



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 14 February 2024 at 2.00 pm.

Present:

Paul Wheeler (Chair) (PW)
Peter French Vice-Chair (PF)
James Shryane (JS)
Dan York (DY)
Rachel Martin (RM)
Iain Massey (IM)
Hayley Walker (HW)
Eliza Hollis (EH)
Thomas Goodridge (TG)

Substitute Members:

Tracey Carter (TC)

Also Present:

Councillor Fiona Baker (FB)

Officers:

Ben Pearson, Assistant Director – Education (BP)
Rehana Karim, Early Years Lead (RK)
Emily Cooledge, Strategic Finance Business Partner (EC)
Beth Baines, Senior Finance Business Partner (BB)
Andy Pymm Project Manager SEND Funding (AP)
James Edmunds, Democratic Services Assistant Manager (JE)
Kathryn Holton, Committee Officer (KH)

1. Apologies for absence and Forum Membership Changes

Apologies were received from Lee Hughes and from Karen Lewis (Tracey Carter substituting).

Schools Forum was advised of changes in membership as follows:

Beccy Merritt had resigned as an early years representative.

Rod Warsap had resigned as an academy representative.

Jenny Thorpe had resigned as the 16-19 representative. After consultation with the sector she was being replaced by Thomas Goodridge who had substituted for her at previous meetings.

Thomas Goodridge was welcomed as a member of Schools Forum.

2. **Declarations of Interest**

There were none.

3. **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 13 December 2023 were agreed as an accurate record.

It had been suggested at the previous meeting 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. However, Schools Forum was advised that there was nothing that could be done within the National Funding Formula (NFF) to solve a problem for one school. The option would be to take all premises factors outside the minimum funding guarantee. This would require a full consultation with all schools, bringing back to Schools Forum and a ministerial decision. It would be worth re-consideration for the next funding year when going to consultation.

Schools Forum was advised that a letter had been sent to the DfE drawing attention to the challenges for early years providers resulting from the late date of the 2024-25 funding announcement. BP had a meeting immediately following Schools Forum with the DfE and this item was on the agenda.

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

PW proposed that PF be elected as Vice-Chair of Schools Forum for 2023-24. This was seconded by EH and all were in agreement.

RESOLVED: that Peter French be elected as Vice-Chair of West Northamptonshire Schools Forum for 2023-24.

5. **Early Years Funding 2024-25**

BP introduced Rehana Karim as manager of the team supporting the Early Years sector.

RK presented the report and outlined the responses to the consultation. BP noted that 23% of responders stating no opinion about WNC retaining 5% for Early Years central spend indicated that there was still scope to improve the consultation process.

Members made the following comments:

- Increased engagement with the sector had resulted in a good response rate to the consultation.
- It was concerning that 42% did not agree with the retaining of 5%. The sector needed a better understanding of where the expenditure was going.
- Early years staff were paid the minimum wage because there were no funds to pay more. The minimum wage was increasing in April.

- There were concerns over the sustainability of the early years sector and nurseries not accepting funded children.
- What would the effect be of retaining 4% rather than 5%?
- People on minimum wage looking after children was shocking. Pre-schools were closing because they could not afford to stay open. Private nurseries were able to stay open because they charged more.
- The benefits of top-slicing needed to be very clearly outlined to the sector if they were to agree with it.

Officers responded as follows:

- There had been a late settlement of the DSG for early years by the DfE
- The team was still being established. Statutory guidance on auditing had not previously been followed but was now being embedded.
- Retaining 5% of 3 and 4 year old funding was needed for transformation of infrastructure and to enable the team to continue on an upward trajectory.
- Any underspend for the current year would be distributed to the early years sector.
- WNC was undertaking lobbying for increased funding rates from Government – it would be good for representatives from the early years sector to join with WNC.

During discussion Schools Forum was advised that it had to either vote to accept the 5% as proposed by WNC or reject it and ask the ESFA to adjudicate. If the ESFA were asked to adjudicate then they might also require WNC to take 5% from the two-year old funding.

Schools Forum voted to retain 5% centrally with any underspend on the block to be distributed to providers. 6 voted in favour, 1 against and 3 abstained.

All items were taken together for the indicative vote, with the 16-19 and diocesan representatives not eligible to vote. All those voting were in favour.

RESOLVED:

- That Schools Forum agreed that 95% of 3-and-4-year-old funding would be paid to providers and 5% retained centrally.
- That Schools Forum recommended to West Northamptonshire Council that any underspend on the Early Years block be re-distributed to providers.
- That Schools Forum agreed in an indicative vote that:
 - The proposed Early years rates for 2024-25 as outlined in Appendix A be approved.
 - 100% of the under 2-year-old funding would be paid to providers.
 - 100% of the 2-year-old funding would be paid to providers.
 - The targeted SEND funding (EY SENIF) hourly rate would be increased by 25%.

6. **2023-24 DSG Monitoring**

EC presented the report and explained that there had been a deterioration from the Period 7 position reported in December. The medium term forecast was being

worked on and a high level forecast would be brought to Schools Forum in May. The trend for WN since disaggregation had been difficult. The report outlined the surplus at the end of last year. Movements in-year had led to a deficit at the end of the financial year driven by the high needs budget overspend.

DY noted that pressures caused by independent placements had increased despite efforts to bring them under control. Had work been done on the value for money impact of moving these placements back in-house?

BP advised that work was ongoing on the quality assurance of specialist places. It was hoped to address quality of provision locally over the next couple of years. WNC was under-identifying needs. To be able to meet all needs locally required additional provision. It was hoped to bring the DSG back into balance over the next 2-3 years.

Schools Forum was advised that FB was part of the F40 group of lowest-funded education authorities who were lobbying the DfE for a fairer and more consistent funding methodology.

The WNC overspend was small compared with other councils. WNC had not been able to carry out what was needed because of budget limitations.

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

7. **DSG Funding Update 2024-25**

BB presented the report and advised that the provisional outturn had been brought in October. The report showed the update following the settlement in December.

Members made the following comments:

- It was concerning to see no increase in funding for hospital outreach. There had been an increase of 13% in the number of pupils, who were some of the most marginalised and disadvantaged children.
- An increase in post-16 numbers was expected, with an increase in study hours but no increase in funding.
- Would the revised forecast at the next meeting be more realistic?

Officers responded as follows:

- BB noted that the lack of increased funding did not mean the services were not appreciated – it reflected the fact that there was not enough to go around.
- BP advised that he was meeting with the DfE after the current meeting and alternative provision would be discussed. The budget was tied and ESFA would not agree to changes. Alternative provision was a high priority and was not working well at the moment.
- EC advised that the high level Period 1 position would inform the rest of the financial year. The effects of deficits would start to be cumulative.

RESOLVED: that Schools Forum noted the final funding settlement and high needs budgets for 2024-25.

8. **WNC Budget Proposals 2024-25**

EC outlined the WNC final budget proposals which had been discussed at Cabinet and were due to be presented to Council the following week. There was a requirement to have a balanced budget for the general fund. The central government settlement had been disappointing and there were severe financial pressures, particularly around adults and children's social care. A strategy of protecting the most vulnerable had been adopted. Council tax was being increased by 4.99% in line with the government allowance. 2% was ring fenced for social care.

RESOLVED: that Schools Forum noted the overview of the Budget Proposals 2024-25.

9. **High Needs Project update**

AP presented the report seeking Schools Forum support for the proposed changes to SEND funding in West Northamptonshire. The question of visibility of successful requests for statutory assessment (RSA) had been raised at the December 2023 meeting. The number of RSA applications by parents and carers was going up but the proportion had not changed from about 35%, although there were seasonal variations.

Additional funding to support implementation of the Education Banding Tool (EBT) of £2.3m was forecast for the first year.

BP stated that a budget overspend was anticipated next year which would probably be challenged by the DfE. WNC had considered all options to address this situation. WNC felt it was right to invest in local schools now because it would reduce the reliance on out-of-county and specialist places in the long term.

FB noted that only 2.5% of young people attending special schools got a job at the end. It was better to keep young people in mainstream schools with support. Parents might push for a special school but this was not always best for the child.

AP advised that a consultation on the new funding would need to be undertaken and results presented to Schools Forum in May 2024. Together with the volume of EHCPs which would need a change of funding, this would result in a delay to implementation from April 2024 until September 2024.

The result of implementing new rates for targeted SEND funding were estimated at £326,000. This would be mitigated by fewer children and young people requiring EHCPs. The aim was to maintain early intervention. WNC would keep numbers under review and would need to consider mitigation if the actual situation differed from forecasts.

Members made the following comments:

- The proposed SEND additional capacity places were mostly primary-based. What was the plan for secondary education?

- The work which had been done was appreciated. However it was concerning that ranges 1-3 would have no additional funding, particularly that children in range 3 would have no targeted SEN support.
- When would settings know how this affected their budgets? Budgets needed to be put in place now without knowing numbers of students for September.
- From an FE perspective it was critical that the bands were real and meaningful to students. Hopefully FE would benefit from the experience of others earlier in the programme.
- Timing and implementation of funding where sectors were disadvantaged by it. A 2-year limit on funding could have the opposite effect than intended.
- There were children who needed more support than notional SEND funding but didn't need an EHCP. If targeted SEND funding was stopped after 2 years these children would be left without support. This could result in a trend towards more EHCPs.
- It was good that an appeals process would be in place; this needed to be independent.

Officers responded as follows:

- Negotiations were taking place with secondary providers. The school at Tiffield would cover all ages. The year group where most requests were received was in Year 6. Work was being done with secondary schools to support effective transitions, which could help to mitigate some demand for EHCPs.
- Within the NFF schools were expected to contribute and additional funding could be applied for if targeted SEND funding had been spent.
- Launch of Ranges was the right thing to do but it needed to be updated. It was important to follow need rather than requests.
- The aim was to make administration simpler with equity across the board.
- A consultation was planned before May. Indicative budget figures would be available for schools before the end of March.
- It was important to recognise that support could be obtained without an EHCP.
- The points about targeted SEND funding beyond 2 years and potential lack of support for Range 3 children would be considered further.
- Phase 1 of the programme had analysed the data around FE. There were many challenges, so after discussion with the sector it was moved to phase 3.
- The model was that targeted funding was time-limited so that the needs could be understood and appropriate provision put in place to meet them going forward. The aim was to move away from a situation in which an EHCP was seen as the only recourse to a system of tiered provision.

The Chair noted that all seemed supportive of the principle of more consistency in High Needs funding. However, it would be helpful for WNC to give further consideration to issues relating to the implementation of the new approach raised by Schools Forum that could represent potential risks.

RESOLVED: that Schools Forum supported the proposed changes to West Northamptonshire Council's SEND funding processes for top up (element 3) as set out in the report but recommended that further consideration be given to:

- extending the two-year limit on targeted SEND funding,
- reviewing the definition of SEND Range 3, and

- payment protection (similar to a minimum funding guarantee) for providers with payment reductions due to starters and leavers having different RAS scores.

10. **Forward Plan**

JE presented the forward plan with meeting dates for 2024-25 which followed the standard pattern. All were in agreement with the proposed meeting dates.

RM asked that consideration be given to moving the early years funding consultation to an earlier point. BB appreciated the issue but advised that this was dependent on receipt of government figures, which had been particularly late this year.

The Chair thanked members for their participation and comments which helped to inform WNC. Officers were thanked for their work.

RESOLVED: that Schools Forum noted the latest version of the Forum Plan including the proposed meeting dates for 2024-25.

The meeting closed at 4.35 pm

Chair: _____

Date: _____