



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 Wednesday 18 October 2023 at 2.00 pm.

Present:

Paul Wheeler, Chair (PW)
Beccy Merritt (BM)
Dan York (DY)
Rachel Martin (RM)
Thomas Goodridge (substituting for Jenny Thorpe) (TG)
Lee Hughes – online (LH)
Hayley Walker – online (HW)
Eliza Hollis – online (EH)
Tracey Carter (substituting for Karen Lewis) – online (TC)

Also Present:

Councillor Fiona Baker, Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Education (FB)
Richard Poole, UNISON (RP)

Officers:

Ben Pearson, Assistant Director Education (BP)
Andy Pymm, Project Manager SEND Funding (AP)
Emily Cooledge, Strategic Finance Business Partner (EC)
Beth Baines, Senior Finance Business Partner (BB)
Shazia Umer, Head of Place Planning and Pupil Admissions (SU)
Rosemary Kavanagh, HR Specialist Strategy and Projects (RK)
Simon Bowers, Assistant Director Assets and Environment (SB)
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, Jon Lake, Karen Lewis (Tracey Carter substituting), Iain Massey, James Shryane and Jenny Thorpe (Thomas Goodridge substituting).

Louise Samways resigned as an academy mainstream representative in July 2023.

2. **Declarations of Interest**

There were none.

3. **Election of Chair for 2023-24**

JE asked Schools Forum for any nominations for Chair. BM proposed PW and this was seconded by LH with all members in agreement.

RESOLVED: That Paul Wheeler be elected as Chair of West Northamptonshire Schools Forum for 2023-24.

4. **Election of Vice-Chair for 2023-24**

There were no nominations for the position of Vice-Chair.

RESOLVED: that the election of Vice-Chair would be held over until the next meeting.

5. **Minutes**

RESOLVED:

- That the minutes of the meeting held on 7 February 2023 were agreed as an accurate record.
- That the notes of the inquorate meeting on 4 July 2023 were agreed as an accurate record.

6. **DSG Monitoring 2023-24**

EC advised that the report outlined the position at period 4 which had been reported to Cabinet in September 2023. The DSG forecast outturn and variance estimated an overspend of £1.9m. This was mostly related to the High Needs Block (HNB) due to an increase in numbers and in independent school placements. Work was ongoing within the WNC capital programme to increase capacity which would reduce costs in the medium term. The in-year position was expected to worsen. The CSSB overspend was due to historical pension costs. The Early Years underspend was due to staffing vacancies; active recruitment was underway. Costs were currently 9% lower than WNC's nearest neighbours with the national position being 81/125 authorities.

The following comments were made:

- The commissioning of Educational Psychologists to reduce the backlog would lead to an increase in EHCPs. How would this be addressed?
- Were WNC at the bottom of the funding band because needs had not been identified historically?

EC/BP responded as follows:

- Capital investment would assist in creating additional capacity for places after dealing with the increased EHCPs and additional modelling would take place over the medium term.
- Under-identification of needs had been an issue. WNC were 1.5% below the national average for the primary phase.
- The impact of lockdown on children was still ongoing. There were more requests for additional support and the severity of need was increasing. There were a

number of programmes being implemented to address this but they would take some time.

- SB advised that outdoor learning centres had been approached to see if increased provision could be made available for schools.

RESOLVED: that Schools Forum noted the forecast outturn position for 2023-24.

7. **DfE / ESFA Funding Announcements**

EC presented the paper outlining the Schools and High Needs National Funding Formula provisional settlement version 2. Additional work had been required following publication of updated provisional settlement. Table 1 showed the current year against the revised provisional settlement. Unfortunately the revised settlement had resulted in a decrease of £3m across the Schools Block since the July announcement and the resultant increase from the current year was 2% (£6.9m).

BB made the following comments:

- There had been no major new formula components this year. The regular uplift of the rates had happened which took the additional grant and rolled it into the base.
- There had been a 1.4% increase on the AWPU and High Needs factors.
- The FSM factor would increase by 1.6%.
- There were two per pupil funding units - AWPU and an overarching minimum per pupil funding level (MppFL). The MppFL had increased; details were set out in the table on page 29 of the report.
- The minimum funding guarantee (MFG) for schools had been set at 0.5%, although in practice some schools would receive less than this. BB was happy to discuss in more detail with those affected.
- Split site funding was now calculated using a national formula which had resulted in more schools being included which pulled funding away from other schools.
- There had also been changes to the growth fund and to notional SEND.
- The HNB was proposed to increase by 3.2% (£2.1m). The forecast overspend on the DSG at period 4 for the current financial year was £1.9m and the proposed funding increase would not be enough to cover the structural deficit, growth and inflationary costs.
- The CSSB had two parts – ongoing responsibilities and historical funding. It was reducing by 20% each year and 2024/25 was expected to be the first year when it would fall below the unavoidable costs. An application would be made to ask for that to be held to cover pension costs.
- The figures included the rolling-in of the mainstream additional grant. Each year there had been an additional grant in December, but this could not be guaranteed.

The Chair noted that the figures showed a depressing picture. The additional money for high needs might not even cover the deficit, let alone inflationary pressures.

Thanks were expressed to BB for her work on the revised settlement.

BP suggested that the Schools Forum could write to the DfE expressing concern at the financial position. This was agreed.

The Chair thanked officers for their work in responding to the revised provisional settlement.

RESOLVED: that Schools Forum noted the update on funding announcements and agreed to write to the Department for Education expressing concern about the financial pressures facing schools in 2024-25.

8. **Schools Funding 2024-25 - consultation proposals**

BB outlined the draft consultation as follows:

- Some items were now set nationally but there were still some requiring consultation.
- The split site funding policy was now set nationally.
- A Schools Forum vote was still required for the Growth Fund and some changes were proposed to align with guidance and to consider increasing rates with salary inflation.
- There were a list of Weighted Numbers which Schools Forum would need to agree in December.
- The falling rolls fund had been voted out in the past. It was not proposed to implement this because no school would benefit from it.
- The proposed de-delegation rates were not changing for SIG and redundancy funding. The TU funding would either continue at the current rate or increase by 10%. The rate had been reduced last year due to a surplus and the 10% increase would put this back, not cover inflation. Work was being carried out with unions for better buy-back particularly for academy schools.
- The Government had asked LAs to consult on the notional SEND budget which had not been done since 2013. There had been discussion on how this budget could be used to help the HNB and enable schools to be more inclusive. There were differences of opinion between authorities. The formula had not quite been resolved but would be in the consultation.

RP pointed out that school support staff were facing an increase in injuries and work-related stress due to dealing with behaviour of EHCP pupils. Union input could support heads and prevent staff leaving. RP asked for an impact assessment to be distributed to schools so that an informed decision on cost per pupil could be made. It was agreed that the impact assessment would be added to the consultation as an appendix.

Members made the following comments:

- What was SCAP population data? Small rural schools had a lot of variation in numbers.
- Had capacity/sufficiency data been published?
- The notional SEND section was unclear.
- Were the factors for notional SEND funding changing?

- Was notional SEND likely to be baked into a national formula? If so, this would have an impact on schools.

BB/BP/SU responded as follows:

- SU advised that falling rolls required forecasts to be submitted for the next 7 years
- BP advised that a temporary dip in population was difficult to evidence, although it could be reviewed in the future.
- The notional SEND funding was the part of the budget which the government expected to spend on SEND. Clarity was needed because it was complex and open to different interpretations. The relevant section would be revised to improve understanding.
- The overall total SEND funding was not set to change but the percentages applied to different characteristics such as AWPU, FSM and IDACI would change.
- There was currently no national formula for notional SEND but this seemed to be the direction of travel.

BP advised that suggestions for improving the consultation response rate would be welcomed. A table would be included in Head West to show how each school would be affected. When engaging with Multi-Academy Trusts (MAT) there could be one response from the MAT plus one from each school.

RESOLVED: That Schools Forum noted the proposed process and timeline for the 2024-25 school funding consultation and agreed to the addition of the Trade Union impact assessment and reworded SEND section.

9. **Northampton Schools Group PFI Update**

SB presented the report updating members on the PFI contract. SB highlighted that the Office of Budget Responsibility (OBR) was due to produce a new inflation forecast in November 2023, although RPIx had been close to the actual position in any case. Work by WNC to examine PFI costs was close to an end and should enable a case for additional funding to be put to the ESFA. The results of the last PFI customer satisfaction survey in October 2022 were consistent with a pattern of a minority of schools experiencing poor performance. However, the contractor was putting real effort into improving, which would hopefully become apparent.

Members made the following comments:

- If there was a difference in April 2024 from the OBR forecasts would the assumption be held and adjustments made later?
- Would any recoupment for non-service be used to offset any potential increases across PFI?
- The contractual period of 2 years between satisfaction surveys was a long time. Could it be beneficial to conduct an additional survey to understand current performance?
- Schools PFI Forum was intended to meet once per term. Would a meeting take place before the end of 2023?

SB responded as follows:

- It was likely that the forecast figures would be used, whether this benefited schools or not, although this was open to discussion.
- The Council were entitled to keep any recoupment for non-service so this would not be returned.
- Conducting an additional survey could be suggested to the contractor, although any issues should be reported as soon as possible.
- Issues with RAAC had consumed the team's time, but it was still hoped to schedule a meeting of the Schools PFI Forum before the end of the autumn term 2023.

RESOLVED: that Schools Forum noted the update.

10. **High Needs Project Update**

BP thanked everyone involved in the launch of the SEND and AP strategy. More than 500 people had attended. There had been 206 pieces of feedback, 98% of which were positive. However, there was still more work to be done. The report showed the additional SEND places already being delivered. Further expansion via a needs-led approach was being discussed and all teachers needed to be engaged with SEND.

AP advised that the additional SEND capacity table had been included in the update as previously requested.

AP went on to highlight progress being made in key areas of activity.

SEND Ranges: work was being carried out to develop the workstream within the strategy, although the dates had slipped into the next half term. Value was being added by implementing training.

The funding consultation had been completed. This had taken place on multiple platforms and reached over 35k people, although some would have been duplicated, for example as both a citizen and a parent. The objective had been to drive awareness and enable participants to share their views.

257 responses in total were received. Not all of those who responded had actually submitted their response, and those who did submit tended to have responded differently. A summary was outlined in the report. The results would be clustered and a summary paper produced. Responses to the survey supported the proposed direction on SEND funding.

The following comments were made:

- The questions appeared to be loaded, particularly the question on whether children and young people with SEND, that do not have an EHC Plan, should receive funding via their education setting.
- Significant work had gone into increasing SEND capacity but numbers would continue to increase.
- Concerns had previously been raised about pinch points from KS2-3.

- Was any time and investment being put into early years? The sector had capacity but would need funding.

AP/BP responded as follows:

- There had been increased requests for support and assessment of children in year 6. Improvements needed to be made to identify and address needs earlier.
- The team was engaging with secondary schools about provision focussed on maintaining continuity of support from KS2-3.
- The current focus on primary ages reflected that this was where the biggest gap in provision had been identified.
- Early years challenges needed to be addressed and the team were keen to have discussions and improve efficiency.

FB advised that the SEND launch event had been organised by Creating Tomorrow College. The young people came to the building, took part in the meeting and ran the event. They rose to the occasion and she was very proud of them. Employers needed to be accepting of those who were different. BP advised that 3 interns with SEND had recently been employed by the Council. They had ideas and passion and were willing to challenge what was being done and why.

Financial modelling and funding recommendations: AP outlined the slide showing the differences between EHCP and non-EHCP funding. Discussions were being held with sub-groups which would then come back to Schools Forum. It was important to get rates as accurate as possible to avoid problems faced by other councils such as clawbacks or a large number of appeals.

The following comments were made:

- Historically there had been a poor response from the early years sector to the consultation. How could this be improved?
- Pre-warning people of the consultation could be helpful in improving responses.
- WNC needed to improve the way it was seen in the early years sector and also change the perception that giving feedback on the funding model would have no effect.
- RM was happy to read through the consultation beforehand and advise on accessibility.
- Were processes being considered within the consultation as well as finance and funding and would these be communicated to all?
- Was 1 April 2024 realistic for implementation of payment changes?

BB/BP/AP responded as follows:

- A web-based platform would be used for the consultation, together with direct emails, Head West and Early Years Connections.
- An Early Years team was being created, but it would be helpful for WNC to engage with Early Years events that were already taking place such as the Early Years Provider Network meetings.

- WNC was open to all ideas about how to maximise engagement, including incentivising responses to consultation and engaging through existing events and networks.
- Work was being done with sectors to look at processes and this would be shared via the local offer. Resources and expertise were being used to help visualise the process and process mapping as part of the SEND improvement scheme.
- It was anticipated that the earliest payments would be made from 1 April 2024, although this would be phased with Further Education following a later timetable.
- Testing was taking place with volunteer providers to accelerate an easier to complete form.

RESOLVED: That Schools Forum noted the update.

11. **West Northamptonshire Council scrutiny review of child and adolescent mental health and the risk of self-harm [verbal item]**

BP reported that as part of a scrutiny review, health colleagues had requested the Council to ask members of Schools Forum if additional funding could be considered to support mental health in schools. Whilst recognising the need, members considered that the pressures on school budgets were already acute and that this request could not therefore be accommodated.

RESOLVED: That due to budget constraints Schools Forum were unable to consider the provision of additional funding for mental health support in schools.

12. **Schools Forum meeting arrangements - responses to survey**

JE summarised the results from the recent survey of members regarding future meeting arrangements.

The following points were made:

- The responses from the survey were mixed with no strong preferences.
- Decision making was easier in person, but it was possible to manage voting at hybrid meetings.
- Face to face meetings were good, but online participation as a backup was necessary.
- The July meeting had not been quorate; this might be better held online because of the difficulties of attending in person due to end of term pressures.

RESOLVED: That future Schools Forum meetings be held on Tuesdays at 2.00pm where possible. In-person meetings were preferred (with remote access as required) to be held at The Forum in Towcester except for the July meeting which would be held as an online only meeting.

13. **Forward Plan**

JE outlined the forward plan and asked members to agree the change of meeting date from 6 February 2024 to 14 February 2024.

RESOLVED: That Schools Forum noted the Forward Plan and agreed the change of date of the 6 February 2024 meeting to 14 February 2024.

The meeting closed at 4.15 pm

Chair: _____

Date: _____