

**SCHOOLS FORUM
5 DECEMBER 2024
4.30 - 5.40 PM**



Present:

Elizabeth Savage, Academy School Representative (Chair)
Jenny Baker, Special School Representative (Vice-Chair)
Sue Butler, Early Years PVI Provider
Caroline Johnson, Primary School Representative
Trudi Sammons, Primary School Representative (Headteacher)
Tim Griffith, Academy School Representative
Grant Strudley, Academy School Representative
Gareth Croxon, Academy School Representative (Headteacher)
Catherine Forrester, Academy School Representative
Richard Ferris, Academy School Representative

Observer:

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

Apologies for absence were received from:

Juanita Dunlop, Primary School Representative (Headteacher)
Keith Grainger, Secondary School Representative (Headteacher)
Katie Moore, Academy School Representative
Rachel Manton, National Education Union

24. Declarations of Interest

Grant Strudley and Trudi Sammons declared an interest in Item 5 "2025-26 School Budgets: outcome from the November 2024 Financial Consultation with Schools".

25. Minutes and Matters Arising

The minutes of the Schools Forum meeting held on 14 November were approved as a correct record.

Arising from the minutes the following points were noted:

- Duane Chappell provided an update on how best to inform parents about the EHCP process. All relevant details were available on the Local Offer, which was where parents in need of this support were signposted. It was agreed that Duane would share the link to the Local Offer with schools. **(Action: Duane Chappell)**
- Work on how best to protect single-form entry primary schools was expected to take an extended period of time due to the complexity of the required coordination. Once completed, the findings would be reported back to the Schools Forum.
- Duane Chappell had compiled information on training that was available to schools through the "Can Do" website. Efforts were underway to collaborate with other services that offered training and incorporate this into the resource.

Once all the information had been consolidated, it was agreed that Duane would distribute it to all headteachers within the borough. **(Action: Duane Chappell)**

26. High Needs Block budget planning

The Forum received a report which outlined the budget planning which was being undertaken in respect of the High Needs Block (HNB) for the duration of the Safety Valve programme through to 2029-30.

Duane Chappell informed the Forum that the local authority was still awaiting confirmation of budget information from the Department for Education (DfE). It was expected, however, that each local authority would receive a funding increase of between 7% and 10% per head for the HNB.

The Forum was informed that the overspend on the HNB had now reached £9.4 million, with a further £0.862 million in emerging issues. Bracknell Forest Council was the third-highest spender of 150 local authorities on top-ups for non-maintained schools and independent providers, the 19th-highest spender on alternative resource provision, and the 24th-highest spender on top-ups into mainstream schools.

Work was ongoing to ensure that each block within the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) became self-sufficient and did not require transfers between blocks. Duane assured the Forum that efforts to reduce the deficit would be undertaken in partnership with teachers, ensuring that services remained as strong as possible while addressing the deficit.

In discussion, the Forum raised the following points:

- The "Working Lives of Teachers 2023/24" report had recently been published, highlighting a worrying trend of increased stress and burden on teachers. Stress levels among teachers were now reported to be the highest they had ever been.
- The Forum welcomed the local authority's commitment to work with teachers during the Safety Valve.
- There was concern about the perception that applying for an EHCP was the only way for children to access specialist support. This issue was contributing to the high volume of EHCP applications.
- Any additional funding received from the government could be viewed as an opportunity to "invest to save" in the long term. This approach could help reduce costs over time rather than solely focusing on paying down the debt.
- Cllr Bailey confirmed that he regularly discussed issues around SEND provision with Peter Swallow MP. The issue was reportedly high on the government's radar, with Peter Swallow MP keen to make representations to the government regarding SEND funding.

Arising from questions, the following points were noted:

- The local authority had implemented several "invest to save" policies in recent years, including the development of additional SRP (Specialist Resource Provision) places and new special schools.
- Negotiations with the independent sector were being used to ensure the best value for money was achieved when utilising independent sector provision for children.
- The focus of the local authority was not on the number of EHCPs issued but rather on ensuring that each EHCP was necessary and that all required support was delivered as part of it.
- Much of the new government funding was replacing existing grants. As a result, the funding available after existing commitments were fulfilled was expected to be lower than the headline figures suggested.

- Workshops related to the Safety Valve process were planned for early 2025, and headteachers were encouraged to attend.

The Forum noted the report.

27. **2025-26 School Budgets: outcome from the November 2024 Financial Consultation with Schools**

The Forum received a report which provided an update on the outcomes from the November consultation with schools on whether the calculation of the Block Transfer from the Schools Block (SB) to the High Needs Block (HNB) should be widened to include those schools funded at the lowest per pupil amount normally permitted by the Department for Education (DfE) through the Minimum Per Pupil Funding Level (MPPFL).

Many details regarding the financial settlement for 2025-26 remained unknown, and it was not expected that they would be clarified prior to 16 December. Consequently, final decisions on school budgets would be addressed at the Schools Forum meeting scheduled for 15 January 2025.

Following the previous meeting of the Schools Forum, a consultation was undertaken on whether the calculation of the Block Transfer from the Schools Block to the High Needs Block budget should be updated to include schools funded at the MPPFL. This followed updated advice from the DfE, which confirmed that all schools could be included in the Block Transfer. A total of 11 responses were received, of which 8 were in favour and 3 opposed.

During the discussion, the following points were noted:

- This was a challenging time for schools to face funding reductions, as these would have a tangible impact on supporting children with SEN. With already stretched budgets and limited resources, every penny counted.
- Some schools affected by changes to the calculation in the Block Transfer, which now included schools funded at the MPPFL, found the decision difficult. They were torn between the desire to support all schools within the borough and concerns about the impact of losing resources.

RESOLVED that the Schools Forum:

- Agrees after taking account of the school responses to the November 2024 financial consultation on the calculation of the Schools Block Transfer / top slice to the High Needs Block, the calculation is updated to include those schools on the Minimum Per Pupil Funding Level.
- Agrees that after taking account of schools responses to the October 2024 Financial consultation on general finance matters:
 - For Maintained Primary Schools de-delegation of budgets continues for services requested by councils.
 - For all Maintained Schools a £20 per pupil contribution continues to be made by maintained schools towards the cost of delivering 'general' education related statutory and regulatory duties.
 - For all Maintained Schools as in previous years, funding rates for de-delegated budgets are increased at the average rate of increase in per pupil funding, currently estimated at 7.5%
 - The Minimum Funding Guarantee for mainstream schools is set at 0.0%

- The cost of financing any impact from the minimum funding guarantee is met from deductions to schools receiving the highest increase in funding, typically those above the average of increase.
- Notes that due to the on-going delay in release by the Department for Education of the detailed information relating to the 2025-26 Financial Settlement for Schools, it has not been possible to present budget proposals for Bracknell Schools to the Forum until the 15 January 2025 meeting.

28. **Initial proposals for the 2025-26 early years budget and funding formula**

The Forum received a report which sought agreement for initial proposals for changes to the early years budget and funding formula for 2025-26.

Cherry Hall informed the Forum that information on early years budget allocations remained limited, as the DfE had not yet released the relevant details. A consultation on the budget formula had been circulated to early years providers, achieving a 20% response rate. The consultation focused on proposed changes to the scoring for the deprivation supplement and the removal of the quality supplement to instead fund the base rate, both of which were overwhelmingly supported by respondents.

Arising from questions, the following points were noted:

- Ofsted ratings for early years providers in the borough showed consistent levels across all areas, irrespective of staff skill levels.
- Funding for staff training in early years settings had previously been available through a Graduate Leader Fund. However, this funding ended a few years ago.
- The age group of 3–4-year-olds was identified as the least adequately funded among all age groups.

Resolved that Schools Forum considers the council's initial proposals for the early years funding formula and budget for 2025-26 and:

- Agrees the proposed revisions to the Early Years Funding Formula and the allocation of the 2025-26 Early Years Block budget, as endorsed by early years providers through their consultation feedback, for the following elements:
 - Deprivation Supplement as detailed in point 5.25 of the report.
 - Quality Supplement as detailed in point 5.26 of the report.
- Agrees that, in line with the requirements set out in point 5.12 of the report, the council will retain the permitted 4% of total funding to support providers.
- Notes that Final 2025-26 Early Years Block budget, Early Years Funding Formula proposals and provider funding rates will be presented to Schools Forum for agreement in January 2025.

Chair