

**SCHOOLS FORUM
13 DECEMBER 2023
5.05 - 5.55 PM**



Present:

Stuart Matthews, Academy School Representative (Chair)
Elizabeth Savage, Academy School Representative (Vice-Chair)
Jenny Baker, Special School Representative
Caroline Johnson, Primary School Representative
Juanita Dunlop, Primary School Representative (Headteacher)
Trudi Sammons, Primary School Representative (Headteacher)
Keith Grainger, Secondary School Representative (Headteacher)
Tim Griffith, Academy School Representative
Grant Strudley, Academy School Representative
Gareth Croxon, Academy School Representative (Headteacher)
Katie Moore, Academy School Representative
Paul Tatum, Trades Union Representative

Observer:

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

Apologies for absence were received from:

Sue Butler, Early Years PVI Provider

17. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

18. Minutes and Matters Arising

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the forum held on 16 November be agreed as a correct record.

Arising from the minutes the following point was noted:

- Arising from minute 15, Duane Chappell confirmed she had emailed the early years sector and confirmed when they will be heavily involved in any work affecting their sector.

19. Safety Valve Update

The Forum considered a report which sought to update the Schools Forum on the initial Safety Valve proposal to be submitted by Bracknell Forest Council to the Department for Education by 15 December 2023 and to report responses from schools to a consultation on the council's proposal to secure a transfer of the equivalent of 1% of the schools block funding into the High Needs Block, while capping the impact on any individual school budget to a maximum of 0.5%.

Paul Clark informed the Forum that the paper outlined the transformational savings that Bracknell Forest Council believed could be made. It was also highlighted to the Forum that a supplementary paper had been published which outlined the responses of schools to the consultation off the Safety Valve. Over 60% of schools within Bracknell Forest had replied to the consultation. 21 schools supported the proposals and two schools disagreed. A further two schools submitted a response after the consultation deadline, both of which also supported the proposals. However, it was noted that there were many comments from schools outlining they had only accepted the proposals reluctantly. Feedback on comments raised in the proposal would be sent out to schools. **(Action Paul Clark)**

Following the Forum's questions and comments the following points were raised:

- The current DSG deficit has been rolled forward in recent years through an unfunded reserve, however this would need repaying at some point and the Safety Valve has been put in place to ensure there is a planned approach to dealing with this deficit.
- Bracknell Forest Council had considered other options, including not joining the Safety Valve programme. Being in the programme would give the local authority more financial flexibility and support that would not be otherwise available.
- The DfE's approach means that the full details of the Safety Valve proposal could not be put into the public domain.
- The Forum asked that its concerns around SEND funding were relayed to the DfE. Grainne Siggins offered to compile the concerns and submit them to political leaders on behalf of the Forum. **(Action Grainne Siggins)**
- The Forum would be allowed to vote on the DSG budget each year.
- Whilst the local authority projected the top slice to last for the duration of the Safety Valve programme, it has committed to reversing the top slice as a priority were the financial situation to improve in these 5 years.
- Were the Forum to vote in favour of the top slice, the reduction in spending would run for no longer than the duration of the programme (6 years) and any continuation beyond this would have to return to the Forum for a vote.
- Evidence suggests that most children could be best supported within a mainstream school environment. The needs of other students would be met by investment into the specialist unit outreach programmes. It was also believed that earlier intervention would be important in helping pupils and relieving pressure on specialist resources.
- The Forum raised concerns that reductions in spending would have a negative impact on the ability to meet the needs of pupils, especially those requiring specialist resources.
- Evidence shows that there are significant benefits of keeping children in local schools, both due to the benefits for the children of avoiding lengthy journeys as well as the savings in education transport.
- In response to queries over whether joining the Safety Valve programme was really the only option available, it was reported that 35 local authorities had already joined the programme, with a further 5 having been invited this year. It was understood that no local authority had turned down an invitation to join the programme.

The Forum emphasised that any vote to agree the Safety Valve recommendations, should not be taken to reflect a positive affirmation of the Safety Valve programme, but instead choosing the option it believed would be the least detrimental to schools and pupils. The Forum also emphasised their great concern about the levels of

schools funding nationally, the scale of proposed cuts and the resources available for SEND provision nationally.

RESOLVED That reflecting the outcome of the consultation with schools that ended on 8 December 2023, the Schools Forum agrees Block Transfers at the equivalent of 1.0% of the Schools Block Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) income to the High Needs Block to be achieved by:

1. Applying a 0.5% deduction to individual school budgets through deducting 0.5% from each factor value in the National Funding Formula, currently estimated at £0.401m and equivalent to 0.42% of the estimated Schools Block DSG, noting that 6 primary schools will be unable to make a contribution due to the impact of the Minimum Per Pupil Funding Level guarantee and another is only able to make a part contribution for this reason
2. Releasing the unallocated balance on the Schools Block DSG Growth Fund, currently estimated at £0.421m and equivalent to 0.43% of the Schools Block DSG
3. Transferring £0.140m of DSG funds from the Central School Services Block to the High Needs Block, equivalent to 0.15% of the estimated Schools Block DSG.

To enable this, the Schools Forum agrees that the council requests the formal approval of the secretary of state for education to make a 0.85% block transfer from the Schools Block to the High Needs Block.

It was noted that the decision was not unanimous, with ten votes to agree the proposals and two votes against.

The Forum requested that the local authority tried to the best of their ability to ensure to ensure local SEND school places were allocated to children from within the borough.

The Forum noted its thanks for local authority officers for their collaborative approach.

20. **Dates of Future Meetings**

The next meeting would take place on 11 January.

CHAIRMAN