



**West
Northamptonshire
Council**

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 Tuesday 24 May 2022 at 2.00 pm.

Present: Peter French (PF)
Paul Wheeler (PW)
Dan York (DY)
Vanessa Bradley (VB)
Karen Lewis (KL)
Louise Samways (LS)

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

Also Present: William Healey, Education, Skills and Funding Agency (WH)

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

1. Apologies for absence and Forum Membership Changes

Apologies for absence were received from Jon Lake, Lee Hughes, James Shryane, Eliza Hollis, Rachel Martin and Lyndsey Barnett. Apologies were also received from Councillor Fiona Baker.

Kathryn White attended as a substitute for Hayley Walker.

Louise Samways (Chair of Governors, Caroline Chisholm Trust) was welcomed as a new Academy member.

2. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

3. Election of Chair for 2022-23

VB proposed that Peter French be elected as Chair. This was seconded by LS.

RESOLVED:

That Peter French be elected as Chair of West Northamptonshire Schools Forum for 2022-23

4. **Election of Vice-Chair for 2022-23**

PF proposed that Paul Wheeler be elected as Vice-Chair. This was seconded by VB.

RESOLVED:

That Paul Wheeler be elected as Vice-Chair of West Northamptonshire Schools Forum for 2022-23.

5. **Minutes**

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 18 January 2022 were agreed as an accurate record.

10. **Schools PFI Tender**

At the Chair's request Schools Forum agreed to change the order of business to bring forward this agenda item.

BB explained that there had recently been changes to PFI. Bills had been sent out to schools which had resulted in many queries. Colin Barrett, Strategic Estates Manager, had therefore been invited to update Schools Forum on the changes.

CB explained that when entering into the PFI contract it had been acknowledged by schools and the Council that existing FM charges would be insufficient to meet new costs due to the existing condition of schools and years of reallocation of budgets for other uses. FM charges would also include payment of lifecycle replacement for which schools had previously received separate funding. To meet the actual costs of schools FM charges it had been agreed to support this with DSG and council generated revenue. In 2005 the value of school FM charges had been calculated as a percentage of the overall FM charge. Subsequently some schools had been extended or had new primaries built which had altered the percentage weighting of FM charges. Schools have had this additional cost of FM met by additional DSG contributions.

The schools FM charges have been set based on predictive inflationary rates. In most years actual inflation has been more than predicted, creating an additional in-year pressure on WNC general revenue.

A five-yearly benchmarking review took place in 2021/22 in which the contractor put forward a claim for an increase of £1.1m. External advice supported this claim, but the council was able to negotiate a commercial settlement of £380k. This cost would have been charged to the schools but due to council diligence in pursuing performance deductions, the value of those deductions was used to offset much of the 2021/22 charge. The addition of the £380k to the base became the 2021/22 revised FM charges.

Schools have had their budgets inflated by the predictive inflation set in November at 7.23%. It was proposed to charge schools the difference of 1.11%.

DY asked whether in future it would be possible to have the report ahead of the meeting to allow time for review and bringing together questions from colleagues. It was explained that this report was prepared in response to questions received in the days before the meeting, so advanced publication had not been possible. However, it was agreed that any questions on this topic could be addressed at a subsequent meeting.

DY questioned the timeframe of the cost increases to schools. Schools were only made aware of the increases last week and they would have a significant impact on budgets, which had already been set.

CB explained that he had been in conversation with the ESFA to try to mitigate the costs and had successfully negotiated from £1.1m down to £380k.

DY advised that he had a responsibility to convey the thoughts of colleagues. He accepted the reduction and acknowledged the work but stated that schools would not be able to meet all their educational needs due to costs. This would have a significant impact on schools. He asked whether the changes could have been implemented over time. CK noted that £350k had been put in by the council and proposed that forthcoming years were looked at to see if anything could be done.

PW asked how much money had been clawed back due to non-performance on the contract. CB advised that the premise should be that the contractor was performing well and no money was clawed back.

PF asked how the FM service was monitored to ensure a gold standard service. CB advised that when the contract was first initiated the level of performance was quite low. WNC had increased resourcing to 2 people to inspect schools. WNC had a higher level of service resource to provide schools with the confidence that it was being managed properly.

RESOLVED:

That Schools Forum noted the report and requested an opportunity for further discussion of the issues raised at the meeting in July or October 2022.

6. **Overview of Dedicated Schools Grant**

ET outlined the presentation which had been shared with the Chief Executive, Executive Director, Finance and the WNC Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee. This was an overview of the Dedicated Schools Grant and Schools Forum powers and responsibilities.

The forecast outturn position was last presented in January 2022 – showing an overspend of £2.9m, largely on the High Needs block. The DSG settlement 2022/23 showed funding increases – supplementary funding information on a school by school basis was still awaited and should be available by the summer.

Information relating to school balances was for 2021. Information for 2022 would hopefully be provided at the July meeting.

PF asked whether there was funding which followed Ukrainian refugees. ET advised that a scheme similar to the Afghan settlement scheme was being considered. LS asked that this should include wellbeing and pastoral support. WH advised that the ESFA were working on delivering funding as soon as possible.

RESOLVED:

That Schools Forum noted the report and encouraged relevant organisations to consider additional funding for schools to provide appropriate support for Ukrainian refugees, including pastoral support.

7. High Needs Block Deficit Recovery Plan Update

CK outlined the report and advised that most of the activity was on track. The structural overspend was just over £2.5m. Three SENCOs had been seconded to help schools understand the additional resources and what services should be available.

Consultation had been started for the new special school which it was hoped could be opened in early 2024. Several trusts had indicated an interest. The costs could be up to £20m. It was not possible to use the government's free schools programme because of the timescales involved. The proposal had been taken to Cabinet members and approved in principle to go to Cabinet. There was a shortfall of £12m for which the council would need to borrow or use reserves. A more detailed spreadsheet would be provided for the next Schools Forum meeting in July.

There would be cost savings for the High Needs budget from the transfer of pupils back from independent schools, as well as reduced costs for school transport which would benefit the general budget. CK stated that additional provision would be filled immediately and greater cost savings would be made if pupils came from independent schools.

In response to KW, CK advised that the Early Years block used the High Needs block for high needs. Providers would be asked to show how money had been spent before being given more.

KL was grateful to CK for looking at this as she had 32 students above numbers. There had been missed opportunities for special schools looking at outreach opportunities. CK suggested that consideration needed to be given to what worked well.

VB asked about the location of the new school. CK advised that there was a site next to Gateway School at Tiffield. This was owned by a trust. The trustee had advised that WNC met the criteria for a 125 year lease, but this had not yet been finalised.

PW asked whether savings in 2023/4 was realistic. CK advised that the build was minor. If an all new build was required, then it would take longer, but if not it could be possible. CK was exploring whether the High Needs block could be used to repay the loan when it was in surplus.

CK noted that WNC's decision would be completely independent of other councils, including North Northamptonshire Council. The site had been carefully chosen to benefit WNC children.

RESOLVED:

That Schools Forum noted the report.

8. Early Years and Maintained Nursery School Update

CK advised that this had been a controversial matter as some nursery heads had believed WNC should offer a bigger settlement than was given by the government, which would not be done. Subsequent discussion with headteachers had resulted in an agreed approach to distributing the maintained nursery school supplement. A working party had been established with nursery headteachers to look at future funding. Scenarios would be presented and consulted on and WNC would then take a view on funding.

RESOLVED:

That Schools Forum noted the report.

9. Provisional DSG and Schools 2021-22 Outturn (Verbal Update)

ET advised that the detail of the provisional outturn was still being worked through. This had been a complex and challenging year end, as the first for West Northamptonshire Council. The provisional outturn would be brought to the July meeting.

RESOLVED:

That Schools Forum noted the report.

11. Forward Plan

RESOLVED:

That Schools Forum noted the Forward Plan.

12. Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

The meeting closed at 3.40 pm

Chair: _____

Date: _____