

**SCHOOLS FORUM
22 OCTOBER 2015
4.35 - 5.45 PM**



Present:

Schools Members

Sue Barber, Primary School Governor
Liz Cole, Primary School Representative
Brian Fries, Secondary School Governor
Martin Gocke, Pupil Referral Unit Representative
John McNab, Secondary School Governor
Trudi Sammons, Primary School Representative
Debbie Smith, Secondary Head Representative
Beverley Stevens, Academy School Representative
Grant Strudley, Primary Head Representative
John Throssell, Primary School Governor (Vice-Chairman)

Non-Schools Members:

George Clement, Union Representative (Chairman)

Apologies for absence were received from:

Liz Cook, Secondary Head Representative
Karen Davis, Primary Head Representative
Anne Shillcock, Special Education Representative
David Stacey, Primary School Governor

1. Election of Chairman

RESOLVED that George Clement be elected Chairman of the Schools Forum for the academic year 2015/16.

2. Appointment of Vice-Chairman

RESOLVED that John Throssell be appointed Vice-Chairman of the Schools Forum for the academic year 2015/16.

3. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

4. Minutes and Matters Arising

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 16 July 2015 be approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record subject to Minute 37 third paragraph being amended to read that 90& should be 90% and Minute 37 fourth paragraph being amended to read that and school should be and schools.

Matters Arising

- In relation to Minute 30: The Scheme for Financing Schools, the update to the Scheme had now been completed and the relevant document on the Council website reflected the update.
- In relation to Minute 39: Paul Clark advised that the issue of loan proposals for schools had been communicated by letter to all schools as part of an update on school funding that highlighted a wide range of cost pressures facing schools in 2016-17.
- In relation to Minute 39: In respect of the Autism and Social Communication Service, Amanda Wilton advised that short term measures were in place to cover a resignation in the service which had impacted on the availability of the service and that options for future delivery were being looked at including joint funding with the Berkshire Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs), an SLA offer to schools to purchase, or seeking additional funding through the budget setting process, which would be subject to agreement of the Forum.

5. Update on SEN Cost Pressures

The Forum received a report which updated it on cost pressures being experienced on supporting High Needs Pupils and the actions being taken to manage those pressures and any future costs increases.

The report included separate information on progress and key issues occurring in Quarters 1 and 2 and the forum noted that as a result of management actions, £0.499m of savings were on course to be achieved, £0.031m above the amount included in the 2015-16 base budget. The work being undertaken on the cost of supporting High Needs Pupils was a key action for the Department and would continue to be reported on a quarterly basis to the Director and Departmental Management Team through the Post-16 SEN Budget Monitoring Board.

As well as providing an update on key matters, Mandy Wilton advised the Forum that the next steps and recommendations for the SEN Team included:

- Develop primary ASD resource
- Develop Binfield learning village SEN resource
- Explore feasibility of a Primary Nurture Group Plus
- Consider implementing school based cluster arrangements
- Consider arrangements to make available a short term intervention fund from the DSG for mainstream schools to utilise rather than request statutory assessments
- Investment in SEN support services to increase mainstream school capacity to meet needs
- Consider increasing capacity of Education Psychology Service in order to provide more support and consultation for SEN in mainstream schools
- Continue to support the development of an PMLD specialist resource for post 19 learners at Bracknell and Wokingham College.
- Benchmark SEN cost
- Work on moving SEN students into employment or apprenticeships where appropriate

In response to questions, officers advised that:

- The SEN unit at Binfield Learning Village would be part of the new Academy school and that in respect of High Needs Pupils, Community and Academy schools are funded in exactly the same way and also equally receive access to all centrally managed High Needs Budgets, subject to meeting qualifying criteria / thresholds.
- School based cluster arrangements would involve allocating an amount of funding for High Needs Pupils to a group of schools to manage independently amongst themselves, rather than through the SEN Panel. This approach had worked successfully in other local authorities.
- it was believed that the Terms of Reference for the SEN Panel had been reviewed and re-issued for 2015-16. This would be confirmed and members informed of where they had been published and where they could be located.
- That the services under review which were funded from the High Needs Block included all centrally managed budgets, but that this work had not progressed in detail yet.
- The admission criteria for prospective pupils for Rise@GHC was considered by the cross-professional admissions panel that looks at each submission made by parents to determine if the request for a place met the needs of the pupil's statement. Mandy Wilton agreed to inform the Forum if and where the admissions criteria had been published and establish whether any overlap could occur with Kennel Lane Special School which was currently a cheaper option, although this would not be the case when Rise@GHC achieves a higher occupancy rate.

The Forum noted the actions being taken to address the current and future cost pressures and the successful progress to date that indicated a year end under spend on the High Needs budget of £0.124m.

6. **Schools Budget Monitoring 2015-16**

The Forum was presented with a report on the 2015-16 forecast budget monitoring position for the Schools Budget, the Education capital programme and other financial matters.

In respect of the revenue and capital budgets, updates were provided in respect of the current budget amounts, including recent changes to reflect adjustments to grant funding and the use of reserves together with explanations to the significant budget variances currently being forecast. Overall, the revenue budget was forecast to under spend by £0.223m, which significantly contributes to ensuring the minimum prudential level of balances that needs to be available at 1 April 2016 to manage potential cost risks of £.51m is achieved. For the capital programme, no variances are being reported as under or over spendings are generally re-cycled within the multi-year programme.

For the Scheme for Financing Schools, two relatively minor changes are required of all LAs by the DfE, in respect of school permission to borrow money, and the register of business interests. Proposed amendments to the BF Scheme were included on the report.

A further update was also provided to the Forum on progress towards the required funding policy for new and expanding schools. Whilst a model was now in place to assess the cost of operating different sized schools and which can accurately

determine likely financial implications, suitably robust pupil forecasts were still outstanding as these depend on the pace of housing construction which is continually updated by the developers. The delay in finalising the model, together with the complexities involved, made it unrealistic to complete a consultation with all schools on the proposed model, meaning the Forum would be asked to approve the policy without a contribution from individual schools.

Forum members commented on:

- the viability and practicability of the LA appointing Executive Headships from existing BF schools to plan the start-up for new schools to avoid the cost pressure of recruiting a full time head teacher before a new school opened. It was agreed that Executive Headships would result in a saving until new schools moved towards capacity but questions remained over whether the role would be too large in practice and whether external providers would agree to having a nominated interim head teacher.
- the LAs financial responsibility for new Academies. It was confirmed that the LA is required to fund Academy and Community schools for start-up and diseconomy costs in the same way, hence the need for the policy which will be brought to the next meeting on 10 December
- The potential adverse impact on existing schools as a result of pupils having the choice to go to schools with newer facilities. Does the LA have a strategy to manage this? Can the LA improve all existing schools rather than build new ones?
- The need for the pupil forecasting model to include housing developments planned in neighbouring LAs.
- Whilst the complexities of the required policy and the fact that the proposal may not be ready for circulation until mid November make it unrealistic to expect to receive and evaluate responses in time for the next meeting from all schools, head teacher representatives do need to speak to their colleagues about the options before a decision is made by the Forum. It was agreed that officers would circulate available information to head teachers only for review at their respective groups. Whilst a decision on the Funding Policy is planned for December, there is an opportunity for a final decision to be made at the January 2016 meeting, but there is no scope to extend beyond this date as LAs must inform the DfE of their funding arrangements for 2016-17 by the end of January 2016.

An update on the issues raised by members would be provided at the next meeting of the forum.

The forum **NOTED**:

- i. The level of funding from the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) of £78.052m.
- ii. Other grant income of £9.767m from the Education Funding Agency (EFA) and £0.031m of general income meant a total of £87.759m was available to fund expenditure within the Schools Budget.
- iii. Points 5.2 – 5.3 of the report confirmed the level of funding and detailed the previously agreed draw down of Earmarked Reserves and other adjustments to increase available budgets. These included £0.117m draw down from the Job Evaluation Reserve to part finance the cost of implementing the Bracknell Forest Supplement for non-teaching staff in schools and £0.208m draw down from the SEN Unit Reserve to support the start-up costs for Rise@GHC.

Further adjustments by the EFA to the Early Years Block DSG allocation were that funding for 2 year olds had now been confirmed at £0.673m and funding for 3 and 4 year olds had been verified resulting in a £0.047m deduction.

- iv. Overall, these changes resulted in a current level of DSG of £78.678m and a total income of £88.476m.
- v. A £0.020m draw down from the SEN Unit Reserve for Rise@GHC as a result of on-going checks to the budget requirement. The Forum agreed this change needed to be made to the medium term budget plan due to the change in the cash flow profile but would not affect the overall cost of the 5 year project.
- vi. Provisional budget monitoring indicated that the Schools Budget would under spend by an aggregate £0.223m. Added to this was an opening surplus amount of £0.208m in the unallocated Schools Budget General Reserve, meaning a potential £0.451m surplus balance at year end. However, this would be £0.079m below the surplus minimum level of £0.510m which may mean a top up from the new year DSG income may be required. It was noted that if this was the case it would become a budget pressure.

The Forum **AGREED**:

- i. That the Schools Forum would make a decision on the Funding Policy at the next meeting of the Forum on 10 December.

The Forum discussed circulating the policy proposal to all other schools to canvass their views by way of consultation. However, due to the complexities of the required policy and the fact that the proposal may not be ready for circulation until mid November it was considered unrealistic to expect to receive and evaluate responses in time for the next meeting. However, Paul Clark agreed to explore the feasibility of circulating the paper to other school head teachers only by way of consultation.

7. **Schools Forum Operational and Good Practice Guide**

The Forum were presented with the Operational and Good Practice Guide which replaced the October 2013 version.

The Forum **NOTED**:

- i. Whilst no significant changes had been made to the guidance, there were three areas where changes were considered beneficial and relatively straightforward to implement:
 - o Improve the flow of information to governing bodies, to include the outcomes of consultations with the Schools Forum, such as those in respect of contracts to be funded from the Schools Budget and other financial issues.
 - o Improvements to induction of new members to ensure appropriate background information was made available in a timelier manner.
 - o Improvements in communications to non-school partners, in particular private, voluntary and independent sector providers of early years childcare and education.

The Forum discussed the self-assessment toolkit issued by DfE which was designed for members to complete, either individually or by the Forum as a whole, which was centred on assessing the strengths and weakness of Schools Forums.

The Forum **AGREED**:

- i. To the completion and return of the self-assessment toolkit to Paul Clark no later than 20 November in order that the outcomes and any proposed changes could be reported to the Forum for a decision at the next meeting on 10 December 2015.

8. **Financial Benchmarking 2015-16**

The Forum briefly reviewed a report which informed members of the Education and Children's Services financial benchmarking data in respect of the 2015-16 original budget. The report provided comparative data with 10 other LAs considered to have characteristics which closely matched those of Bracknell Forest. These were Hertfordshire, Hampshire, Central Bedfordshire, West Berkshire, West Sussex, Oxfordshire, Warwickshire, South Gloucestershire, York and Buckinghamshire.

The Forum noted that BFC had a higher general cost base than most of the 10 other LAs, in particular due to its geographical location and payment of London weighting to staff. However, due to the brief and unclear completion guidance issued by the DfE it was likely that not all authorities would have completed the statements on the same basis, leading to doubt of the accuracy of the data.

The Forum commented that spend reflected the budget decisions and priorities of the Forum and variances should be expected, and that high spend in some areas is expected and a benefit. For example, whilst young people's learning and development was 4 times the average spend compared to the other 10 LAs and the highest in the group, BFC had the lowest number of young people Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) and the spend here reflected the cost of the Adviza contract that provided information, advice and guidance to post 16 students. The same applies to spend on combined services which are 2.6 times the average, but this supports vulnerable children and families and is often an effective form of preventing escalation of difficulties.

9. **Dates of Future Meetings**

The next meetings of the Schools Forum were scheduled to take place at 4.30pm in the Council Chamber at Easthampstead House on:

Thursday 10 December 2015
Thursday 14 January 2016
Thursday 10 March 2016
Thursday 21 April 2016

If there was no business to discuss, meetings would be cancelled.

CHAIRMAN