

SCHOOLS FORUM
11 MARCH 2021
4.30 - 5.40 PM



Present:

Martin Gocke, Pupil Referral Unit Representative (Governor) (Chairman)
Stuart Matthews, Academy School Representative (Headteacher) (Vice-Chairman)
Sue Butler, Early Years PVI Provider
Liz Cole, Primary School Representative (Headteacher)
Jane Coley, Academy School Representative (Headteacher)
Karen Davis, Primary School Representative (Headteacher)
Peter Floyd, Special School Representative (Governor)
Keith Grainger, Secondary School Representative (Headteacher)
Jo Lagares, Primary School Representative (Headteacher)
Roger Prew, Primary School Representative (Governor)
Phil Sherwood, Primary School Representative (Headteacher)
Debbie Smith, Secondary School Representative (Headteacher)
Richard Stok, Primary School Representative (Governor)
Greg Wilton, Teacher Union Representative

Observer:

Councillor Dr Gareth Barnard, Executive Member for Children, Young People & Learning (Observer)

175. Apologies for Absence/Substitute Members

The Chair noted that Rachel Morgan, Assistant Director for Education and Learning, had passed on her apologies. The Chair welcomed Chris Hilliard who had been appointed as Interim Assistant Director.

The Chair welcomed Liz Savage to the Forum as a new Academy representative.

176. Declarations of Interest

In respect of Item 7 (2021-22 proposals for the High Needs Block Budget), affected interests were declared from The Chair (as a member of the management committee of College Hall and as a Governor of Kennel Lane School), Peter Floyd (as the Chair of Governors at Kennel Lane School), Keith Grainger (as Headteacher of Garth Hill College), Debbie Smith (as a member of the management committee of College Hall), Richard Stok (as a Governor of Meadow Vale Primary School), and Councillor Barnard (as a Governor of Warfield Primary School and Garth Hill College).

177. Minutes and Matters Arising

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Forum on 14 January 2021 be approved as a correct record.

Arising from minute 170, Paul Clark advised that a report showing the overall pressures on schools from the forecast numbers would be presented to the Forum in

June when the 2020-21 accounts were closed. Paul Clark was anticipating that he could report on Covid-19 spend data as well.

Action: Paul Clark

Arising from minute 171, Kashif Nawaz highlighted that updates on controlling the number of Education, Health & Care Plans (EHCPs) were included in the report for Item 7 (2021-22 proposals for the High Needs Block Budget). Updates had also been shared at the last meeting of the Sub Group.

Arising from minute 173, Kashif Nawaz had followed up with the Headteacher of Holly Spring Primary School regarding the FUSION project. The Headteacher expressed that the project should be withdrawn. If they were to resubmit a bid, it would be presented to the Sub Group for oversight.

178. High Needs Block Sub Group Minutes - 20 January 2021

The Forum received and considered the minutes of the High Needs Block Sub Group held on 20 January 2021. The Chair expressed that, since the Terms of Reference had been revised and the management of the meetings had been sorted, the Sub Group was making much better progress.

179. 2020-21 Childcare Sufficiency Assessment

The Forum considered a report which presented the 2020-21 Childcare Sufficiency Assessment (CSA).

Cherry Hall explained that the Early Years team at Bracknell Forest Council (BFC) have sought to better understand the market. The team had good ideas last year, but this was impacted by the pandemic. A lot of the work has continued but the outcomes look different to what had been anticipated as the numbers of children accessing childcare were lower. However, providers had stayed open as much as they could within Government guidelines.

The CSA shows that there was sufficient childcare across the Borough. However, Cherry Hall wanted to understand more about the market in individual wards. This data would help avoid putting new childcare provision in areas where there was already sufficient capacity. Section 9 of the CSA showed the data by electoral ward. The CSA identified how children were moving across boundaries. Cherry Hall planned to speak to neighbouring authorities to ascertain how many BFC children were going out of area for childcare this had been delayed due to CV-19 but would be undertaken during the coming months

The CSA was not able to provide an absolute number of childcare places in BFC as it differed from day to day; providers adapting their capacity based on space and staffing requirements which were dependent on the age of the children attending. Therefore, it was only possible to provide a snapshot of capacity at any one time.

One of the priorities for 2021-22 was to identify and understand the changing childcare needs arising from the impact of the pandemic. For example, the data suggested that more parents would be working from home. Therefore, childcare providers were being supported to look at changing their business models to be sustainable; for example, having different opening hours and extending to holiday childcare.

Before and after school activities were severely impacted due to the pandemic. There continued to be a need to identify any gaps to ensure working families were able to access childcare. The Early Years team were actively promoting childcare and the range of options available.

There had been a drop of 18 childminders last year and Cherry Hall had not seen any new provisions joining the market. However, seven expressions of interest had recently been submitted to the team.

The Early Years team were joining a pilot scheme with an organisation called 'Famiio' which was developing an app to signpost families to childcare solutions and to provide them with customised childcare plans. The app was expected to provide real time information on childcare providers.

The Forum expressed on behalf of the childcare providers that they have felt well supported by Cherry Hall and the Early Years team during these unprecedented times. Childcare providers had fed back that a member of the team was always available to provide advice and support.

The Forum noted that Section 2 of the CSA highlighted that two group providers had reported financial difficulties and asked what had been provided for them. Cherry Hall replied that the Early Years team were working with providers to see what else the team could help with. Fully funded Business skills training had also been provided. They were also looking at identifying more children who were eligible for two-year-old funding who were not accessing childcare. No group providers have closed due to sustainability issues.

The Chair enquired whether there was any funding transfer across borders. Cherry Hall replied that the Census recorded all children attending providers in our area, regardless of where they live. This had changed from the historical position.

The Forum asked, regarding EHCP funds, whether there was identification of children needing additional help. Cherry Hall responded that she worked closely with the Special Education Needs and Disabilities team. The Early Years team also provided an inclusion fund for emerging needs which provided support to settings. The inclusion fund panel looked at the needs of the children and would intervene early but only instigate the Statutory Assessment process when it was needed.

The Forum quoted a paragraph from Section 2 of the CSA which stated that "[providers] who remained open and accepted vulnerable children or children of keyworkers from closed settings and as a result the number of children attending their setting exceeded the funded places for the term were able to claim additional funding." The Forum questioned whether there was any double reporting. Cherry Hall confirmed that a small number would have been double reporting. In most situations, when children moved to another setting, they were able to use pre-paid places. However, if children were eligible for 30 hours funded childcare, most would go from nursery to childminders who did not have pre-paid places, so the childminders received top-up funding. Paul Clark added that there were sufficient funds in the budget to meet early years commitments.

The Forum asked Cherry Hall whether she was expecting a further drop in participation in Autumn 2021 from providers that cannot weather the storm, or whether the current level could be maintained. Cherry Hall replied that she was hoping that the position could be maintained as this term the average attendance was between 1300 and 1500 a day. This showed that children were returning to provisions.

The Forum noted that data was unavailable for breakfast and after-school clubs and asked whether that was because it was a fluid number or because of a lack of any mechanism to collect up-to-date information. Cherry Hall replied that both were factors. Lots of these clubs didn't run due to the pandemic. It was hoped that the new app would be able to keep more real-time data.

The Chair expressed that there was clear linkage between the CSA and the school places plan. The Chair hoped that some of the work Cherry Hall's team has been doing with the SEND provision fed into the work Kashif Nawaz was responsible for (Kashif Nawaz confirmed that the SEN section was firmly embedded within the school places plan). Together, the three documents provided useful information for BFC. Chris Hilliard added that he has worked in several Local Authorities and this was the first time he had heard of all the key areas being integrated into one. Chris Hilliard felt that this approach further strengthened BFC discussions with the DfE.

Cherry Hall added that she had started working with the SEND team and the Child Development Centre to move forward with collating SEN data. Cherry Hall was expecting to be able to report to the Forum on how this was moving forward after a couple of terms.

Action: Cherry Hall

Kashif Nawaz reiterated that the Sub Group would be learning from the data and identifying emerging needs as opposed to just taking a rigid statistical approach.

The Chair thanked Cherry Hall and her team on behalf of the Forum for the work that had gone into the CSA and the report which provided a useful summary.

RESOLVED to NOTE the 2020-21 Childcare Sufficiency Assessment.

180. 2021-22 proposals for the Early Years Block Budget

The Forum considered a report which sought agreement for the 2021-22 Early Years budgets, including the values to be attributed to the Bracknell Forest Council Early Years Funding Formula (EYFF).

Cherry Hall highlighted that there was to be a national increase in Early Years funding, and it was proposed that the increases should be passed on in full to providers through the EYFF base rate. There were also proposals to make minor changes to that allocation of funding across the Early Years Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) income budget. This was to better reflect the budget forecasts and maintain the agreed proportional distribution of funds so that money was provided to those who most needed it.

Cherry Hall explained that the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI) element was previously paid on universal and extended hours. The proposal this year was for the IDACI just to be paid on universal hours.

Taking account of all the budget proposals and the latest data for provider eligibility to EYFF supplement payments, it was expected that, overall, 32 providers would experience a decrease in hourly rate and 126 providers would see an increase in hourly rate.

One concern was that the numbers on the Census would be significantly lower; however, the recent figures showed that numbers were only 3.5% lower than the usual Census. The number of two-year-olds accessing childcare had decreased significantly.

The Forum felt that the new formula was good in that monies would reach children experiencing the most deprivation. The winter grant fund was incredibly beneficial to families. One difficulty that providers had shared was to do with accessing PPE. There was an increase in costs related to the supply of PPE and the need for additional cleaners, and childcare providers did not receive additional support in the same way as other sectors. Cherry Hall agreed with those points. The funding side had gone well in terms of paying providers even if children were not attending. However, there was a difficulty in costs outside of that with which the Council had not been able to support.

The Chair highlighted that one thing the Forum was asked to agree was whether there were appropriate arrangements in place for administration of the Early Years free entitlement funding. The Chair asked whether there was anything else apart from the comments already made that the Forum could use to make a judgement on that. Paul Clark explained that this was something that had been included by the DfE but there was no definition on how to measure. Paul Clark advised that BFC was not holding back any money intended for providers and suggested that the Forum reflect on whether providers and parents were getting the breadth of support needed. The Chair expressed that he doubted anyone on the Forum would have been unhappy with what has been fed back.

RESOLVED, on consideration of the EYB budget proposals from the Council, to AGREE:

1. that for the 2021-22 financial year the Executive Member sets:
 - i. the Early Years DSG income budget at £7.74m (Table 3 of the report);
 - ii. the funding rates in the Early Years Funding Formula as set out in Table 4 of the report; and
 - iii. the proposed budgets as set out in Annex 1 of the report; and
 - iv. that there are appropriate arrangements in place for administration of the Early Years free entitlement funding.

181. **2021-22 proposals for the High Needs Block Budget**

The Forum considered a report which sought comments on the detailed budget proposals for the High Needs Block (HNB) element of the Schools Budget.

Paul Clark explained that, whilst it was expected that we could see three years of high increases in funding, this was significantly below the forecasted demands, so the deficit was still increasing. The two main factors were the increase in demand of costs which fell into the Council's commitments, and the actions to aid cost reductions from the Commissioning Plan had slowed due to the pandemic. Although BFC was not financially responsible for this deficit, as this lay with the DfE, BFC was still spending public money and therefore was managing these budgets in same way as if it were responsible, seeking best value and following all the normal financial regulations and procedures.

To illustrate the national nature of the financial challenge facing BFC, financial returns from 77 LAs (a 52% response rate), including BFC, had been completed in autumn 2020. This confirmed that most LAs were expecting larger SEND budget deficits.

BFC's deficit was forecast to increase around the midpoint range of the survey results.

The DfE launched a consultation regarding a small number of changes to the distribution of funds to LAs in 2022-23. This was in advance of further potential changes in 2023-24 as part of the SEND review. Regarding the proposed changes for 2022-23, the DfE was looking at certain allocations being based on actual data as opposed to budget data. Although the funding protection mechanism means that changes would not have an effect in 2022-23, BFC could be very vulnerable after that if funding protection measures were amended.

Paul Clark also answered a question on Support for Learning which was an in-house SEN service and to what extent the funding was secure. He explained that all budgets within the HNB were regularly reviewed and could be subject to future changes.

RESOLVED

1. to AGREE that the Executive Member:
 - i. sets the total initial Dedicated Schools Grant funded HNB budget at £18.998m;
 - ii. releases £0.143m of funds from the SEND Units Reserve to finance estimated start-up costs at the proposed Special Resource Provisions in BF schools; and
 - iii. confirms the changes set out in the supporting information (Table 1 and Annex 5 of the report) and relevant budgets are therefore updated to those summarised in Annex 6 of the report; and
2. to NOTE:
 - i. that work needed to continue to ensure appropriate provision for children and young people with Special Educational Needs and those in need of Alternative Provision through the programme of the HNB sub-group;
 - ii. the further deterioration in the forecast financial position of the HNB Budget at Table 1 of the report, with a:
 - a. £5.698m deficit forecast for financial year 2021-22;
 - b. £11.217m cumulative deficit forecast for 31 March 2022; and
 - c. £17.216m cumulative deficit forecast for 31 March 2023; and
 - iii. the key aspects of the DfE consultation on the review of the 2022-23 HNB NFF including:
 - a. the importance of the Funding Floor factor to protect against a potential £0.738m funding reduction; and
 - b. the potential for significant changes in funding allocations to LAs from 2023-24 for which the financial implications cannot be estimated at this stage.

182. Dates of Future Meetings

The next meeting of the Forum would be held at 4.30pm on 24 June 2021.

CHAIRMAN