

SCHOOLS FORUM
9 MARCH 2023
4.30 - 5.55 PM



Present:

Stuart Matthews, Academy School Representative (Chair)
Elizabeth Savage, Academy School Representative (Vice-Chair)
Jenny Baker, Special School Representative
Stuart Bevan, Primary School Representative (Headteacher)
Sue Butler, Early Years PVI Provider
Simon Cope, Primary School Representative (Headteacher)
Juanita Dunlop, Primary School Representative (Headteacher)
Roger Prew, Primary School Representative (Governor)
Trudi Sammons, Primary School Representative (Headteacher)
Debbie Smith, Academy School Representative
Grant Strudley, Academy School Representative
Paul Tatum, Trades Union Representative

Observer:

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

Apologies for absence were received from:

Keith Grainger, Secondary School Representative (Headteacher)
Tim Griffith, Academy School Representative

276. Apologies for Absence/Substitute Members

The Chair welcomed Trudi Sammons to the meeting as a new member of the Forum.

277. Declarations of Interest

The Chair noted that any representatives from Kennel Lane School and Owlsmoor School may need to declare an affected interest for Item 8 (Final proposals for the 2023-24 High Needs Block Budget).

278. Minutes and Matters Arising

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Forum on 12 January 2023 be approved as a correct record.

Arising from minute 273, an update on Special Resource Provision (SRP) places at King's Academy Binfield would be provided under Item 6 (Update on Special Resource Provisions).

279. Schools Forum - Constitution & Membership

The Forum considered a report which sought endorsement to minor changes to the Schools Forum's Constitution and Membership.

The Chair noted that the membership had changed to reflect the increase of academies in the borough. Paul Clark added that there would only be one governor from maintained schools going forward as the council had difficulty recruiting to those vacancies. There were two vacancies for the additional academy representatives and one vacancy for the 16-19 Provider representative. Next steps would be confirmed following endorsement of the Constitution and Membership.

Action: Paul Clark

RESOLVED that the Schools Forum Constitution and Membership be endorsed.

280. **Early Years Childcare Sufficiency Assessment 2022**

The Forum considered a report which updated on the 2022 Childcare Sufficiency Assessment (CSA) which was due to be submitted to the Executive Member and subsequently published on the Bracknell Forest Council website, as required by the authority's statutory duty to secure sufficient childcare.

Cherry Hall explained that the data was based on summer 2022 attendance and capacity. However, the picture had significantly changed since the report was completed, potentially losing two settings at the end of the academic year, meaning that around 50-60 part-time places for 2-, 3- and 4-year-olds would be lost. The council was also working with a further three providers on their business models to support them to make changes to remain sustainable.

It had been a difficult time for the sector with significant issues impacting sustainability including recruitment and retention issues. Part of the problem had been around funding and the increases had not been enough to meet the outgoings, so providers had not been able to attract high quality staff.

The report still needed to be published as it was accurate at the time it was written. There had been an increase in the numbers of children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and, when the Family Information Service had been doing brokerage for childcare, they have not been able to meet all the requests currently.

Sue Butler was invited to comment as an Early Years provider. Sue felt that if the current challenging conditions in Early Years were to continue, there would be concerns relating to the sustainability of the private provider. Sue also commented that there has been a constant turnover of staff and outcomes for children had been impacted. Cherry added that it was a national issue. If Bracknell Forest lost lots of private and voluntary settings, it was unclear how it would meet childcare sufficiency needs.

The Forum noted the statutory duty for the LA to secure sufficient childcare and to submit a report to council members on how it was meeting that duty. The Forum enquired whether the suggestion was that Bracknell was not going to be able to deliver sufficient childcare. Cherry replied that, when the report was written, the team was confident that there was sufficient childcare, but they were now looking at what needed to happen to maintain sustainability given the recent developments. There had been an overall decline in child numbers, but more families had been taking up the 30-hour places. The team had been doing more surveys with providers to understand the pressures.

The Forum asked whether there were any other solutions. Cherry explained that she had been working with another organisation on the rent that they were charging. One of the providers wanted to increase their hours and the council were negotiating with the owner of the building for a reduced rate until the provider built up numbers. Recruitment was the biggest difficulty and there were no quick fixes, but it had been part of the discussions with the Local Government Association (LGA) as well. Councillor Barnard added that this was a high priority, and he would continue to raise it with the MP and with the LGA.

RESOLVED to NOTE the CSA. The Forum also noted its concerns about childcare sufficiency and sustainability going forward.

281. **Update on Special Resource Provisions**

The Forum considered a report which updated on the development and work associated with primary and secondary SRPs within Bracknell Forest and the development and implementation of a Banding Tool.

Secondary SRP Development

Nathan Jones explained that there would be no capital investment required from SEND capital funds for the SRP at King's Academy Binfield. The school had committed to developing 40 places: 14 places in primary and 26 places in secondary. Only one place had been secured so far but it was expected that all 40 places would be brought online within the next three years, with 10 young people already having been identified as suitable for accessing the secondary places in September 2023. The school had committed to increase its knowledge base to meet those needs.

New Secondary ASC SRP Provision and Further Secondary Development

Three secondary schools had expressed an interest in hosting SRPs for children with ASC. Two of those schools would require substantial capital spend and the other would require moderate capital spend. A more formal procurement process was needed to bring the places to fruition.

Development of a secondary cognition and learning SRP had been identified as a way to support effective transition from the Owlsmoor primary SRP. This would also require a significant level of capital and revenue funding.

The LA was developing a capital strategy group to have oversight on capital spending and the SEND Team had put forward a plan to the group detailing all the activity that would be involved in bringing SRP places online. The team was confident that places would be made available by 2024.

The Forum thanked Nathan and the team for all the work done so far. The Forum offered to do whatever it could to help speed the process. Cheryl Eyre advised that a Capital Board was being set up within the People directorate and she would welcome having members of the Forum and other stakeholders on the Board. The Board would be working to develop the SRP plan, and this would provide an opportunity for the Forum to challenge from within, but they would still report to the Forum.

The Forum noted that there was already one Year 7 pupil in a primary school unit and two further Year 6 pupils who did not yet have a secondary school to go to. Therefore, it was imperative for the SRP project to move at pace.

The Forum asked how much funding was available for SEND capital projects. Cheryl replied that there was approximately £4.8m available in total for SEND capital builds.

There was a complex sign-off process to access those funds. The Forum noted that this was a significant amount of money that could make a real difference to SEND students in the borough.

Primary SRP Update

The Speech, Language & Communication Needs (SLCN) unit at Meadowvale had been running at 20% occupancy and the school had served notice of closure. Nathan had been working closely with the Headteacher and the SEND Team to plan the moving of the children impacted by the closure. Only four children had been accessing the unit and two of those were expected to remain at Meadowvale, so the closure of the SRP was unlikely to have a significant impact.

In November 2022 officers were contacted by the Headteacher at Harmans Water as the lead teacher had decided to leave due to the level of challenge they were dealing with on a daily basis. This was followed by two other key members of staff leaving. Officers had sought to secure places for two children who had been inappropriately placed in that provision and had consulted with 15-20 schools to try to find appropriate provision. Officers were also developing mutually understood entry criteria to understand the nature and needs of children to be placed in those provisions.

The Headteacher at Owlsmoor Primary had proposed adding 8 further places to their SRP unit, catering for two distinct cohorts: one for children that could access some aspects of the mainstream curriculum, and the other for children with more complex needs.

Banding Tool Update

Following the banding tool update held at the end of 2022, data had been received from 13 settings which had moderated a number of children through the tool. It was noted that some schools were identifying a need for £40,000 funding for children currently getting around £7,000. The department had accepted that there would be situations where more funding was going in to maintain provision in mainstream, but it was expected that there would be an overall reduction in costs. A project was underway to run new EHCPs through the banding tool. It was noted that there was disparity around the landscape in the current model. Ultimately, whatever tool was used, there was a need for guidance, support and a suite of documents to ensure consistency. The draft documents had been shared with the working group.

The Forum welcomed that schools may receive additional funding but expressed concern about where similar tools used in other LAs had had a depressing effect on funding and been used as a blunt instrument. The Forum asked whether there would be a mechanism for challenge and when the tool was likely to come into place. Nathan replied that it needed to be modelled much more effectively than it had done. Nathan felt it was helpful to present the impact based on current data but was clear that this was not the final position. The department was not advocating an LA-driven model and would like it to be done between the school and parents initially. There was a need to ensure a robust and commonly accepted way of schools challenging the banding allocation which required transparency in the system. Care was needed to ensure the tool did not take out substantial funding, but nor could it be used to give substantial additional funding where the child's needs were not showing that level of funding. It was likely that the tool would be stair-cased in over a number of years, but there would be ongoing conversations with Forum and HNB colleagues about pace.

The Forum expressed concerns that the current administration of HNB was not working and asked for assurance that some things would be fixed in the meantime while waiting for the new tool to come in place. Nathan replied that a national

banding tool had been included within a central government green paper and it would be helpful if more details were available. There was a risk that the LA could invest a huge amount of time over the next two years developing its own tool but then have to use the national banding tool, although it was acknowledged that there was a need to do something.

Free School Application Update

Cheryl Eyre explained that the LA had submitted applications for two Free Schools: one for an ASD school and one for a Social Emotional Mental Health (SEMH) school. ASD had been the biggest need in Bracknell Forest. Both applications were well received by the DfE, but the DfE said they were looking at applications from neighbouring LAs and asked how Bracknell Forest was intending to link up with those. Only 33 schools across England had been agreed overall by the DfE, including our ASD school. SEMH schools had been agreed for Wokingham, Windsor, and Surrey, and Bracknell Forest would be working with them to access places in those schools. Cheryl highlighted that council members including Councillor Barnard had been very supportive of this project. There was a great deal to be done within the next 12 months to progress this and the foundations needed to be laid by 2025 but it was hoped that it would be before then.

RESOLVED to NOTE the activity around SRP:

1. the drive to bring online the 40 ASC SRP places at King's Academy Binfield across primary and secondary education stages;
2. the development of the Capital Board to oversee the utilisation of the borough's SEND capital;
3. the plan to undertake procurement to establish an additional 30 secondary ASC SRP places;
4. the ongoing support of Harmans Water SEMH SRP
5. the ongoing development of Owlsmoor Cognition and Learning SRP with the creation of an additional 8 places; and
6. the work related to the implementation of a new banding tool for the allocation of top up funding and the need to ensure this did not create additional pressure on the high needs block budget, supported through modelling.

282. Delivering Better Value Project Update

The Forum considered a report which briefed on the agreed areas of work as detailed in the Delivering Better Value submission to the DfE.

Cheryl Eyre explained that the council's bid to the DfE was successful and had been awarded £1m to be allocated across three projects: establishment of a new transitions support team, ASD training for teachers, and Kennel Lane outreach support to improve provision for SEND children in mainstream settings. Certain parts of each workstream had already started and regular updates would be provided to the Forum.

The Forum thanked officers who were involved in the bid and establishing the programme.

RESOLVED to NOTE the contents of the report.

283. Final proposals for the 2023-24 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 that were

being presented now by the Council. In line with the statutory funding framework, there were also a small number of decisions for the Forum to take.

Grant Strudley raised questions around the current assumptions being made. For example, the Teaching Assistant hours did not reflect the actual cost to the school and the number of weeks that Teaching Assistants were actually paid for. Cheryl added that she had received Grant's email, and this was being followed up and had been noted.

The Chair noted that the PRU was running a deficit and asked whether that was reflected in the budget and if there had been an adequate settlement. Paul Clark replied that he was aware of the deficit, and it had been built into the 2022-23 forecasts. Discussions with the College Hall management committee were currently underway to determine any long term impact that may need to be considered for next year, but this remained work in progress. The Forum asked whether part of the £4.8m funding could be used for College Hall. Paul Clark explained that was capital funding so could only be used for capital related expenditure and not for day-to-day costs. Cheryl added that the site needed to be reviewed and there may be capital spend required which would need to be considered at the capital board.

RESOLVED

1. whilst NOTING concern around the level of deficit which was due to fall on the LA in the future and the associated risks when the deficit was owned by the LA, to AGREE that the Executive Member:
 - i. sets the total HNB Dedicated Schools Grant retained budget at £23.740m
 - ii. releases £0.175m of funds from the SEN Resource Development Reserve to finance ongoing diseconomy costs at the new Special Resource Provisions; and
 - iii. confirms the changes set out in the supporting information (summarised in Table 1 and Annex 2 of the report) and relevant budgets are updated accordingly; and
2. that the Forum was of the view that appropriate arrangements were NOT yet in place for:
 - i. the education of pupils with SEN (paragraph 6.17 of the report) although positive steps for the future were being taken and improvements were being seen; and
 - ii. the use of pupil referral units (paragraph 6.17 of the report). In respect of arrangements for the education of children otherwise than at school, some parts of the service were operating effectively but others were not yet there. It was agreed for Stuart and Paul to discuss this outside the meeting (**Action: Paul Clark and Stuart Matthews**); and
3. to NOTE the updated forecast financial position of the HNB Budget at Table 1 of the report, which showed a forecast £7.365m overspending in 2023-24 and a £43.396m cumulative deficit on the High Needs Block as at the end of March 2026.

284. Dates of Future Meetings

The next meeting of the Forum would be held at 4.30pm on Thursday 22 June 2023.

CHAIRMAN