appendix A to the report.

Lisa Potts highlighted that the recommendation was to distribute growth funding across all schools via the school formula. She noted that the value of the growth fund for 2025-2026 was £307,452.

Lisa Potts drew attention to the recommendation to set the high needs budget at £200k. This was for schools that had a disproportionate number of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) needs. Lisa Potts invited questions on the report, noting that it was a regular report brought to the Forum on an annual basis.

Trevor Keable raised a question regarding whether the funding was just for West Berkshire children or if it included children from other authorities, such as Reading. Lisa Potts responded that the funding aimed to include children from other authorities, but there were challenges in updating the data for children not in their authority. She mentioned that if schools felt they had more children than what the average calculation included, they could review it on a case-by-case basis. Lesley Roberts added that schools could challenge the numbers and potentially have the funding backdated if it did not pick up children from across borders.

The Chair invited the Forum to consider the recommendations set out in section 2.1 and 2.2 of the report. It was proposed and seconded that recommendation 2.1, to agree that the DfE funding allocation for growth be distributed to all schools via the school formula, be approved. At the vote with all school representatives the motion was carried.

It was proposed and seconded that recommendation 2.2, to set the additional high needs fund at £200k, be approved. At the vote with all Forum members the motion was carried.

RESOLVED that recommendations 2.1 and 2.2 were approved as set out above.

6 **Final Central School Block Budget Proposals 2025/26 (Lisa Potts)**

Lisa Potts introduced the report (Agenda Item 7), which set out the budget proposal for services funded from the Central Schools' Services Block (CSSB) of the Dedicated Schools' Grant (DSG).

Lisa Potts explained that the CSSB covered a number of services, which were listed in the table in section 5.1 of the report. She highlighted a couple of areas that had seen increasing costs, including the school admissions team, which had additional work due to the influx of refugees and changes in school places, and the education welfare team, which was supporting more children. Lisa Potts reported that there had been a significant increase in the cost of the Capita system, which had moved to the cloud, resulting in a deficit in the current year. The Heads' Funding Group (HFG) had requested a value for money review on the CSSB, which would be included in the CSSB report for 2026-2027. Lisa Potts invited questions on the report and no questions were raised.

The Chair invited the Forum to consider the recommendations set out in section two of the report and suggested that recommendation 2.1 and 2.2 be voted on together. It was proposed and seconded that the recommendation to agree the CSSB for 2025/26 be

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agreed, and a review be undertaken on the value for money of the services of the CSSB, in line with the recommendation from the HFG. At the vote with all Forum members the recommendations were approved.

RESOLVED that recommendations 2.1 and 2.2 were approved as set out above.

7 **Final DSG Funding Settlement Overview 2025/26 (Lisa Potts)**

Lisa Potts introduced the report (Agenda Item 8), which set out the final Dedicated Schools' Grant (DSG) allocation for 2025/26.

Lisa Potts explained that the DSG allocations were based on the national funding formula used by the Department for Education (DfE) and were calculated using the October 2024 pupil numbers. She highlighted that the table in section 4.1 of the report showed the allocations for the different blocks, including the early years block, which had seen a significant increase due to the funding of additional hours for children aged nine months and above. Lisa Potts also drew attention to the increase in the Central Schools Services Block (CSSB) which had helped cover some of the areas discussed earlier in the meeting. No questions were raised in relation to the report.

RESOLVED that the Schools' Forum noted the report.

8 **Final School Funding 2025/26 (Lisa Potts)**

Lisa Potts introduced the report (Agenda Item 9), which set out the final school funding formula allocations for 2025/26. She mentioned that the tables in the appendices provided detailed information on the final formula rates and the allocations for individual schools. These figures were based on the consultation with schools and the items listed in section 3.3 of the report.

RESOLVED that the Schools' Forum noted the report.

9 **Growth Fund Application 24/25 (Lisa Potts)**

Lisa Potts introduced the report (Agenda Item 10), which provided information on payments made to schools from the Growth Fund budget in 2024/25. Lisa Potts explained that growth funding was allocated by the Department for Education (DfE) and could either be distributed through the school formula, as previously agreed, or from a separate Growth Fund. She highlighted that the table in section 5.4 of the report showed the forecast of the Growth Fund at the end of the next financial year. Lisa Potts mentioned that for the current year, there had only been one application from Trinity School as set out in section five of the report.

RESOLVED that the Schools' Forum noted the report.

10 **High Needs Block Budget Proposals 2025/26 (Neil Goddard/Nicola Ponton)**

Nicola Ponton introduced the report (Agenda Item 11), which provided information on the proposed 2025-26 High Needs Block (HNB) budget.

Nicola Ponton explained that the report had been updated from the one presented in December, with most of the details remaining unchanged. It was highlighted that the numbers had been adjusted to reflect placements made during that time. Also, following feedback from the Heads Funding Group, they had been looking at increasing places at some of the specialist provision in the area. Nicola Ponton had met with Jon Hewitt, the Headteacher at the Castle at Theale, who had agreed to extend the provision and provide an additional six places. She highlighted that this extension had a cost impact, which was reflected in the report.

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RESOLVED that the Schools' Forum noted the report.

11 **Early Years Funding Rates to Providers (Lisa Potts/Beth Kelly)**

Lisa Potts introduced the report (Agenda Item 12), which set out the proposed funding rates for early years providers.

Lisa Potts explained that the Department for Education (DfE) had requested the publication of the rates by 28th February 2025, necessitating an earlier discussion of the rates ahead of the full budget for 2025-2026. She highlighted the rates for various funding streams, including uplifts for three and four-year-olds, two-year-olds, and under two-year-olds, as shown in table 5.2 of the report. Lisa Potts reported that the quality rate and the early years pupil premium would remain unchanged, while the Disability Access Fund was set by the DfE.

Lisa Potts reported that the Early Years Funding Group had discussed the rates and felt they were fair. She explained that the local authority was required to pass through 96% of the grant received to providers, with the remaining 4% retained for costs such as systems and quality checks. Lisa Potts acknowledged that there was still a deficit on the early years block and that the proposed rates aimed to address this while meeting the DfE's requirements. She asked if there were any questions on the report.

Keith Harvey raised a question about why the quality rate had not increased, given the teacher pay rise and other cost pressures. Lisa Potts responded that the decision was influenced by the existing deficit on the early years block and that a review of the criteria for the quality rate was planned. It was possible the quality rate might change in future years following this review.

Chris Prosser asked if the rates were lower than the local authority rates due to the aim of reducing the deficit. Lisa Potts confirmed that the rates were set to match the 96% pass-through requirement stipulated by the DfE, and the remaining 4% was retained to cover costs such as systems and quality checks. Lisa Potts reported that the impact on the deficit would be reviewed in the next meeting when discussing the 2025-2026 budget.

RESOLVED that the Schools' Forum noted the report and that the rates would be published as required.

12 **Report setting out response to Trevor Keable's questions on LA Legal Responsibilities (Melissa Perry/Neil Goddard)**

Neil Goddard introduced the report (Agenda Item 13), which set out a response to questions raised by Trevor Keable at the previous meeting in December.

Neil Goddard began by summarising the detailed written response provided in the report which provided an oversight of the work taking place in the areas requested by Trevor Keable. Neil Goddard acknowledged concerns regarding ensuring all children had access to suitable education and that there were sufficient places and services to support children to access provision.

Neil Goddard reported that he had received some further questions and comments from Trevor Keable and he moved on to address these.

Regarding 4.13 (2) of the report, where an Appendix 2 was referred to but not provided, Neil Goddard confirmed that this was because the piece of work related to Delivering Better Value (DBV) would be circulated after the meeting.

Regarding actions being taken and all of these being pre-exclusion, Neil Goddard confirmed that the preference was to avoid exclusions in the first instance and much work was required to support schools to meet the needs of pupils within school and work with

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the Local Authority (LA) as proactively as possible regarding the joint responsibility to ensure exclusions were minimised. Regarding expanding alternative provision, Neil Goddard reported that he had discussed this matter with a number of headteachers since joining the LA and this was also within the context of developing the commissioning function, which had been identified as part of DBV. The development of alternative provision and offering a broader breadth of this service was something the commissioning function would be doing. Neil Goddard referred to iCollege, which was an outstanding provision that provided a wide range of services, and acknowledged the need for there to be clarity about funding and services that could be provided and expanded.

Regarding the Fair Access Protocol, Neil Goodard reported that there was a Pupil Placement Panel (PPP) and fair access arrangements for children deemed difficult to place. The fair access protocol and PPP arrangements were currently under review by Education and Children's Services, in consultation with schools, to ensure they were fit for purpose. This work was underway and ongoing.

Trevor Keable queried if schools could have students imposed upon them through the fair access protocol and if a school had the right to say no. Neil Goddard explained that the intention of the fair access protocol and pupil placement process was to bring schools together and mutually agree a way forward. Locally this process had worked well over a period of time however, he acknowledged that sometimes challenges were faced that might complicate conversations, particularly if there was not a feeling of equity across schools. The current proposal had not been formed because the current arrangements were failing but it was about ensuring the process was fit for purpose moving forward and all involved were clear about how it worked. Neil Goddard explained that fair access provided the LA with the opportunity to direct a school to take a pupil if necessary however, Neil Goddard emphasised that this was not something the LA was keen to do and the focus was on mutual agreement and collaboration.

Chris Prosser commented that his understanding was that the fair access protocol was being reviewed because it was not working effectively. He noted that there were concerns about the process and the need for clearer procedures. Neil Goddard acknowledged the points raised and agreed that there were areas for improvement. He commented on the secondary headteacher group and that this was a particularly positive arrangement that not all LA areas benefitted from. The review was not a response to the process being inoperative however, concerns had been raised and these were likely to become more regular due to the pressure faced by schools and the High Needs Block.

Chris Prosser commented that the purpose of iCollege had changed over time, and they needed to think carefully about the provision and what it should be used for moving forward. Chris Prosser felt that capacity at iCollege needed to be increased. Neil Goddard agreed and commented that it was important to ensure iCollege had the opportunity to continue successfully and this could only be delivered through ensuring there was clarity about its purpose and function. It had been very beneficial to the system that iCollege had provided flexibility in terms of adapting and growing its offer but to provide security, its role and how it was funded needed to be defined.

Trevor Keable asked for clarification on the term "enhanced service offerings" for pupil referral units mentioned on page 72 of the report. Neil Goddard explained that this was similar to the point he had made about alternative provision in that they were very fortunate to have iCollege in place however, the needs of children were so diverse they needed to be able to respond to all of these in an appropriate way. The offer available needed to be made as broad as possible and reflect the current need of children in the system. The commissioning resource received would support work with providers to help

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them understand what was required in West Berkshire so that they could look to how this could be delivered.

The Chair thanked Neil Goddard for his detailed response. Trevor Keable expressed his appreciation for the thorough answers and the time taken to address his questions.

RESOLVED that:

- Appendix 2 referred to in the report would be circulated following the meeting.

13 Forward Plans

The Schools Forum noted the forward plans.

14 Date of the next meeting

The next meeting would take place on Monday 10th of March 2025 at 5pm, in person at Shaw House.

(The meeting commenced at 5.00 pm and closed at 5.45 pm)

CHAIR

Date of Signature