

**SCHOOLS FORUM
16 SEPTEMBER 2021
4.30 - 5.45 PM**



Present:

Martin Gocke, Pupil Referral Unit Representative (Governor) (Chairman)
Stuart Matthews, Academy School Representative (Headteacher) (Vice-Chairman)
Jennifer 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)
Phil Sherwood, Primary School Representative (Headteacher)
Debbie Smith, Secondary School Representative (Headteacher)
Richard Stok, Primary School Representative (Governor)

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
Peter Floyd, Special School Representative (Governor)
Keith Grainger, Secondary School Representative (Headteacher)
Elizabeth Savage, Academy School Representative (Headteacher)
Greg Wilton, Teacher Union Representative

192. Election of Chairman

RESOLVED that Martin Gocke be re-elected Chairman of the Schools Forum.

Martin Gocke in the Chair

193. Appointment of Vice-Chairman

RESOLVED that Stuart Matthews be re-appointed Vice-Chairman of the Schools Forum.

194. Apologies for Absence/Substitute Members

The Forum noted the attendance of the following Substitute Member:
Jenny Baker for Peter Floyd

The Chair explained that, following Jane Coley's departure, there were two academy representative vacancies. Stuart Matthews and Elizabeth Savage were asking their academy school colleagues for nominations for new members of the Schools Forum and were expecting new members to be in place by November.

The Chair welcomed Nichola Jones who had been appointed as Interim Head of Children's Support Services.

195. **Declarations of Interest**

In respect of Item 4 (2022-23 Budget Preparations for the Schools Block Budget and other Finance Matters), an affected interest was declared by Councillor Barnard as governor of Warfield School, who planned to take no part in the discussion.

196. **Minutes and Matters Arising**

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Forum on 15 July 2021 be approved as a correct record.

Arising from minute 185, updates on the collation of SEN data for the Childcare Sufficiency Assessment was expected to be presented to the Forum in January.

Action: Cherry Hall

Arising from minute 186, the Chair asked Cheryl Eyre to update on the progress made in building partnerships and setting up the framework and processes as part of the High Needs Block (HNB) business change project. The Chair also queried where the Sub-Group fitted into the arrangements. Cheryl Eyre replied that the work was moving at pace and the team had worked throughout the summer. Cheryl Eyre had met with Liz Cole and Debbie Smith and identified areas to move forward. Following that meeting, Cheryl Eyre was asked to provide an update on the SEN team to all Headteachers which she had done. Cheryl Eyre had agreed to meet face-to-face with all secondary school Headteachers on 24th September to talk about the HNB; to hear what the issues were and decide how to work together to address the issues. On the same day, Liz Cole had arranged a meeting with all the primary school Headteachers.

Cheryl Eyre had met with Jenny Baker to talk about the HNB Sub-Group and how to progress the work. On 24th September, it was planned to bring together a task and finish group for this piece of work. At that meeting, the group would identify an agenda for the work and agree the Terms of Reference. They would then set two dates to progress the work. The Headteachers had identified two topics to progress first: the specialist resource provisions, and the Matrix.

Regarding other partnerships, Cheryl Eyre had also met with the Parent Carer Forum and SENDIASS (the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Information Advice and Support Services). Cheryl Eyre was also due to meet with the PRU.

Cheryl Eyre had been looking at the budget and trying to see where alignment was needed, whether it was fit for purpose, and whether they were targeting the right areas going forward. There had been a good response so far by stakeholders and they were engaging well. Cheryl Eyre acknowledged that there was a lot of work to do but the team was working in a process driven way. Cheryl Eyre was expecting to be able to give a detailed briefing at the meeting of the Schools Forum in November.

Action: Cheryl Eyre

Arising from minute 186, the update regarding the DfE funding consultation was on the agenda to be presented to the Forum under Item 5 (DfE Funding Consultation: Fair Funding for All).

197. **2022-23 Budget Preparations for the Schools Block Budget and other Finance Matters**

The Forum considered a report which updated on the information currently available in respect of the 2022-23 Schools Budget for mainstream schools together with other relevant finance related matters.

Paul Clark explained that there were three key parts of the report: firstly, to provide an update on the funding framework; secondly, to share information about the budget prospects; and thirdly, to ensure that the development of the 2022-23 budget was in alignment with what the Forum wanted to do. This all related to the mainstream schools budget only.

Regarding the funding framework, with the exception of school business rates, Paul Clark explained that there would be some minor changes around data collection, but little in the way of material impact compared to what was in place for 2021-22. For School Business Rates, the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) would be paying these directly in future rather than individual schools making payments. The local authority was still waiting for details on the practical implementation of this but there was expected to be no financial impact on schools from that.

In relation to the budget prospects, based on the data currently available, Paul Clark advised that there was an increase in funding of 2.6% on average, lower than the 3.4% last year and 6.7% the year before. This reflected the change towards the national funding approach.

The annual financial consultation with schools had started, generally seeking views on the usual matters and it was anticipated that responses would be received by October half term. Responses to the consultation were therefore expected to be reported to the Forum at the next meeting on 18 November.

Action: Paul Clark

Regarding the Bracknell Forest strategy, the local approach had been to replicate the National Funding Formula (NFF), and the proposal was to continue that approach.. The authority was also proposing to continue the same approaches as before on diseconomy budgets at new schools, aiming to fund any extra costs from the £1m contribution from the council and general school balances, and centrally managing the same budgets as were agreed for 2021-22.

At this stage, if all the changes set out in the initial budget report were implemented, there would be a funding gap of around £0.5m, which would be managed using reserves from the Council and from the Schools Budget. It was normal to have a funding gap at this stage of the budget preparations.

Some parts of the budget setting process required agreement from the DfE to deviate from the standard approach, and this had been set out in the recommendations. One new request to the DfE that the authority was proposing related to additional split site funding for Warfield Primary School. The Headteacher had indicated that the current funding was around £0.050m below the additional costs. The school had remained at 2 FE capacity as opposed to expanding to 3 FE. More work was needed to analyse the costing information provided and there was the option of seeking support from another Headteacher to review the split site working arrangements and consider whether alternative options could be implemented. Should the DfE agree this request, due to lagged funding there would be a one-year pressure of £0.050m.

The Forum asked how many schools were below the NFF and by how much, and how long it was expected to take those schools to reach that formula. Paul Clark replied that there were 18 schools below the NFF during the current year. From the provisional data available, that number had gone down to 11. However, where a NFF delivered a budget below the minimum level, a top up to that amount was always applied, meaning all schools were funded at least to this level.

How long it would take to work through the system depended on the measures put in place by the government, including the amount of funds and was therefore outside the authority's control.

The Forum asked whether the aim was for all schools to achieve the Minimum Per Pupil Funding Level (MPPFL). Paul Clark explained that the MPPFL was the safety net and the authority had to top-up to that level. No schools were ever affected by being below the MPPFL as it was always topped up.

The Forum asked whether the amount of money going to new schools as part of the growth fund was in alignment to the authority's obligations. Paul Clark confirmed that it was. It was clarified that the next financial year (2022-23) was to be the final year that KGA Binfield Secondary school would receive significant financial support, and from April 2023, it was due to be moved to the Bracknell Forest Funding Formula.

The Chair asked whether there was any chance that the request to the DfE to support new schools would not be agreed. Paul Clark replied that, in agreeing the request for 2021-22, the DfE acknowledged that it was part of the authority's long-term strategy agreed with the Forum and benefited schools. Therefore, there was only a small chance that it wouldn't be agreed. The Chair asked whether there was an alternative mechanism to cover the funding. Paul Clark confirmed that there was, but it wasn't expected to be necessary to pursue it.

Regarding the Warfield split site, the Forum agreed that it could rely on Paul Clark doing his due diligence to review the supporting information that had been received, and that the Forum had confidence in his judgement.

RESOLVED

1. to AGREE that subject to consideration of school responses to the annual financial consultation and general affordability, the approach to setting the 2022-23 budget should remain broadly the same as for 2021-22, and in particular:
 - 1.1 that there should be no change to the current budget strategy of:
 - a. replicating the NFF at individual Bracknell Forest school level;
 - b. setting minimum per pupil funding increases between financial years at the highest amount permitted by the DfE; and
 - c. meeting the diseconomy costs at new and expanding schools in a measured way from a combination of council reserves, Schools Budget reserves, and funding allocated for the relevant year from the DfE;
 - 1.2 that a centrally managed Growth Fund should be maintained for in-year allocation to qualifying schools (Table 2 of the report);
 - 1.3 on-going central retention by the Council of the existing Central School Services Block items (Annex 1 of the report); and
 - 1.4 that the DfE be requested:
 - a. to approve that the council continues to disapply the Minimum Funding Guarantee where schools are funded on the Start-up and Diseconomy funding policy for new and expanding schools;
 - b. to approve that the council continues to add resources from the General Fund to support the additional cost of new schools; and

- c. subject to the checks proposed in the supporting information, to increase split site funding for Warfield primary school, provisionally by £0.050m; and
2. to NOTE
- 2.1 the latest update on the School and Education Spending review and the impact anticipated for Bracknell Forest at this time;
 - 2.2 the areas where schools were being asked to comment on through the annual financial consultation, to inform later decision making;
 - 2.3 the 2.6% average increase in per pupil funding that would be received by Bracknell Forest schools if the NFF was fully implemented; and
 - 2.4 the current estimated funding gaps at Table 3 of the report of:
 - a. £0.467m on the Schools Block; and
 - b. £0.050m for the Central School Services Block.

198. DfE Funding Consultation: Fair Funding for All

The Forum considered a report which provided an update in respect of the next stage of national school funding reform being proposed by the DfE. This closely followed the verbal update provided at the previous Forum meeting, but now with full detail.

Paul Clark shared that the authority had given consideration as to the response it would like to give. The initial view was that it would not be supporting the implementation of a hard NFF as there needed to be scope for more local decision making. Furthermore, there were no details as to how the budgets currently managed locally would operate if centralised and managed by the DfE.

Regarding the potential centralisation of services, the DfE recognised as best delivered by a local authority, the DfE had made a proposal to transfer the funds out of the dedicated schools grant (DSG) to pay authorities through part of the normal local government financial settlement. The response from the authority would be that it would not want to be financially disadvantaged as a result of any change but would not be against it otherwise.

The DfE had also asked for interest from maintained schools in adopting academic year funding as opposed to financial year. The Forum felt that this would be useful from a practical point of view in managing budgets; for example, it had been difficult in the past to set the budget prior to the staffing resignation date. However, partner agencies would still be working on a financial year basis which could complicate things.

The Chair noted that the report detailed some changes to the role of schools forums but that there were no specific questions relating to that on the DfE consultation. Paul Clark confirmed that was the case, and explained that, although there would still be a role for a local schools forum, a number of responsibilities and powers would be removed. However, the planned government policy paper on SEND was likely to trigger some changes to the funding formula which would have a further effect on schools forums' responsibilities.

RESOLVED to NOTE the content and changes proposed to School Funding through the DfE Consultation *Fair School Funding For All*.

199. Dates of Future Meetings

The next meeting of the Forum would be held at 4.30pm on Thursday 18th November.

CHAIRMAN