

**SCHOOLS FORUM
7 MARCH 2024
4.30 - 5.40 PM**



Present:

Stuart Matthews, Academy School Representative (Chair)
Elizabeth Savage, Academy School Representative (Vice-Chair)
Jenny Baker, Special 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
Caroline Johnson, Primary School Representative

28. Apologies for Absence/Substitute Members

It was noted that Stuart Matthews had offered his apologies for the beginning of the meeting and therefore the Vice-Chair Elizabeth Savage would chair the meeting.

29. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

30. Minutes and Matters Arising

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the forum held on 11 January 2024 be approved as a correct record.

31. 2023 Childcare Sufficiency Assessment

The Forum received a report which sought to provide an update on the 2023 Childcare Sufficiency Assessment (CSA), which was to be submitted to the Executive Member and subsequently published on the Bracknell Forest Council Website, as required by the authority's statutory duty to secure sufficient childcare.

Due to large changes to early years funding levels, large parts of the CSA would only apply to the previous financial year and would be out of date once the new financial year began on 1 April 2024. From the 1 April work would be done to understand the

increases in demand for childcare and recruitment would take place to ensure additional capacity to carry out this work.

Arising from questions the following points was noted:

- Whilst there had been sufficient childcare places in the previous year, there were some challenges in achieving this for the upcoming year. The local authority was negotiating with providers to try and ensure sufficient provision was in place.

RESOLVED That Schools Forum **NOTES** the 2023 Childcare Sufficiency Assessment.

32. **Revisions to the Local funding agreement for funding Early Years Provision and Childcare**

The forum received a report which sought:

- Agreement on proposals for the introduction of monthly early years entitlement payments for childminders in Bracknell Forest.
- Agreement changes to the local funding agreement for funding early years provision and childcare.
- To Provide an update on the local funding agreement, essential for providers to adhere to in order to secure funding for the provision of early years entitlements (referred to locally as the Provider Agreement), which had undergone revision to align with amendments in the statutory guidance for Local Authorities, including the expansion of early years entitlements from April 2024 and the introduction of a monthly payment option for childminders.

The proposals for the introduction of monthly early years entitlement payments for childminders, stemmed from the changes to funding from 1 April. This would mean that the council's payments were the primary income source for many childminders and this sort to give childminders more stability in their income. These proposed changes had gone through an extensive consultation with childminders within the borough. It was noted childminders would retain the option to stay on their existing payment terms if they wished.

Due to changes in the early years funding, a number of changes were to be made to the provider agreement, including large changes in terminology. The primary changes were to include the new statutory requirements. Work was also ongoing with the legal team to improve the data sharing agreement with providers.

Arising from questions the following points were noted:

- There is a funding gap for childcare providers, as government entitlements are only available during term time (equivalent to 38 weeks a year) which causes some working parents to have to stretch their entitlement, over more than 38 weeks.

RESOLVED that the forum:

AGREE that in accordance with the responses to the consultation with childminders the proposals for the introduction of monthly early years payments to childminders, as set out in points 5.3 to 5.9, are implemented from April 2024.

AGREE the revised Provider Agreement for funding early years provision and childcare, as set out in points 5.10 to 5.11.

NOTE the need for additional work on data sharing between the Council and early years providers, which will be addressed via an addendum to the Provider Agreement if required.

33. **Final proposals for the 2024-25 High Needs Block Budget**

The Forum considered a report which sought agreement on the detailed budget proposals for the High Needs Block (HNB) element of the Schools Budget that are being presented now by the Council. These proposals reflected the latest spend forecasts for 2023-24 financial year together with the earlier work on the Safety Valve (SV) programme bid, for which an update on status was also provided.

The HNB is part of the dedicated schools grant and is provided to ensure funding for children with the most challenging educational needs. It was proposed that the budget for the HNB be set at £24.686m for 2024/25.

An update was provided on the progress of the Safety Valve programme which was approved by full council on 10 January and then submitted to the DfE shortly after. Confirmation had been received that the DfE had approved the Safety Valve bid and it was now awaiting approval from the treasury.

Bracknell Forest Council had also agreed funding for the new SME free school and had also submitted bids to fund 2 new secondary SRP's.

In setting the annual budget, forecasts had been provided based on the December monitoring cycle and this suggested a HNB overspend of £10.10 million, an increase of £1.62 million from when it had last been reported. It was noted that these figures were subject to change, due to the volatile costs associated and possible changes in circumstances. The amount of money budgeted for inflationary pressures was based upon a forecast of a 2.8% increase from the Bank of England.

Arising from questions the following points were made:

- The Borough Solicitor had confirmed the Safety Valve content and agreement was lawful.
- Modelling suggested there would be growth in the number of EHCP's over the next 5 years. The local authority had also committed not to put a cap on EHCP's.
- The local authority had committed to prioritising early interventions, to ensure pupil's received intervention at the earliest possible stage.
- The local plan would ensure a growth in specialist places within the borough in the next 5 years.
- In response to concerns over the number of specialist places in the short term it was confirmed that there was ongoing work with current resource providers, to ensure there was an outreach provision to ensure schools needs were met, and that the independent sector was being used to ensure the most complex needs were met and work was constantly ongoing to increase provision.
- Interim measures had been put in place to increase specialist resource provision capacity whilst building work was ongoing this included negotiating

to increase specialist places at Sandhurst prior to the build being done, ensuring all places were now available at Kings Academy.

- Work was ongoing to determine the level of funding allocated to the banding tool and the local authority would work with headteachers to ensure appropriate values underpinned this.
- A final decision had yet to be made on the closure of the Pupil Referral Unit at College Hall, if it was not closed a reduced number of places would be available at the facility.

Arising from debate the forum raised the following points:

- There were concerns about the effects of reductions in funding would have on SEN provision.
- There were concerns there could be a reduction in EHCP's, as well as children being placed in schools they would be unsuited too.
- There were concerns that whilst there were plans to create more specialist places within the borough, this would not help in the short term.

RESOLVED That the Forum **Agrees subject to Bracknell Forest Council's acceptance into the Safety Valve agreement**, that for the 2024-25 financial year:

That the Executive Member:

1. sets the total HNB Dedicated Schools Grant income at £24.686m
2. confirms the changes to relevant budgets set out in the supporting information (summarised in Table 1 and Annexes 2 and 3).

And that whilst there are not yet appropriate arrangements in place for:

1. The education of pupils with SEND
2. The use of pupil referral units and the education of children otherwise than at school

Progress is being made but we have not yet reached a point where services match demand, but all parties are aware of the issues and petitioning relevant parties for support.

RESOLVED that the Forum **NOTES** The updated forecast financial position of the HNB Budget at Table 1, which shows a forecast £5.321m overspending in 2024-25 and a £41.533m cumulative deficit on the High Needs Block as at the end of March 2026

34. **Dates of Future Meetings**

The next meeting would take place on 20 June 2024.

CHAIRMAN