



**West
Northamptonshire
Council**

West Northamptonshire Schools Forum

Minutes of a meeting of the West Northamptonshire Schools Forum held remotely via Zoom and at <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCDyc2cNcl19OvcGOCuZDTBQ> on Tuesday 5 July 2022 at 2.00 pm.

Present: Peter French (PF)
Dan York (DY)
Vanessa Bradley (VB)
Lee Hughes (LH)
Rachel Martin (RM)
Jon Lake (JL)
Iain Massey (IM)
Eliza Hollis (EH)

Substitute Members: Beccy Merritt (BM) attending as substitute for Lyndsey Barnett
Kathryn White (KW) attending as substitute for Hayley Walker

Also Present: Councillor Fiona Baker, Cabinet Member for Children, Families & Education (FB)
Councillor Mark Hughes, Assistant Cabinet Member for Education (MH)
Councillor Aziz Rahman (AR)

Apologies for
Absence: Paul Wheeler
James Shryane
Lyndsey Barnett
Karen Lewis
Hayley Walker

Officers: Chris Kiernan, Assistant Director for Education (CK)
Beth Baines, Senior Finance Business Partner (BB)
Emily Taylor, Strategic Finance Business Partner (ET)
James Edmunds, Democratic Services Assistant Manager (JE)
Maisie McInnes, Democratic Services Officer (MM)

Councillor Baker thanked the Chair for agreeing to a request to hold the current meeting on-line rather than in-person, in light of current COVID-19 infections.

1. Apologies for absence and Forum Membership Changes

Apologies for absence were received from Lyndsey Barnett, Karen Lewis, James Shryane, Paul Wheeler and Hayley Walker. Kathryn White attended the meeting as a substitute for Hayley Walker and Beccy Merritt attended as a substitute for Lyndsey Barnett.

JE advised that Simon Bentley had resigned from Schools Forum after taking new employment outside West Northamptonshire and that there were now 4 vacancies for mainstream academy representatives on the Forum. The Chair encouraged Forum members to feed back any prospective interest in these positions.

2. **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

3. **Minutes**

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 24 May 2022 were agreed as an accurate record.

4. **DSG Provisional Outturn and Schools Balances 2021/22**

ET presented the report, which outlined a provisional outturn expenditure for the 2021/22 financial year of £135m against a net budget of £135.6m including carry forwards. The latest position represented a favourable movement of £3m from that reported to Schools Forum in January 2022.

ET further advised that the report demonstrated an overall balanced position within the 4 DSG blocks. However, the High Needs block remained overspent by £1.2m at the end of 2021/22 and this pressure would be carried forward. The overspend related to demand for special school places, resulting in the increased use of places in independent schools. The West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) Capital Programme for 2022/23 included resources for additional places in mainstream and special schools. WNC had recently consulted on the need for a new 250 place special school, which would alleviate demand pressures in future. The overspend in the High Needs block was mitigated by underspends of £0.7m in each of the Schools and Early Years blocks as set out in the report.

BB subsequently presented the position on maintained schools balances and reserves for 2021/2022. As at 31 March 2022 there were 5 maintained nursery, 65 primary and 3 special maintained schools in West Northamptonshire: the number of maintained schools had not changed in the past year. There were also 85 primary, 16 secondary, 5 special, 3 alternative provision and 1 UTC academies. There were 2 new primary academies in 2021/22, but no academy conversions. The total of maintained schools balances had increased by £119,441 between 2020/21 and 2021/22. There had been a small reduction in capital balances; a small reduction in committed revenue balances, reflecting greater use of balances in 2021/22; and there was a deficit in the nursery sector on uncommitted revenue balances, which was a worsening position compared to 2020/21. Other sectors had increased their uncommitted revenue balances, although there was one primary school in deficit at the end of 2021/22. The balances for Pupil Premium Grant reflected that it had been difficult to use this during lockdown.

BB advised that WNC's policy was that schools could not carry forward uncommitted balances of greater than 10% and if this threshold was exceeded Schools Forum

would need to agree whether the funding could be carried forward or would be clawed back. There were currently no schools in this position. The threshold would be reviewed as part of the schools budget consultation but there were no plans to change it.

DY questioned if WNC provided any support to schools to help to prevent them getting into a deficit position. BB responded that WNC had preventative measures in place and would review schools' financial returns mid-year and annually, as well as their 3 year financial plans. WNC worked with schools to address any deficits. It was recognised that small primary schools faced a more challenging position due to the tight financial envelope within which they operated. An Education & Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) schools resource management advisor also worked with the local authority and schools facing a deficit within their 3 year plan.

DY further highlighted that the recent situation regarding the schools PFI contract was an example of how unexpected costs could put schools in a difficult financial position despite their best efforts. BB responded that schools provided 3 year plans so with new expenses or repair changes WNC would expect that the governing body and school would review their financial position regularly and react and adapt to any changes to ensure a balanced position over 3 years. CK advised that schools PFI had been subject to further discussion since the last Forum meeting. It was an exceptional issue and WNC needed to consider the impact on schools' budgets that were otherwise well managed. Work was being done with the Place directorate to address the long term situation. WNC would recognise if a school's budget position was being significantly affected by a single factor that was outside of the school's control.

The Chair highlighted that the Forum would receive an update on schools PFI at its meeting on 18 October 2022.

EH noted that the number of pupils on-roll was a key factor in relation to maintained schools whose 3 year financial projections were not positive. Schools needed to be as well-informed as possible about potential funding sources available to them, including any additional capital funding to improve buildings. CK responded that the position regarding the condition of school buildings was challenging. WNC had received £2m additional funding from the Department for Education for maintained schools and would use this on a prioritised basis. The only other provision was basic need funding, which would not be available to a school with a falling roll, and growth funding, which was available for expanding schools. Many local authorities were already looking at school closures or mergers and in the next 4-5 years this might become unavoidable for WNC, particularly if pupil numbers in the primary phase did not recover. There were no easy answers to the situation.

RESOLVED:

- That Schools Forum noted the provisional outturn position for the year ended 31 March 2022.
- That Schools Forum noted the carry forwards and reserves and school balances position as at 31 March 2022.

5. **High Needs Block Deficit Recovery Plan Update**

CK presented the update, noting that this would be a standing item at each meeting until Schools Forum decided that this was no longer necessary. CK advised that WNC had received a 4% funding increase for the current financial year, which meant that the projected deficit had reduced from £2.5m to just over £1m, which was a much more positive position. Effective overall management of DSG in West Northamptonshire also meant that it was not necessary to declare an overspend to the ESFA.

There were 2 major financial pressures in place for the foreseeable future. The first of these was the net number of new Education, Health & Care Plans (EHCPs), which was approximately 300 per year. The second concerned the one-off cost of implementing a banding system designed to fund Special Educational Needs & Disabilities (SEND) and EHCPs more fairly in West Northamptonshire than was the case under the system inherited by WNC. It was aimed to make this change in the next year and it would have an overall net cost. It was vital that this was balanced by reducing expenditure on places at independent schools and through more efficient resource provision, including the establishment of a new special school, which would provide 500 more places. The new special school was a starting point: it was likely that WNC would need to bid for another special school in around 3 years to meet projected demand. It also needed to reduce the number of the most able pupils in special schools. There was a huge amount of work to do in the next 3 years, involving both the expansion programme and a more inclusive, fair and sustainable approach to special provision.

The financial recovery plan was proceeding well overall. WNC would be looking again at the top slice that Schools Forum had been asked to agree for this year. It might be possible to reduce this but the matter needed to be considered further. An initial discussion with Forum would be sought in September 2022.

EH asked if there was a list of the schools due to have a special provision unit that could be circulated to head teachers. CK confirmed that it should be possible to share this in the next edition of HeadWest as the schools concerned had all agreed, although not all of the funding had been agreed for all schools. Other schools would be invited to become involved in subsequent waves of the process. BB added that agreed higher needs places had to be presented annually to Schools Forum and information on places was also published by the government.

RM asked that information also be circulated to early year settings as they had many children with additional needs and promoting specialist provision would be very helpful to families. CK responded that all education settings should have access to HeadWest, although some may be more aware of it than others.

FB highlighted that the WNC Cabinet had not yet approved all of the funding packages associated with the special provision units, which should be taken into account when considering information-sharing. CK advised that appropriate advice could be taken with a view to being open with schools about the information.

DY questioned the impact of not carrying out visits to independent providers with a view to improving value for money as originally set out in the recovery plan. CK advised that he had taken this approach in another area, which had identified the scope to make some savings. However, independent providers were not incentivised to make changes as places would be taken by other authorities at the existing cost. It would not be worth pursuing the planned work if there was not a reasonable likelihood of it producing a practical benefit.

The Chair commented at the conclusion of discussion that the number of questions raised at the current meeting illustrated why this topic should be a standing agenda item at Schools Forum meetings.

RESOLVED:

- That Schools Forum noted the update.
- The Schools Forum requested that schools and early years settings be informed as soon as appropriately possible of the schools due to have a special provision unit.

6. **DSG Monitoring 2022/23**

ET provided a verbal overview of the developing position for 2022/23 and key risks and opportunities that had been identified as at period 2. In the 2022/23 financial year WNC was still going through its local government reorganisation journey so work had been done to get a deeper understanding of inherited budgets in the forecast outturn, to produce data and identify trends that would inform the medium term plan. The economic climate showed a bleak picture with inflation increasing and other areas of uncertainty. ET highlighted that as previously discussed the biggest risk area was demand on the High Needs block. Demand would outstrip the 3% annual funding increase indicated by the ESFA, which reinforced the importance of the High Needs block deficit recovery action plan. A more detailed update on the DSG position would be brought to the Schools Forum meeting on 18 October 2022.

RESOLVED:

That Schools Forum noted the update.

7. **West Northamptonshire Council Schools Funding Consultation for 2023/24**

ET presented the report, which was intended to inform Schools Forum of the proposed process and timeline for consultation on school funding for 2023/24. The provisional DSG settlement was expected in July. WNC would present this and the proposed consultation to Schools Forum in October. It was proposed to use the same timetable for consultation as in 2021. Final proposals would then be presented to Schools Forum in December.

JL emphasised that WNC should make the consultation as high profile as possible in order to maximise the amount of feedback.

The Chair echoed this and added that the consultation should be presented in an accessible manner, using plain English rather than technical financial terms. ET

responded that consideration could be given to the best way of presenting information accessibly, within the requirements of the overall process.

RESOLVED:

- That Schools Forum noted the proposed process and timeline for the 2023/24 school funding consultation.
- That Schools Forum encouraged West Northamptonshire Council to maximise the profile of the 2023/24 school funding consultation and the use of accessible language in the consultation.

8. **West Northamptonshire Council Early Years Funding Consultation for 2023/24**

BB presented the report setting out the proposed process and timeline for consultation on Early Years funding. The government was due to announce provisional Early Years funding allocations in mid-July. The timeline for consultation proposed by WNC would involve circulating consultation questions to Schools Forum members by email ahead of the meeting in October. This would allow consultation with providers in the autumn and a decision by Schools Forum at the meeting in December.

RM echoed the points about accessibility raised in relation to the schools funding consultation and added that communication with Schools Forum was imperative as members could engage with other providers to take part in the consultation. BB responded that terminology to be used in the consultation questions could be checked with members in advance as it was necessary to use some technical language.

The Chair shared the views expressed with regard to the accessibility of the consultation and thanked ET and BB for their reports and hard work.

RESOLVED:

- That Schools Forum noted the proposed process and timeline for the 2023/24 early years funding consultation.
- That Schools Forum agreed that proposed questions for the 2023/24 early years funding consultation could be shared with Schools Forum members by email.
- That Schools Forum encouraged West Northamptonshire Council to maximise communication about the 2023/24 early years funding consultation and the use of accessible language in the consultation.

9. **Forward Plan**

The Chair introduced the Forward Plan and added that as discussed earlier in the meeting the subject of schools PFI would be considered again in October.

RESOLVED:

That Schools Forum noted the Forward Plan.

10. **Urgent Business**

There were no items of urgent business.

The Chair confirmed the next meeting would be held on 18 October 2022 and wished everyone a pleasant summer break.

The meeting closed at 2.50 pm

Chair: _____

Date: _____