



**West
Northamptonshire
Council**

West Northamptonshire Schools Forum

Minutes of a meeting of the West Northamptonshire Schools Forum held at Council Chamber, The Forum, Moat Lane, Towcester, NN12 6AD on Tuesday 18 October 2022 at 2.00 pm.

Present Paul Wheeler - vice chair (PW)
James Shryane (JS)
Dan York (DY)
Rachel Martin (RM)
Karen Lewis (KL)
Iain Massey (IM)
Eliza Hollis (EH)

Substitute Members: Kathryn White for Hayley Walker – online (KW)

Also Present: Councillor Fiona Baker
Councillor Azizur Rahman

Apologies for Absence: Louise Samways
Peter French
Vanessa Bradley
Lee Hughes
Jon Lake
Jenny Thorpe
Hayley Walker

Officers Ben Pearson, Assistant Director – Education (BP)
Emily Taylor, Strategic Finance Business Partner (ET)
Beth Baines, Senior Finance Business Partner (BB)
Rosemary Kavanagh, HR Specialist - Strategy and Projects(RK)
James Edmunds, Democratic Services Assistant Manager (JE)
Kathryn Holton, Committee Officer (KH)

1. Apologies for absence and Forum Membership Changes

Apologies were received from Peter French, Hayley Walker (substituted by Kathryn White online), Louise Samways, Jon Lake, Lee Hughes, Vanessa Bradley and Jenny Thorpe.

There were no membership changes to be advised.

The vice-chair advised that the chair had stepped back from Schools Forum for the present due to illness. His excellent service to schools over many years was noted and best wishes extended for a speedy recovery.

2. **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

3. **Minutes**

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 5 July 2022 were agreed as an accurate record.

4. **Introduction to the new Assistant Director - Education, West Northamptonshire Council (verbal item)**

BP had appreciated the welcome from everyone since his arrival in mid-August. He acknowledged that there was lots to do but had noted a will to make a difference in West Northamptonshire. It had been good to get out into schools and see them in action. A focus was needed around more vulnerable children – particularly following Covid and lockdown. There were not enough places for children with additional needs and a programme of extending provision was underway. BP planned to bring ideas for doing things differently and was keen to continue project work.

RESOLVED:

That Schools Forum noted the update.

5. **DSG Monitoring 2022-23**

ET outlined the report which provided an update on the last financial year. Being the first year of the unitary council the closedown had been more complicated. The 2021-22 position had not yet been audited, due to ongoing audits of the legacy councils, and was therefore subject to change. The provisional outturn position showed an underspend of £0.2m.

The forecast for the current year showed an overspend of £0.4m which had been reported to Cabinet. This was entirely within the High Needs block and was expected to deteriorate because of the pressures such as out of county placements.

DY asked how long out of county placements would continue. ET stated that they would continue in the medium term. BP advised that this was an area of work to be looked at – creating new places locally would improve outcomes and reduce costs. A dedicated resource was needed to look at SEND and the way support was commissioned. Needs could potentially be met at an earlier stage as an EHCP was not needed to get support. Special schools were not the only way forward. BP pointed out that nationally less than 10% of authorities' High Needs blocks were within budget and some had far greater overspends than WNC.

RESOLVED:

That Schools Forum noted the provisional outturn position for 2021-22 and the forecast outturn position for 2022-23.

6. **Dfe/ESFA funding announcements 2023-24**

BB reported details of the National Funding Formula (NFF) 2023-24 policy publication for schools and high needs. This was the second year of a three year increase to the national core school budget of £7 billion. The provisional announcement for WNC schools was that they would receive £10.1m (2.4%) of this national increase in 2023-24.

The NFF did not include growth – this could be estimated using a tool, but the actual figure would not be received until December. The estimate would be £600k less due to a reduction in the numbers of children.

The DSG did not include the early years block. The high needs and early years indicative budgets would be received in December and reported to Schools Forum as soon as possible.

There had been funding formula changes which were becoming more nationally led. WNC had already followed the national guidance so these changes would not have a major impact.

The central schools services block had reduced overall due to unwinding of the historical part of that funding. Historical pensions would need to be protected. NFF indicative budgets did not match what WNC were funding because they had a more historical basis for minimum funding guarantee (MFG) part of the budgets.

PW considered that 0.5% MFG was a shock and added more pressures to schools – especially those with high needs issues. It was suggested that more detail around the availability of funding would be provided at the next meeting with a view to possibly making representations to government regarding concerns.

DY asked about the energy subsidy of 75%. BB advised that the energy subsidy in the PFI contract was back to 100%. It was noted that energy bills could increase by 400% for some schools.

PW reported that he had asked the PFI team to undertake more work and bring a comprehensive view to the December meeting in order to ensure time for schools to see how budgets would be affected.

BP advised that he was meeting the Regional Director at the DfE and would raise the fact that there would be challenge and feed back to Schools Forum.

RESOLVED:

That Schools Forum noted the update and agreed to have a broader discussion on the funding environment for schools and the scope to mitigate pressures at its meeting on 13 December 2022.

7. **Schools, high needs and central schools budgets 2023-24**

BB outlined the proposed consultation which would be sent to schools and come back to Schools Forum for decision at the December meeting.

RESOLVED:

That schools Forum noted the draft consultation proposals and made the following comments:

- Could Trade Unions be given an opportunity to consider the level of resources put into facility time to reflect the lower pupil base from which to recover it?
- Could there be provision in the growth fund policy for additional flexibility to respond to the needs of refugee children?
- Could more contextual information be included in the consultation regarding the outcomes from funding for SIG and specialist services?

7.1 **Schools funding formula and Specialist Services 2023-24**

BB stated that this applied to both mainstream and academy schools. There were two options. The first was to continue with the current arrangement which would require a further disapplication request because the £2.2m topslice would be over the allowed 0.5%. This would require consultation and approval by Schools Forum and would mean all children could access specialist services. The second would keep the sensory impairment service by topslice, but specialist support services would be bought at point of need. The impact of these options was modelled in the Appendix.

DY stressed the commitment to children in schools and challenged the impact of how funding for specialist services was being used. There was SEND support but high needs were increasing. More information was needed on the services provided and costs of each category if schools were to have confidence in this.

BP acknowledged the need to understand the impact of services and wanted to employ a team to look at this. Detailed information was not currently available, but hopefully this could be provided next year.

7.2 **Split Site Funding Policy**

BB pointed out that this applied equally to academy and mainstream schools and had to be agreed each year. It would be locked down under the national formula, but there was currently local discretion.

7.3 **Growth Fund and weighted numbers for new schools/year groups**

BB advised that if schools were new and growing then weighted numbers applied. The policy looked at funding growth outside of that.

EH asked whether there could be funding for refugee children as none was available from the government and many of these children had significant needs.

It was suggested that authorisation for this form part of the consultation and be voted on in December.

7.4 Central Schools Services budgets 2023-24

BB advised that there were two parts to this budget – ongoing and historical. There was a 20% reducing budget as historical services were being unwound.

7.5 Maintained schools de-delegation 2023-24 - Trade Union

RK advised that there were two options. De-delegation could be continued as previously, with academies able to join if they wished, or schools could make representations themselves. A carry forward of funds had helped in the past but fewer academies opting in and fewer primary school pupils had resulted in a proposed increase from £2.10 to £3.57 per pupil. BB appreciated that this would be unpopular, but was in part mitigated by the fact that proposals for other areas were lower because they still had a carry forward.

DY questioned why there had been a reduction in buy-in from academies. PW advised that a large MAT would have its own facilities.

It was suggested that Trade Unions should be given the opportunity to look at the level of resourcing and consider whether this could be reviewed given the lower pupil base to recover it.

7.6 Maintained schools de-delegation 2023-24 - School Improvement Grant

BP advised that there was a duty to provide support to improve outcomes for children. He noted DY's challenge about the impact of the work.

7.7 Maintained schools de-delegation 2023-24 - Redundancy support

BB advised that there were very strict criteria for accessing redundancy support. It needed to be as a result of restructuring to reduce costs. Schools had not restructured during Covid and consequently there was a greater carry forward available and the proposed rate per pupil for 2023-24 had been reduced.

8. Early Years budgets 2023-24 verbal update

BP advised that the early years consultation would be brought to Schools Forum in December and would be circulated in advance. Consultation would take place in early January and a decision would be made by Schools Forum in February 2023. It was hoped that the settlement would be known by that point so that the consultation could be more informed. BP expressed a desire to speak to providers about inclusion.

RM noted that historically the funding rates had been late which then affected budget setting.

RESOLVED:

That Schools Forum noted the update.

9. Schools PFI update

BP advised that the Strategic Estates Manager was aware that a report needed to be brought to the December meeting to ensure time was available to assess budget

impacts. Additional work and modelling was being undertaken, but information was not yet available.

RESOLVED:

That Schools Forum noted the update and agreed to have a substantial discussion on matters relating to the Schools PFI and facilities management costs at the meeting on 13 December 2022.

10. Forward Plan

It was noted that there would be a full agenda for the December meeting.

Schools Forum agreed to continue with in-person meetings rather than online.

RESOLVED:

That Schools Forum noted the forward plan.

The meeting closed at 3.30 pm

Chair: _____

Date: _____