



## West Northamptonshire Schools Forum

Minutes of a meeting of the West Northamptonshire Schools Forum held at the Council Chamber, The Forum, Moat Lane, Towcester, NN12 6AD on Wednesday 13 December 2023 at 2.00 pm.

### Present:

Paul Wheeler (Chair)  
Eliza Hollis (EH)  
Dan York - online (DY)  
Beccy Merritt - online (BM)  
Lee Hughes - online (LH)  
Iain Massey (IM)  
Tracey Carter (substituting for Karen Lewis - online (TC))  
Rachel Martin (RM)  
Hayley Walker (HW)

### Also Present:

Councillor Fiona Baker, Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Education (FB)  
Councillor Azizur Rahman (AR)  
Richard Poole, UNISON (RP)  
Elaine Coe, National Education Union (EC)  
Robert Johnston, NASUWT (RJ)

### Officers:

Ben Pearson, Assistant Director Education (BP)  
Beth Baines, Senior Finance Business Partner (BB)  
Simon Bowers, Assistant Director Assets and Environment (SB)  
Emily Cooledge, Strategic Finance Business Partner (EC)  
Diana Davies, Democratic Services Officer (DD)  
James Edmunds, Democratic Services Assistant Manager (JE)  
Rosemary Kavanagh, HR Specialist Strategy and Projects - online (RK)  
Andy Pymm, Project Manager SEND Funding (AP)

## 1. **Apologies for absence and Forum Membership Changes**

Apologies were received from Karen Lewis (Tracey Carter substituting), Jon Lake, James Shryane, Jenny Thorpe and Peter French.

Schools Forum was informed that Beccy Merritt and Jenny Thorpe had advised that they intended to step down from their respective positions on the Schools Forum. The relevant sectors had been contacted to try to fill these positions ahead of the next meeting.

## 2. **Declarations of Interest**

There were none.

## 3. **Minutes**

RESOLVED: that the minutes of the meeting held on 18 October 2023 were agreed as an accurate record.

Matters arising on the minutes:

### DfE / ESFA Funding Announcements

The Chair advised that a letter to the Department for Education (DfE) expressing Schools Forum's concern about the financial pressures facing schools in 2024-25 had been drafted and would be sent within the next day.

### Northampton Schools Group PFI Update

The Chair invited SB to give an update on developments since the previous meeting and to comment on the position regarding the inflation rate. SB made the following points:

- It had now been agreed that an extra satisfaction survey would be carried out as soon as possible as an addition to the requirement in the PFI contract.
- West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) was close to appointing a new PFI Manager, who would provide more capacity in this area of work.
- Office of Budget Responsibility (OBR) inflation projections had changed through 2023, particularly the projection for 2024 Quarter 1. However, the OBR was still the best source of information available.
- WNC appreciated that schools wanted certainty about facilities management (FM) charges. It therefore proposed to set future charges based on December inflation projections. Any difference between the projections and actual rates would be held in a reserve that would be used to adjust charges in the following years.
- The PFI contract was complex and hard to administer. WNC wanted to discuss opportunities to simplify some arrangements. It proposed to change billing so that all schools were billed April to March. This would have a financial impact of £20K in total on academy schools with wave 1 or wave 2 extensions.
- WNC also planned to produce a document setting out the process and principles followed when administering the PFI contract, which had not been done before. A draft would be circulated to all PFI schools for consideration as soon as possible.

Schools Forum members made the following comments:

- The draft document mentioned should be sent to all PFI schools in multi-academy trusts.
- The principle of providing more certainty about FM charges was welcomed. However, assurance was sought that the inflation projections used would not differ significantly from the actual rates and cause the smoothing reserve to become too large.

- Incorporating a sensitivity analysis in the process used to administer the PFI contract would help to manage the risk associated with using inflation projections.

SB advised in response that there could not be complete assurance that OBR inflation projections would match the actual rates. The trade-off for using projections was that schools could be advised earlier of FM charges.

RESOLVED: that Schools Forum noted the update.

[IM entered the meeting at this point].

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

The Chair invited nominations for the role of Vice-Chair of the Schools Forum for 2023-24. In response to a question the Chair advised that the role involved attending pre-meetings and chairing Schools Forum meetings if he could not attend, although he did not anticipate this occurring.

No nominations were received. The Chair therefore proposed that the matter could be revisited at the next meeting.

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

#### 5. **DSG Monitoring 2023-24**

EC presented the report setting out the position at period 7, which was a forecast overspend of £4.15m. This was an adverse movement of £2.24m on the position at period 4 reported to the last Schools Forum meeting. This movement was largely due to additional demand pressures on the high needs block, with some mitigation from a forecast underspend on central expenditure in the early years block. An overall deficit on the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) account was currently forecast for the end of 2023-24. A local authority with an overall deficit was required to inform the DfE about its plans to address the situation.

The Chair commented that the picture was a depressing one. There had been pressure on the high needs block for some years and significant work had been put into mitigating this. It had previously been possible to find options to prevent a deficit but the ability to do was changing.

BP responded as follows:

- The growth in demand and in the complexity of cases in the high needs sector in West Northamptonshire was above average and WNC also had a backlog of cases to assess. WNC continued to carry out significant work intended to mitigate this situation as well as making representations to the DfE about the impact of it. However, it was not possible to give a commitment at this point that the DSG account could be brought back to a balance.
- WNC was working with two outside experts so that it would be prepared if the DfE required it to produce a recovery plan.

- There were some significant variations in the numbers of young people with additional needs identified by different schools in West Northamptonshire, which indicated issues with identification. WNC sought to address this by encouraging the use of SEND Ranges and offering support to schools. Most schools were receptive to the offer, although some only sought support from their multi-academy trust.

FB advised that the f40 group of local authorities would shortly be writing to the DfE to make strong representations about the impact of demand pressures on authorities' ability to secure a good education for young people. The Chair emphasised that WNC was not in a poor financial position overall and was doing what it could to manage pressures but it could not do enough to meet the scale of demand.

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

## 6. **Schools Funding 2024-25 - outcome of consultation and final proposals**

BB presented the report and set out the results of consultation on each element of the proposals, which were considered and resolved in turn by Schools Forum.

### Schools funding formula

BB advised that the proposal involved a change to the overall funding formula by transferring 0.5% of the Schools Block to the High Needs Block. There had been 26 consultation responses in favour of the proposal and 7 responses against.

The Chair invited members to raise any comments or concerns about the proposal that they wished Schools Forum to consider. There were none.

### Split site funding policy

BB advised that consultation responses were broadly supportive of the proposals to implement the standard split site funding policy and rates set out in the national funding formula. It was emphasised that split site funding was a matter that concerned all schools as it affected the overall funding available.

LH raised concern that implementing the policy set out in the national funding formula could have a significant impact on some small schools, which had been highlighted in consultation responses. It was also questioned whether Schools Forum could defer a decision on the proposal until after the final DSG settlement was received.

BB and BP advised that the impact of implementing the policy set out in the national funding formula would be analysed further once the final DSG settlement was available. Any adverse impact identified could be discussed with the Schools Forum. It was likely that WNC would also raise the matter with the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) if there were particularly significant cases. However, WNC recommended that the standard split site funding policy and rates be implemented.

The Chair suggested that Schools Forum could recommend that WNC diverted from the standard split site funding policy and rates in cases where they would have a disproportionate financial impact on a school. Members supported this approach.

#### Growth fund policy, budget, rates and weighted numbers

BB advised that consultation responses were largely in favour of proposed changes to WNC's growth fund policy, of the inclusion in the schools formula of the weighted numbers included in the consultation document, and of the proposed growth fund budget for 2024-25. However, the same proportion of consultation responses were against increasing growth fund rates by 6.5% in line with the teachers salary increase in 2023-24.

BP subsequently advised that the proposed growth fund budget for 2024-25 had been increased by £200K to fund additional classes that would be needed as a result of the prospective closure of Southfields Primary School, Brackley. The Minister had been due to take a decision on closure that week but this had been deferred to January. The DfE also did not agree that it should fund the impact of closure. WNC was therefore including provision in the proposed growth fund budget to protect affected schools pending the decision. In response to a question BP confirmed that if Southfields Primary School did not close the decision on the additional provision would effectively be reversed; it would not just be retained.

The Chair noted that consultation responses showed a majority in favour of bringing the growth fund policy in line with national requirements. It was questioned why there was not more support for increasing growth fund rates and BB confirmed that a 6.5% increase represented approximately £75K. IM commented that this could stem from the view that schools' budgets did not reflect increasing costs.

#### Central schools services budgets

BB advised that consultation responses were strongly in favour of the proposed budgets set out in the consultation document, which related to the central services block of the DSG and did not affect individual schools' budgets.

The Chair invited members to raise any comments or concerns about the proposal that they wished Schools Forum to consider. There were none.

#### Maintained schools de-delegation for trade union facility time

BB advised that the consultation had put forward two options with regard to the maintained schools de-delegation for trade union (TU) facility time, involving continuing the de-delegation at the previous rate of £3.21 per pupil, or increasing the rate to £3.53 per pupil. There were 24 consultation responses in favour of option 1 and 9 in favour of option 2.

TU representatives present were then invited to address Schools Forum.

RP noted that option 1 in the consultation would mean a reduction in TU facility time and questioned whether the effect that this would have was appreciated. TUs

recognised the pressures on school budgets and wanted to see a long term strategy to increase the pool of schools buying in to facility time. TUs already carried out a significant range of activity that was not covered by membership fees. If facility time was reduced it would affect schools' ability to consult on policy and HR matters, which would be detrimental both for schools and for WNC. North Northamptonshire Council was proposing to increase provision for TU facility time in line with teachers' salaries.

EC emphasised the impact of reducing the resources for TU facility time. The de-delegation produced a range of benefits for the schools that contributed to it, including supporting the effectiveness of consultation on service changes, helping staff members to remain in work and dealing with other HR matters in a cost-effective way. If local TU representatives had less capacity these tasks would have to be handled by regional offices, which did not have the same local knowledge or relationships.

RJ endorsed previous comments. Option 1 in the consultation was effectively a budget cut and would reduce the support that TU representatives could provide to members on a range of matters.

The Chair thanked TU representatives for their input and commented that all of the consultees were responding in the context of a pressured financial environment that created the need to make difficult choices.

BB responded to subsequent questions as follows:

- The number of academies buying in to TU facility time was relatively small. The modelling for the budget proposals included schools that were in the process of buying in.
- It was difficult to quantify the impact of adopting option 1 exactly as this would be affected by factors including the number of schools converting to academy status and the number of academies that chose to buy in to TU facility time.
- TUs could help WNC by promoting the benefits of buying in to academies. WNC followed up expressions of interest from academies but in some cases when invoices were sent out they were not paid.

The Chair noted that in reaching a decision on this matter Schools Forum needed to balance competing priorities and pressures. EH commented that the work done by TU representatives was valued. DY commented that the difference between the two options was only £0.32 per pupil and that as a head teacher he had been both challenged and supported by TU colleagues.

Maintained schools de-delegation for school improvement grant

BB advised that 27 consultation responses supported the proposal to continue the de-delegation at a rate of £5.50 with no responses against it.

The Chair invited members to raise any comments or concerns about the proposal that they wished Schools Forum to consider. There were none.

BP and BB went on to advise that consultation responses had identified the potential benefit of extending the de-delegation to provide additional financial support to maintained schools. This would fund capacity within the School Effectiveness team that could be used by schools when dealing with an unexpected issue such as their bursar being absent due to ill-health. Schools Forum was therefore invited to consider an extension of the de-delegation at a rate of £5.00 per pupil for this purpose.

EH commented that schools wanted a clear idea of how resources generated by extending the de-delegation would be used. Individual schools had different needs and would want to be involved in determining arrangements if the de-delegation was agreed. DY commented that the proposal was currently only an outline and £5 per pupil was a significant amount.

BP and BB responded as follows:

- It was intended that the new offer would be developed in conjunction with the sector. WNC was asking for the ability to produce a more detailed proposal informed by schools.
- Resources generated by extending the de-delegation could be returned if development of the new offer did not proceed effectively.
- If the new offer was to be funded through a de-delegation Schools Forum needed to agree this at the current meeting to fit in with the timescale for agreeing schools funding. If Schools Forum did not agree a de-delegation further work could still be done on the potential offer and alternative means of funding it.
- There was a risk that schools which most needed the additional support proposed were least able to buy it in.

At the conclusion of discussion one maintained primary school representative voted for the proposal and one voted against. JE advised that the Schools Forum Powers and Responsibilities specified that the DfE was responsible for adjudicating in cases when a schools forum did not agree a local authority proposal concerning de-delegation for mainstream maintained schools. BB and BP advised that it was not possible to give a timescale for that process. The DfE was also likely to consider the results of consultation with schools and it could be beneficial for WNC to contact schools again for their views on the proposal. The Chair endorsed this and ask for further responses to be circulated to him and to the two maintained primary school representatives.

Maintained schools de-delegation for redundancy support

BB advised that 19 consultation responses supported the proposal to continue the de-delegation at a rate of £4 with only 1 response against it.

The Chair invited members to raise any comments or concerns about the proposal that they wished Schools Forum to consider. There were none.

[TC left the meeting at this point].

## Notional SEND element of the national schools funding formula

BB advised that this was the first year in which local authorities were required to consult on this matter. The proposal to change the SEND budget for 2024-25 as recommended by the ESFA was supported by 18 consultation responses with 9 responses against. Consultation responses on the three options for changing the budget were strongly in favour of option 1: low prior attainment factor at 80%; age weighted pupil unit at 2.3%; and exclusion of free school meals.

The Chair agreed that the consultation responses seemed to indicate a clear preference for option 1. Members were invited to raise any comments or concerns about the proposals that they wished Schools Forum to consider. There were none.

### RESOLVED:

- That Schools Forum agreed the proposal to move 0.5% from the Schools Block to the High Needs Block in 2024-25.
- That Schools Forum agreed the implementation of the split site funding policy to follow the National Funding Formula but recommended that adjustments to the Formula be made in cases when it would have a disproportionate financial impact on a school.
- That Schools Forum agreed the updated growth fund policy.
- That Schools Forum agreed that growth fund rates remain at current levels and not be increased.
- That Schools Forum agreed the inclusion in the schools formula of the weighted numbers included in the consultation document.
- That Schools Forum agreed to set the net growth fund budget at £1.1m.
- That Schools Forum agreed that the central schools services budgets included in the consultation document continue to be funded for 2024-25.
- That Schools Forum agreed the continuation of the de-delegation for trade union facility time with a 10% increase to a rate of £3.53 per pupil.
- That Schools Forum agreed the continuation of the de-delegation for school improvement grant and the proposed rate of £5.50 per pupil.
- That Schools Forum noted that the Education Skills Funding Agency would need to adjudicate on the proposed extension of the de-delegation for school improvement grant to include finance support at a rate of £5.00 per pupil as the Schools Forum could not reach a resolution, and that West Northamptonshire Council would carry out further consultation with all maintained primary schools to inform the final decision.
- That Schools Forum agreed the continuation of the de-delegation for redundancy support and the proposed rate of £4.00.
- That Schools Forum agreed the notional SEND budget changing for 2024-25 based on the Education Skills Funding Agency recommendations.
- That Schools Forum agreed the approach for the notional SEND budget set out in option 1 in the consultation document: low prior attainment factor at 80%; age weighted pupil unit at 2.3%; and exclusion of free school meals.



**7. Early Years 2024-25**

BP advised that information about early years funding for 2024-25 had only just been received from the DfE and consultation questions therefore still needed to be confirmed. EC advised that WNC would carry out consultation during January 2024 and final proposals would be presented to the Schools Forum meeting on 14 February 2024.

RM stated that it was unfair that the early years sector was notified in March of the budgets it was expected to implement in April with no more advance warning. BP agreed and commented that the DfE seemed to leave the early years sector behind too often. WNC would seek to engage with the sector as far as possible.

BB advised that the consultation proposals produced in January were likely to give a good indication of the final budget. RM responded that the early years sector already had to manage budgets to a penny and any uncertainty made a difference. Early knowledge of 2024-25 budgets would have been especially welcome given other changes coming into effect in April 2024.

The Chair stated that the situation resulting from the timing of the early years funding announcement was unacceptable and Schools Forum could consider making representations to the DfE on this matter. The DfE emphasised the importance of effective financial management but the timing of the funding announcement needed to support this.

RESOLVED:

- That Schools Forum noted the update.
- That Schools Forum agreed to write to the Department for Education to draw attention to the challenges for early years providers resulting from the late date of the 2024-25 funding announcement.

**8. High Needs Budget 2024-25**

BB presented the report setting out high needs places, indicative special school budgets and RAS rates for 2024-25 and the process that WNC would follow to set the high needs budget. BB highlighted that the increase in RAS rates seemed generous but the overall situation was more complex.

The Chair invited members to raise any points on the report that they wished Schools Forum to consider.

RESOLVED: that Schools Forum noted the update.

**9. High Needs Project Update**

AP presented the report and highlighted progress and key issues as follows:

- The Joint SEND and Alternative Provision Strategy was now operating and over 150 colleagues were working on implementing it across the 7 workstreams.

- Training sessions on SEND Ranges were scheduled in January – March 2024 for primary and secondary schools and early years settings, with more dates to be added for early years and for further education providers.
- The number of new applications since April 2021 for Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans, early years targeted SEND funding, and school age targeted SEND funding showed an increasing overall trend.
- The number of requests for statutory assessments in November 2023 was 30% higher than in April 2021.
- The project sub group had identified that pressure on schools budgets was the key factor driving an increase in the number of applications in recent months. The impact on children of the lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic was also a longer term factor, as children affected reached school age or moved from primary to secondary school.
- The report aimed to provide a clear breakdown of the number and timing of additional SEND places being created in West Northamptonshire.

BP advised that WNC and NNC were significant outliers in the East Midlands for the high number of new requests for assessment received as a percentage of the population. WNC was also an outlier for the low number of cases in which it did not agree to an EHC Plan as a result of the assessment process. Both issues needed to be addressed and budget pressures would continue to increase for the next few years whilst this was done.

Members made the following comments:

- It would be useful to know how the number of EHC applications from schools and from parents compared.
- If approximately 82% of new applications for targeted SEND funding at school age were successful, as Schools Forum was advised, this suggested good practice in schools.
- If applications were high quality they should be agreed accordingly.
- The panel process was improving, which should be recognised.
- The information provided on the number and timing of additional SEND places was helpful, although it suggested that there was more focus on primary than secondary schools.

BP took the opportunity to thank BM for all her work in her current role before she left her final meeting as a Schools Forum member.

[EH, BM and HW left the meeting at this point].

The Chair advised members that the meeting was no longer quorate.

The meeting closed at 4.25 pm

The Chair noted that the remaining business for the meeting did not involve decisions by Schools Forum and members present agreed that they should be discussed informally.

AP provided further information on the High Needs Project as follows:

- There had been significant discussion with the further education sector about funding arrangements. It had been agreed to continue the current allocation system for an additional year with implementation of the new banding system now scheduled for 1 August 2025.
- The timeline for implementing funding arrangements with special schools would be agreed in the first quarter of 2024.
- Since July 2023 caseworkers and WNC officers had completed 2,600 and 1,700 reviews of EHC plans respectively.

BP commented that reviewing every EHC plan was the right approach to take although it put additional pressure on capacity. FB agreed that a better understanding was needed of issues such as the source of applications.

The members present noted the update.

#### 10. **Forward Plan**

JE outlined the latest version of the Forward Plan.

The Chair reiterated that the proposed early years budget 2024-25 would be presented to the Schools Forum meeting on 14 February 2024 following consultation. RM offered to review the consultation document before it was finalised. BP commented that it could also be productive to seek a discussion with Dame Andrea Leadsom about the pressures affecting the sector, given her interest in the subject. The Chair offered to be involved in that discussion.

The members present noted the Forward Plan.

#### 11. **Urgent Business**

There was none.

The Chair thanked all those who had attended the meeting for their commitment as there had been a lot of business to complete.

The informal meeting closed at 4.35 pm

Chair: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_