

**SCHOOLS FORUM
14 SEPTEMBER 2023
4.30 - 5.53 PM**



Present:

Elizabeth Savage, Academy School Representative (Vice-Chair)
Stuart Bevan, Primary School Representative (Headteacher)
Sue Butler, Early Years PVI Provider
Juanita Dunlop, Primary School Representative (Headteacher)
Keith Grainger, Secondary School Representative (Headteacher)
Trudi Sammons, Primary School Representative (Headteacher)
Grant Strudley, Academy School Representative
Paul Tatum, Trades Union Representative
Gareth Croxon, Academy School Representative (Headteacher)
Katie Moore, Kings Academy Binfield and Oakwood
Caroline Johnson, Primary School representative

Observer:

Councillor Roy Bailey, Executive Member for Children, Young People & Learning (Observer)

Apologies for absence were received from:

Jenny Baker, Special School Representative
Tim Griffith, Academy School Representative
Stuart Matthews, Academy School Representative

1. Election of Chair

RESOLVED that Stuart Matthews, Headteacher at Edgbarrow be appointed Chair of Schools Forum for the academic year.

2. Appointment of Vice Chair

RESOLVED that Liz Savage, Headteacher at Jennett's Park Primary School be appointed Vice-Chair of the Schools Forum for the academic year.

3. Declarations of Interest

Caroline Johnson, Headteacher at St Michael's Easthampstead Primary School declared an interest in the St Michael's Easthampstead deficit which may be discussed during the meeting.

4. Minutes and Matters Arising

The minutes of the meeting held on 22 June 2023 were approved as a correct record.

Arising from the minutes, the following points were noted:

- The DBV programme was to be used across primary and secondary settings. An additional teacher would be recruited to support staff training from January 2024.

- The Year 6 transition project was aimed at supporting children with SEN to transfer to a bigger environment. A senior officer to support the project was being recruited in October 2023, and the programme should be functional by January 2024.
- The outreach hub project had been intended to be in a secondary school, however there had been difficulty progressing the programme in its current form. Officers were revisiting the project scope and focus to potentially include some issues around Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH).
- The College Hall Management Committee had recruited a new interim Headteacher, and further details could be provided at a future meeting.
(Action: Zoe Livingstone)

5. **Update on the Early Years Entitlements**

Cherry Hall provided an update on Early Years entitlements.

Additional funding would uplift the hourly rate from September, and the local authority had received money in the Early Years supplementary grant which was separate to the Early Years DSG. An in principal paper was submitted to Schools Forum in June, prior to the final guidance being received, no changes were required following receipt of the guidance.

It was not clear what the position would be from next April, and the Council had submitted a response to the consultation on funding from April 2024 when the extension to entitlement was due to start. It was also not yet clear what the sufficiency would be like from April, and officers were meeting with providers to discuss capacity building and Forum members were invited to book on to the session through Can-Do.

Cherry clarified that unlike the DSG which allowed a 5% retention by LAs all of the Early Years supplementary grant was being passed on to providers.

6. **2024-25 initial Budget Preparations for the Schools Budget**

Paul Clark presented the 2024-25 initial Budget preparations for the Schools' Budget and highlighted the following areas.

There was an overall 2.7% increase in per pupil funding to fund new year cost increases, however it was not yet clear to judge whether this was a good settlement. Paul commented on the unusual composition of school funding for 2024-25, where in addition to the general 2.7% increase for new year cost pressures, schools would also see the £3m additional grant funding had been allocated in 2023-24 through the Mainstream Schools Additional Grant added to general school budgets, plus continuation of the new separate grant for the teachers' pay award.

While these three changes aggregated to a 7.8% total increase in school budgets compared to the original budget, it is important to remember that only 2.7% of this was intended to meet increased costs rather than funding catch up from the previous year.

In accordance with the normal publication timeline, the provisional 2024-25 budget was expected to be ready in January 2024 and finalised in March 2024. No significant changes were anticipated.

A key change to the DfE funding framework was the way in which additional funding for low prior attainment pupils was calculated, due to the 2020/21 cancelled exam result cohort. Going forwards, the exam results of 2019 would be used in lieu of 2020, and 2022 results would be used in lieu of 2021 when calculating low prior attainment pupils.

There was a new funding scheme from the Department for Education to schools which had seen significant fall in pupil numbers, which was a national issue also affecting Bracknell Forest schools. The Department for Education measured changes in pupil numbers between October censuses, and if there was more than a 10% reduction £140k would be awarded in grant funding for the affected area. While Bracknell Forest experienced a number of budget issues affecting smaller schools, the general reduction in pupil numbers is indicated at a maximum 6.6%, so the grant funding was unlikely to be received in Bracknell Forest.

There was a 3% increase in per pupil funding into the High Needs Block, which was lower than the increase of 9% in previous years. The Department for Education had previously signposted a decrease to 3%, and this was already reflected in the council's medium term financial plan for the HNB.

In response to questions, the following points were noted:

- A 3% increase to the High Needs budget was below inflation, and Forum members raised concerns that this demonstrated further financial hardship to come when supporting children with SEN, with or without EHCPs. In response, it was noted that the Bank of England forecast inflation to be low next year, and that 3% would cover costs. It would not be clear until the next financial year whether a 3% increase was sufficient, but the concern had been factored into the medium-term forecast. Grainne Siggins and Councillor Bailey agreed to feed back Forum members' concerns and to lobby the Government on the issue. **(Action: Cllr Bailey / Grainne Siggins)**
- There was no further detail available at this time on the likely impact on individual school budgets arising from the change methodology to fund schools for low prior attainment.

There being no further questions, it was **RESOLVED** that subject to consideration of school responses to the annual financial consultation and general affordability, the approach to setting the 2024-25 budget should remain broadly the same as for 2023-24, and in particular:

1. That there should be no change to the current budget strategy of:
 - a. as far as possible, replicating the NFF;
 - b. setting minimum per pupil funding increases between financial years at the highest amount permitted by the DfE;
 - c. meeting the diseconomy costs at new and expanding schools in a measured way from a combination of Schools Budget reserves and funding allocated for the relevant year from the DfE.
2. That a centrally managed Growth Fund should be maintained for in-year allocation to qualifying schools (Table 2).

3. That work should be undertaken to consider potential options available to support schools facing the greatest financial impact from falling rolls;
4. On-going central retention by the Council of the existing Central School Services Block items (Annex 1).
5. To prevent over funding, that the DfE be requested to approve that the council continues to disapply the requirement for minimum per pupil funding increases where schools are funded on the Start-up and Diseconomy funding policy for new and expanding schools.

7. **Safety Valve Briefing**

Grainne Siggins, Executive Director: People joined the meeting to give an update on the Safety Valve programme.

The Department for Education had invited Bracknell Forest to join the Safety Valve programme, and on 31 August 2023 the Local Authority had agreed. The Safety Valve programme supports LAs with the most challenging High Needs Block Budget difficulties. The first meeting with the Department for Education was scheduled for 2 October 2023, which would give more details on the plans. The Council had been asked to submit the latest financial forecasts in a DSG management plan in preparation for this meeting.

Following the SEND inspection in 2021, a Written Statement of Action had been co-produced in 2022 with 113 actions to undertake. The SEND strategy had been agreed by Executive in June 2023.

The Council had already been invited to join the Department for Education's Delivering Better Value programme. A number of local authorities were already in the Safety Valve programme, and Bracknell Forest and an additional 5 local authorities had now been invited to join the programme. The Council would work with the other additional local authorities to share learning. The programme would work with local authorities to further develop DSG management plan and to look at actions. Once the Safety Valve management plan had been created, formal sign off would be sought through the Council's democratic processes and Grainne stressed that the involvement of School's Forum would be vital to develop the detailed plan with the Department for Education.

Paul Clark presented the Bracknell Forest position with the DSG in total, including forecast deficits of nearly £43m without mitigation. The Safety Valve programme aimed to help the local authority to break even in line with DSG grant funding, and where an agreement is reached, additional DSG funding can be allocated by the DfE to aid financing the accumulated deficit.

Members were reminded of the change in position over time with regard to increase in High Needs Block, total expenditure of which had increased by 95% over the past 4 years. This increase was primarily linked to the increase in number of children needing support, but also by price changes.

To address the DSG deficit, local area funding could look to use Council reserves, set aside funding in future Council years' budgets, or a top-slice to school funding, These were the options available, with no decisions having been made on the approach to take. at.

Members were reminded of the key milestones which were the start-up meeting on 2 October 2023 following which Schools Forum would be engaged on the collective requirement, and if agreed, a formal agreement would be confirmed with the Department for Education in March 2024.

In response to questions, the following points were noted:

- Schools Forum expressed concern that the deficit would be met by a transfer of money from schools, particularly in light of ongoing SEN needs supported by fewer Educational Health Care Plans.
- It was clarified that a decision had not yet been taken, and there would be further clarity following the start-up meeting with the DfE.
- The Department for Education had seen an opportunity for Bracknell Forest to achieve £1.3m savings through the Delivering Better Value programme, and the change of programme suggested that they felt a different approach was now needed.
- It was clarified that there was no further detail in terms of the funding arrangement of the Safety Valve programme at this time, and further detail would be shared with Schools Forum members when available.
- It was commented that while the top-slice would have a small benefit on the DSG deficit, the impact and additional pressure on school budgets would be significant.
- Members expressed concerns at the short timescales for gathering views of their groups and asked Grainne to make representation to the Department for Education for more time to gather views from school colleagues.
- Councillor Bailey commented that government funding was lacking, and the Council had been put in an impossible position. He agreed to lobby and work with the local MPs for additional school funding.
- Members requested graphs from Paul to illustrate the scenarios of 95% funding, and for if the 9% increase had been granted instead of 3%. **(Action: Paul Clark)**

Grainne Siggins agreed to engage with the Schools Forum Chair and Vice-Chair after the start-up meeting on 2 October 2023.

Members who were interested in joining the SEN Subgroup were to let Chair or Vice Chair know. **(Action: all school forum members)**

8. **2023-24 Arrangements for additional financial support to schools**

Paul Clark presented the 2023-24 arrangements for additional financial support to schools.

LAs could support schools in financial difficulties via licenced deficits, which had an agreed set of procedures on how to deal with requests from schools and help financial deficits to be managed in a measured approach. Only one new licenced deficit had been received this year, and four Bracknell Forest schools already had licensed deficits. The total aggregate deficit increase if agreed was £815k. Paul commented that the issues often related to the smallest schools experiencing a fall in numbers on roll, and a further plan to address this would be investigated.

Paul Clark and Chris Kiernan would provide more complete monitoring arrangements to support one two-form entry school whose deficit was widening. There was the expectation that the one-off sale of Council accommodation would help this deficit position by approximately £250k, but the underlying deficit would need to be addressed.

It was clarified that there were no redundancies planned as a result of the deficit plans.

RESOLVED that subject to the school governors confirming the relevant financing schedule and compliance with the associated terms and conditions of the deficit scheme the Schools Forum AGREES the following deficit limits for 2023-24:

- i. Ascot Heath Primary School £0.500m;
- ii. Cranbourne Primary School £0.080m;
- iii. The Pines Primary Schools £0.035m;
- iv. Winkfield St Mary's Primary School £0.160m;
- v. St Michael's Easthampstead Primary School £0.040m

9. **Dates of Future Meetings**

Forum members were reminded of the upcoming meeting dates on 16 November 2023, 7 December 2023, 11 January 24, and 7 March 24.

CHAIRMAN