

**SCHOOLS FORUM
12 JANUARY 2023
4.30 - 5.45 PM**



Present:

Stuart Matthews, Academy School Representative (Chair)
Elizabeth Savage, Academy School Representative (Vice-Chair)
Jenny Baker, Special School Representative
Stuart Bevan, Primary School Representative (Headteacher)
Sue Butler, Early Years PVI Provider
Simon Cope, Primary School Representative (Headteacher)
Keith Grainger, Secondary School Representative (Headteacher)
Tim Griffith, Academy School Representative
Ruth Jackson, NAHT Headteacher
Debbie Smith, Academy School Representative
Grant Strudley, Academy School Representative
Paul Tatum, Trades Union Representative

Observer:

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

Apologies for absence were received from:

Roger Prew, Primary School Representative (Governor)

269. Apologies for Absence/Substitute Members

The Forum noted the attendance of the following Substitute Member:
Ruth Jackson substituting for the Primary School (Headteacher) vacancy following Karen Davis leaving the Forum.

The Chair welcomed Stuart Bevan and Paul Tatum to the meeting as new members of the Forum.

It was noted that there were still some vacancies for primary and secondary governors which Paul Clark was progressing.

The Chair advised that he had to leave the meeting at 5.30pm to attend another meeting and that the Vice-Chair would take over the meeting at that point.

270. Declarations of Interest

The Chair noted that any representatives from Kennel Lane School, Garth Hill College, and Owlsmoor School may need to declare an affected interest for Item 5 (2023-24 proposals for the High Needs Block Budget).

271. Minutes and Matters Arising

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Forum on 8 December 2022 be approved as a correct record.

Arising on minute 262, Paul Clark had followed up on Paul Tatum's availability to join meetings.

Arising from minute 264, Cheryl Eyre had discussed with Councillor Barnard the comments made by the Forum regarding the distribution of funds for Ukrainian children placed in schools in the Borough. The way the funding was currently distributed appeared to be appropriate, but it would be monitored going forward. A follow-up letter had since gone to all schools. Councillor Barnard added that he was willing to receive and review any feedback.

272. 2023-24 proposals for the Early Years Block Budget

The Forum considered a report which sought agreement to proposals for the 2023-24 Early Years budgets, including the values to be attributed to the Bracknell Forest Council Early Years Funding Formula.

Cherry Hall explained that the Forum had agreed during the meeting in December 2022 to keep the funding formula as it was and that in the absence of a funding update from the government, to plan to allocate any increase in funding into the base rate.

Subsequent to this, the government had now confirmed that in 2023-24, the council was due to receive a 4.9% increase from the DfE for 3- and 4-year-olds, and a 9.9% increase for 2-year-olds. However, given the proposed adjustments to some council managed budgets and differences in census points used by the DfE to fund the council compared to those used to fund providers, there were sufficient funds to propose an indicative funding increase to providers of 5.4% for 3- and 4-year-olds and 13.5% for 2-year-olds, which would be a bigger increase than the council was receiving.

Additionally, the Department for Education had updated the base data used to distribute funding to LAs. The new data indicated a 10.9% funding increase for 3- and 4 years olds and a 19% increase for 2 year olds. However, the actual increases were lower to finance funding protection to areas which otherwise would be subject to funding cuts.

The Forum noted that, although it was positive that there was an indicative funding increase, it recognised that due to general cost increases, there was still likely to be a real terms cut.

The Forum queried whether the council had done a risk assessment as to whether any providers would no longer be viable and whether this could lead to pressure on places. Cherry Hall replied that this was an ongoing piece of work and that they always encouraged providers to come forward as soon as they realised there could be an issue. There had been some providers which had been looking at closing but had gone on to become sustainable by working with the council. The team had been doing lots of mini surveys to understand the picture across the Early Years' service. There had also been issues with recruitment and retention which the council was assisting providers with as some were at capacity as they had been unable to recruit further staff for more children.

RESOLVED, considering the Early Years Budget proposal from the council

1. to AGREE that for the 2023-24 financial year the Executive Member for Children, Young People and Learning sets:
 - i. the Early Years Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) income budget at £8.689m (Table 2 of the report);
 - ii. the funding rates in the Early Years Funding Formula be as set out in Table 3 of the report;
 - iii. the proposed budgets be as set out in Annex 2 of the report; and
 - iv. the proposed changes to the arrangements for the Early Years Special Educational Needs Inclusion Fund be as set out in paragraphs 5.19 and 5.20 of the report; and
2. to NOTE the impact of funding protection introduced by the Department for Education in the latest DSG on early years funding rates in Bracknell Forest as set out in paragraphs 5.7 to 5.9 of the report.

273. 2023-24 proposals for the High Needs Block Budget

Delivering Better Value Project (Additional Item)

The Chair gave notice that he had agreed to an additional item of business relating to the Delivering Better Value (DBV) Project. This was agreed as it would provide additional context for the discussion on the 2023-24 proposals for the High Needs Block (HNB) Budget.

Cheryl Eyre explained that this was a DfE initiative working with around 50 LAs in England to explore and identify how to reduce HNB deficits. Over the past few months, colleagues had been spending lots of time working with the delivery company to explore and develop the data and understand the context. This had been useful in analysing the cases and understanding what could be done better. The council was now required to submit a bid for £1m funding to undertake work that would lead to a sustainable position and implement changes to alleviate some of the issues underlying the deficit budget. Cheryl thanked colleagues who had given a significant amount of time to the project. The council had been working on a high-level submission linked to the data and research so far, including proposals targeting the areas needing resolution and support.

The first proposal was for universal training across mainstream education focusing on ASD and Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN), focussing on young people with and without Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs). Specialist Resource Provisions (SRPs) had also been considered as part of this, as there was a need to train staff who were supporting young people accessing the mainstream curriculum. This would help enhance the SRP offer.

The second area related to a historic proposal from Kennel Lane School to provide an outreach service for young people in small groups and to develop toolkits for staff to meet needs in mainstream settings. Jenny Baker has been considering how to update the proposal.

The third proposal was to develop a transition team working with primary schools to support pupils as they transition and for a period of time afterwards. If this could be delivered for two years, there would be the data and evidence to strengthen the argument for more permanent funding so that this service could be sustained.

The bid needed to be submitted by 23 January. It was noted that, if the bid were successful, there would be no time limit for spending the money and it could be stretched out for lasting impact. This would also ensure that schools were not

bombarded with too many initiatives at the same time. Cheryl thanked members of the Forum for their support.

The Forum noted that this was good news and that the money was a significant amount for a small Borough. Headteachers had reported during meetings that they were happy that the bid addressed the issues that had been raised. There had been some really innovative thoughts about how to make a lasting positive impact.

2023-24 proposals for the High Needs Block Budget

Jenny Baker declared an affected interest as the Headteacher of Kennel Lane School. Jenny remained at the meeting during consideration of the item.

The Forum considered a report which provided an update on the development of the 2023-24 High Needs Block (HNB) element of the Schools Budget in advance of final proposals that were to be presented to the Forum in March.

Paul Clark explained that no new initiatives were being proposed, but figures had been added to the proposals that have already been agreed.

The budget position was similar to the last few years. There had been significant increases in income from the government but even with those increases, there was still forecast to be an annual HNB deficit of around £7m. Although it was anticipated that certain projects would start to deliver savings, for others, such as the DBV programme, there was not enough data currently to include these on the forecasts. Therefore, there was a potential aggregate £44m deficit by 31 March 2026. It was expected that this would come down as savings were made.

Paul highlighted the key assumptions:

- expecting increases in government funding although at a lower level than had recently been received;
- expecting an increase in numbers of EHCPs but the trend from recent years suggested that this would be a smaller increase than previously;
- expecting a high level of inflation next year but then rapidly reducing; and
- expecting some plans to come to fruition to decrease the numbers of educational placements outside the borough.

The DfE had announced that liability for Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) deficits would remain with the DfE for a further three years to 31 March 2026. However, the size of deficit remained a significant concern.

The Forum noted that:

- it had asked the council to consider working with other LAs and expressed its appreciation that this was being explored;
- top up funding to schools had been increased, and the Forum was grateful for the indicative increase, but acknowledged that this was not increasing in line with costs;
- in the past, the Forum had challenged the council about figures coming through late, but that this year the information had been presented to the Forum as early as possible – the Forum expressed its thanks for this; and
- The Forum noted with continuing concern the projected HNB £44m cumulative deficit at the end of the 2025/26 financial year and Bracknell Forest Council's ability to manage any potential payback. .

The Forum also expressed its concern regarding the additional capital investment required to ensure that any new SRP places at King's Academy Binfield were fit for purpose. It was felt that the original funding should have been spent appropriately to ensure it could deliver the 40 places that were included in the capacity design of the school. Cheryl Eyre explained the context around that and shared that the council were investigating the matter. The Forum requested an update on the progress of that investigation at the next meeting.

Action: Cheryl Eyre

RESOLVED

1. to NOTE the updated medium-term financial plan which indicated an estimated deficit for 2023-24 of £7.166m and an accumulated HNB deficit at 31 March 2024 of £29.835m; and
2. to AGREE that no further budget developments were required in the next update to the medium-term financial plan which was to be reported to the Forum in March.

274. 2023-24 proposals for the Schools Block and Central School Services Block Budgets

The Forum considered a report which presented final proposals from the Council for the 2023-24 Schools Block (SB) and Central Schools Services Block (CSSB) elements of the Schools Budget.

This was the final set of proposals as the deadline for informing the DfE was 20 January. No changes were being presented in terms of initiatives and pressures, but the figures had been updated following the confirmed October 2022 Census.

The following was highlighted:

- pupil numbers had showed a steady increase this year, with a larger increase than previous years;
- there had been a big increase in pupils with additional educational needs characteristics, including children with English as an additional language, children eligible for free school meals, and additional funding allocated to primary schools for low prior attainment scores;
- the number of schools on the minimum per pupil funding (MPPFL) had decreased significantly from 14 to 6. When schools were moved from one calculation to another, this could result in relatively low per pupil funding increases; and
- there was an overall surplus of £0.188m which was larger than the surplus forecast in December. This had mainly arisen due to one-off gains in funding, meaning that it was a unique situation.

Proposals from the council were intended to allocate as much of the 2023-24 budget surplus to schools as possible without creating further difficulties in balancing the 2024-25 budget which initial, high-level forecasts predicted a potential £0.423m deficit. This required a method of distribution that did not build in extra funding to the 2024-25 baseline.

As part of the DfE strategy of requiring LAs to mirror the National Funding Formula (NFF), as an authority already achieving this, Bracknell Forest was required to remain within 2.5% of expected factor values. The only available factor not linked to the baseline was the fixed lump sum allocation and the maximum additional amount that could be allocated to each school was £3,385.28 (a total of £0.101m). It was proposed that the remaining £0.087 of the surplus would be earmarked into reserves to support the budget deficit expected in 2024-25.

The Forum welcomed the comprehensive paper. The Forum queried whether the council could choose not to allocate any of the surplus to schools so that it could all be put into the reserves. This was an option, but the council's view was that schools should get some of the money now as there had been significant financial challenges in the current year, as these were expected to continue into 2023-24. The Forum also questioned whether there was any mechanism for the money to sit within the Council to support schools in a targeted way. The Council was not permitted to do this as the DfE controlled how funding was distributed to schools, and it had to be done through the formal funding factors with no ability to introduce local deviations.

Having notified the Forum that he needed to leave the meeting due to another appointment, the Chair withdrew from the meeting.

VICE-CHAIR, ELIZABETH SAVAGE, IN THE CHAIR

RESOLVED to AGREE

1. In its role as the representative body of schools and other providers of education and childcare, the Forum requests that the Executive Member for Children, Young People and Learning agrees the following for the 2023-24 Schools Budget:
 - a. the changes to budgets as set out in Table 1 of the report, in particular:
 - i. that the Schools Block DSG be set at £90.985m (columns A and B of line 3);
 - ii. that the Central School Services Block be set at £0.855m (column C of line 3);
 - iii. the changes to all other budgets that amount to £5.995m (column D of line 18); and
 - iv. that in the first instance, the units of resource used in the BF Funding Formula for Schools are set at 100% of the values used by the DfE in the NFF; and
 - b. that the resultant surplus funding of £0.188m be applied:
 - i. to all schools as an additional fixed lump sum allocation, by the maximum permitted increase of £3,385.28, to allocate £0.101m (paragraph 6.38 of the report); and
 - ii. the remaining £0.087m to be added to the centrally managed growth fund for use in supporting the budget deficit expected in 2024-25 (paragraph 6.38 of the report); and
 - c. that other Schools Block related grants, including the new Mainstream Schools Additional Grant, be set to the amounts anticipated in 2023-24; and
 - d. that the Executive Director: Resources be authorised to submit the DfE pro forma template of the 2023-24 BF Funding Formula for Schools in accordance with the decisions taken at this meeting; and
2. As decision maker:
 - a. that the arrangements in place for the administration of central government grants are appropriate;
 - b. the budgets for the Growth Fund be as set out in Annex 1 of the report; and
 - c. the budgets to be centrally managed by the council on behalf of schools, be as set out in Annex 2 of the report.

275. 2023-24 proposals for the local authority budget

The Forum considered a report presenting for comment a summary of the Council's draft budget proposals for 2023/24 as agreed by the Executive on 13 December 2022, with a particular focus on the impact expected on the People Directorate.

Paul Clark highlighted that the report was part of the council's consultation process with any comments to be considered ahead of the final proposals in February 2023.

There were five key parts to the budget: the commitment budget, grant income, budget pressures, economies & savings, and inflation. There was a potential budget gap of £8.2m; whilst this was a big increase, it was not unexpected. The gap could be covered by either an increase in council tax, using reserves, or by making further savings.

The Forum asked how significant the recruitment issue was within the People Directorate. Paul replied that there was a high percentage of agency staff within Children's Social Care (CSC). The recent "outstanding" Ofsted grading had attracted more social workers, but there was a national lack of social workers which was why there was still a higher level of agency workers. Adult Social Care did not have as many agency staff but there were vacancies.

RESOLVED that the Forum had commented, as captured in the minutes, on the 2023/24 budget proposals of the Executive for the People Directorate in respect of:

- i. the revenue budget (Annexes A to C of the report); and
- ii. the capital programme (Annexe D of the report).

CHAIRMAN