

SCHOOLS FORUM
29 MARCH 2022
4.30 - 5.35 PM



Present:

Martin Gocke, Pupil Referral Unit Representative (Governor) (Chair)
Stuart Matthews, Academy School Representative (Headteacher) (Vice-Chairman)
Jenny Baker, Special School Representative
Liz Cole, Primary School Representative (Headteacher)
Karen Davis, Primary School Representative (Headteacher)
Jo Lagares, Primary School Representative (Headteacher)
Roger Prew, Primary School Representative (Governor)
Elizabeth Savage, Academy School Representative (Headteacher)
Phil Sherwood, Primary School Representative (Headteacher)
Debbie Smith, Academy School Representative
Grant Strudley, Academy School Representative

Observer:

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

Apologies for absence were received from:

Sue Butler, Early Years PVI Provider
Richard Stok, Primary School Representative (Governor)

229. Apologies for Absence/Substitute Members

The Forum noted the attendance of the following Substitute Member:

Debbie Smith as an Academy School Representative.

230. Declarations of Interest

The Chair declared an affected interest regarding Item 4 (2022-23 Proposals for the High Needs Block Budget) in relation to College Hall. Debbie Smith also declared an affected interest as part of the Management Committee for College Hall.

The Chair declared an affected interest on behalf of Jenny Baker regarding Item 4 in relation to Kennel Lane School.

The Chair highlighted that, whilst Item 4 related to all schools, only College Hall and Kennel Lane School were named. Liz Cole queried whether schools with Specially Resourced Provisions (SRPs) should declare an interest. The Chair confirmed that Owlsmoor School was mentioned. The Chair requested members of the Forum to use their discretion to declare any interests if they became evident during discussions later in the meeting.

231. Minutes and Matters Arising

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Forum on 10 March 2022 be approved as a correct record.

Following the previous meeting, the Chair expressed a desire to move forward constructively, listening to the outcomes from the subsequent discussion between the Council and the Headteachers. Councillor Barnard added that it was a credit to all members of the Forum that discussions had happened in the short space of time since the last meeting. Councillor Barnard reinforced that he takes seriously the views of the Forum.

Most of the actions from the meeting held on 10 March 2022 were for the June 2022 meeting so would not be discussed at this meeting.

Arising from minute 227, Paul Clark had met with Jenny Baker, Stuart Matthews, and Phil Sherwood.

232. **2022-23 Proposals for the High Needs Block Budget**

The Forum considered a revised budget 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.

Prior to presenting the report, Paul Clark provided an update from a regional seminar attended last week where the emerging strategy that Local Authorities (LAs) in the London Boroughs had adopted to tackle their HNB deficits. Two Boroughs presented how they were working with the Department for Education (DfE) as part of the “safety valve” programme. This programme had been created by the DfE and worked by agreeing medium-term action plans with the individual LAs. As long as the LA could evidence that they were meeting their targets, the DfE were providing additional Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) income to help those LAs repay their deficit as they moved towards a balanced budget. The DfE had been working with around 20 LAs as part of this programme. The LAs that presented at the seminar had very similar deficits and challenges to Bracknell Forest Council (BFC): they both had £6m to £7m annual deficits and at the start of the programme had cumulative overspendings of £20m and £30m. The expectation was to achieve balanced budgets by the end of the 5-year plans.

Of particular note was that the action plans presented at the seminar, as agreed by the DfE, were similar to what BFC was planning; for example, supporting schools to meet a high level of need in a cost-effective way within mainstream settings, reviewing and reforming outreach services, expanding local specialist provision, improving efficiency of commissioning services, and managing demand for Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) by scrutinising provision at each annual review. The DfE were in the process of expanding the programme and BFC was due to be included in the next branch of the work which would include 55 LAs highlighting the widespread effect of the financial challenges being faced across the country.

The Chair expressed that this sounded very encouraging and tied in with the aspiration of the Council and the Forum to work towards the medium-term plan. Cheryl Eyre added that a previous seminar on the DfE “safety valve” programme was attended by Timothy Wheadon, Grainne Siggins and Stuart McKellar, and there was a commitment at the top level, supported by Councillor Barnard, to support this piece of work which would give rigour to what BFC was doing and make it accountable.

The Council wanted to get to a balanced budget and would do everything it could but needed to be joined by stakeholders to achieve that goal.

In presenting the budget report, Paul Clark thanked the Headteachers for attending the follow-up meeting. Three main changes to the previous budget report were agreed for inclusion: further clarity and context on the SEND strategy, more details about the calculation of costs and savings from the change programme, and a commitment to providing a medium-term financial plan in the autumn term 2022 setting out options to balance annual spend to annual income. There were a number of complexities outside of the Council's control which meant that officers could not guarantee presenting a balanced budget for the autumn term, but that was the aim.

Phil Sherwood was invited to speak about the follow-up meeting held with Cheryl Eyre, Paul Clark, Stuart Matthews, and Jenny Baker. Phil shared that the revised recommendations showed the reluctance on the part of the Forum to approve the budget but understanding the need to move forward and the desire to all work together. The Forum recognised the issues that had come up in the past regarding slow progress or ineffective pathways for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), and this needed addressing.

The Forum was pleased to hear that there would be accountability and an aspiration to balance the budget whilst providing the best outcomes for children with SEND. However, the Forum felt that improving relationships with families needed to be included as a central part of the recommendations.

The Forum queried what was meant by "Early Help" which was referred to in section 7c of the commentary on the 2022-23 budget proposals. Cheryl Eyre explained that it was talking about early identification, early intervention, and early support. However, the Early Help model was still a work in progress which needed further implementation and Debbie Smith (Safeguarding & Inclusion Team Manager) was progressing it. Cheryl Eyre was also looking at the capacity within the service to deliver the Early Help aims. Debbie Smith added that the Council needed to improve the whole Early Help offer (Early Help spanned social care as well as education).

Councillor Barnard felt it would be helpful for the Forum to come up with a roadmap to set out what updates it needed in the run up to January next year when the indicative budget would be presented and to ensure that the proposals being submitted were fit for purpose. The Chair added that the Forum had created an HNB steering group which seemed to have dissipated. The Chair felt that, if the subgroup could be revitalised, it could help set out the roadmap and agree what information needed to be provided to the Forum.

Jenny Baker replied that the subgroup had been looking at the SRPs and the Service Level Agreements (SLAs), as well as the banding matrix. There was still work to be done and it was considered more effective to split into two groups. The Chair felt that there needed to be a more coherent roadmap to come from the Forum to ensure that officers were given time to respond to requests. Cheryl Eyre added that she was chairing a group looking at the new workstream created regarding the capital strategy and SEND sufficiency, HNB funding, and establishing systems to bring together SEN data to use in projections. Cheryl Eyre suggested that a Primary and a Secondary Headteacher could join this workstream to put together all the strands into a cohesive piece of work. The Chair highlighted that there was a bigger pool of Headteachers than those on the Forum and it would be good to use the mechanisms and people that we had got.

Regarding the expectation to reduce the number of requests for high-cost external placements, the Forum highlighted that there may be additional pressures in terms of SEN tribunals if parents were to choose out of area high-cost placements. Cheryl Eyre explained that, if the Council had sufficient and high-quality provision in-Borough and identified that as the most appropriate placement for a child, parents could take the Council to tribunal but would be unlikely to win.

Chris Hilliard expressed that it would be helpful to identify examples of best practice. There were some examples of outstanding practice within Bracknell Forest schools which should be looked at to identify what was making the difference. There was also a need to look at the School Places Plan and Capacity Strategy which had been drawing out issues to do with forward planning and identifying where the shortfall was for SEND places. The report would be taken to the Executive, but it would also be helpful to get contributions from the Forum on that, perhaps at an extra meeting of the Forum. The Chair agreed to discuss that with Chris Hilliard and Paul Clark.

Action: Martin Gocke

Revised recommendations had been submitted to the Forum ahead of the meeting. It was agreed during the meeting to reflect the need for co-production of SEN systems and processes with children, families, and all key stakeholders.

RESOLVED

1. to AGREE that the Executive Member:
 - i. sets the HNB budget at £28.907m and commits to the presentation of an ambitious medium term (5 year) plan at its meeting in November 2022, setting out options to balance annual expenditure to annual income. This plan should:
 - a. include a significant increase in local, effective provision within Bracknell Forest; and
 - b. be designed to meet the needs of our children and young people in a more cost effective and efficient way;
 - ii. releases £0.210m of funds from the SEND Units Reserve to finance ongoing diseconomy costs at the new Special Resource Provisions with the commitment to providing:
 - a. clear data about the uptake of places at SRPs and progress towards meeting Key Performance Indicators; and
 - b. a strategic approach to the transition of children from Primary SRPs to secondary education, in place from September 2023;
 - iii. confirms the changes set out in the supporting information at Table 1 and Annex 2 of Appendix 1 of the report subject to the commitment outlined in 1.i above; and
 - iv. confirms relevant budgets to those summarised in Annex 3, Appendix 1 of the report;
2. to NOTE the outcome of the recent Ofsted SEND inspection and is of the view that appropriate arrangements are NOT in place for the education of pupils with SEN (paragraph 6.19 of the report). The Forum AGREES that:
 - a. whilst there are appropriate arrangements for the majority of children and young people accessing mainstream and specialist provision in Bracknell Forest, there is a shortage of specialist provision and support within the borough and therefore many children and young people are not having their needs appropriately met. This should be addressed in the plan outlined in 1.i above;
 - b. as part of the 'appropriate arrangements', the Forum supports and encourages continued rapid progress towards the improvement of local SEN systems and processes; and

- c. the issue of 'co-production' with all partners, especially parents and carers, needs greater emphasis
 - 3. that appropriate arrangements are NOT in place for the use of pupil referral units and alternative provision. The Forum AGREES that:
 - a. whilst there are appropriate arrangements for the some of the children and young people accessing specialist provision within the borough, we note that there is a shortage of specialist provision and support within the borough and therefore many children and young people are not having their needs appropriately met. This should also be addressed in the plan outlined in paragraph 1.i above;
 - b. as part of the 'appropriate arrangements', the Forum supports and encourages continued rapid progress towards the improvement of local systems and processes for the provision of alternative provision; and
 - c. the issue of 'co-production' with all partners, especially parents and carers, needs greater emphasis
- to NOTE the forecast financial position of the HNB Budget at Table 1 of the report, which shows a forecast £7.408m overspending in 2022-23 and a £36.371m cumulative deficit as at the end of March 2025.

233. Dates of Future Meetings

The Chair advised that there may be an extra meeting held in May 2022 to discuss the School Places Plan and Capacity Strategy.

The next scheduled meeting of the Forum would be held at 4.30pm on Thursday 23 June 2022.

CHAIRMAN