

Minutes of Cheshire West and Chester Schools Forum, virtual meeting, on 7 December 2021

Members	Representing	Attendance
Schools and Academies		
Alan Brown	Primary headteachers	Attended
Julie Chambers	Primary headteachers	Attended
Sarah Curtis	Primary headteachers	Apologies
Ian Devereux Roberts	Primary headteachers	Attended
Kate Docherty	Primary headteachers	Attended
Sharon Broughton	Primary governors	Apologies
Duncan Haworth (Chair)	Primary governors	Attended
Lisa Rigby	Primary governors	Attended
David Nield	Primary governors	Attended
Nick Lacey	Primary governors	Attended
David Curry	Secondary headteachers	Attended
Mike Holland	Secondary headteachers	Attended
Vacancy	Secondary governors	Vacancy
Rob Williams	Secondary governors	Attended
Mike McCann	Special headteachers	Attended
Philip Hopwood	Special governors	Attended
Andy Stewart	PRU	Absent
Deborah Beaumont	Academies - mainstream	Attended
Sarah Connolly	Academies - mainstream	Absent
Darran Jones	Academies - mainstream	Apologies
Luci Jones	Academies - mainstream	Attended
Jason Lowe	Academies - mainstream	Apologies
Helen Studley	Academies - mainstream	Attended
Vacancy	Academies - special	Vacancy
Non Schools		
Sue Anderson	PVI early years providers	Attended
Kathryn Magiera	Diocese	Absent
Caroline Vile	Diocese	Attended
Greg Foster	Unions	Attended
Geoff Wright	Unions	Absent
Rob Pullen	CWAPH	Attended
Cat Hirst	PVI early years providers	Apologies
Angela Thornton	PVI early years providers	Substitute
Vacancy	16-19 providers	Vacancy
Official Observers		
Councillor Robert Cernik	Cabinet Member for Children and Families	Attended
Officers in attendance		
Natalie Cole	Finance Manager	
Carolyn Davis	Senior Manager Education and Inclusion	
Charlotte Fenn	Clerk	
Observer		
Councillor Razia Daniels	Shadow Cabinet Member for Children and Families	

1. Introductions and apologies

Apologies and substitutes were noted.

Debbie Murphy, Acting Head of Education and Inclusion, sent apologies as she was involved in an Ofsted inspection.

Duncan reported the following updates to Schools Forum membership:

New primary governor representative - Lisa Rigby, Antrobus St Mark's Church of England Primary – previously been in attendance as a substitute.

2. Minutes and matters arising of last meeting

2.1 To agree the minutes from the meeting held 19 October 2021

The minutes of the meeting held on the 19 October 2021 were agreed as a correct record.

2.2 Matters arising

2.2.1 Item 3 Social Finance Averting Exclusions Project

Apologies were noted as a copy of the presentation had only been received and circulated to Schools Forum that day.

2.2.2 Item 4 Early Years Funding Formula Consultation and proposal for 2022-2023

It was noted that the proposals had been approved by Cabinet in November 2021, despite Forums concerns and reservations regarding the recommendation that the Quality supplement be phased out over a two-year period, halving in year one with consideration of full removal in year two.

3. School Information Management System (SIMS) Update and Options

Carolyn Davis provided a verbal report on the latest position regarding the SIMS contract. Carolyn apologised for not providing a report prior to the meeting as the position had been changing on a regular basis and there were still some unanswered questions.

Education and Inclusion were the contract holder for SIMS, Carolyn Davis had led on the procurement for the last two three-year contracts through the Council's framework, funded through de-delegation. The current provider, ESS, had been bought out and the new provider, ParentPay, was offering a cloud-based solution from the 1 April 2022 when the current contract was due for renewal.

Officers had looked at moving away from de-delegation and were working with procurement regarding the new contract. Officers had met with ESS and been informed that, from 1 April 2022, they would be contracting directly with individual schools under a three-year facilitation agreement under the Local Authority, and schools would be

invoiced direct, if continuing with SIMS. It was noted that the rate per pupil, under this new contract, had not yet been confirmed. The Local Authority had to nominate one support unit, which would remain as ECWIP ICT Shared Services.

ESS had requested that the Local Authority confirm which schools would be part of the facilitation agreement by 21 December; Carolyn had written to schools requesting this information by 17 December. It was also noted that further guidance was being sought following an article in 'Schools Week' saying that a Department for Education spokesperson was looking into the change and suggesting schools pause before agreeing to the new three-year contract whilst they investigate.

Carolyn asked Forum if they had any queries, they wished to be taken back to ESS. Carolyn acknowledged the timing was one of schools' concerns.

David Curry referred to the communication sent by Carolyn and raised concerns over the high ramifications of unknown inflationary costs, schools need a full year to consider changing systems and asked if Officers could negotiate an extension to the deadline to an academic year. David was also aware that Academies pay around twice as much as a similar size school to his.

Rob Pullen agreed that an extension to the deadline was preferable as schools were already dealing with the impact of Best 4 Business on workloads.

Councillor Cernik agreed with the previous comments and asked if there was a possibility of an overlap between the old and new systems and what percentage of schools used SIMS.

Carolyn responded the majority of schools used SIMS, approximately eight schools used other systems.

David Neild felt it 'high handed' to impose a new contract method without consultation and asked what happens if a school joined a Multi Academy Trust during the three-year contract.

Carolyn responded that currently there was a mechanism for schools to come out of the contract as it was renewed annually, once an Academy contracted direct they could not be part of the current contract, however further guidance was being sought regarding the new three-year contract.

Duncan Haworth asked if ParentPay had indicated if there would be any link between their system and SIMS.

Carolyn agreed to ask ESS the question.

Natalie Cole confirmed that the current per pupil rate was approximately £4.00 for secondary and slightly less for primary and expected similar rates for the new contract though the rates had not yet been confirmed.

Concerns were also raised of the costs of additional modules on top of the initial entitlement.

Resolved that Schools Forum note the report.

4. Government consultation - Reforming how local authorities' school improvement functions are funded

Natalie Cole introduced the report and took Forum through the key points from the Government consultation and the potential impact on Cheshire West and Chester of the consultation proposals.

It was noted that the current School Improvement budget was made up of three funding sources, DSG (Central School Services Block), Council base budget and School Improvement Monitoring and Brokering (SIMB) grant and the indicative amount to replace the 50% grant reduction would be £7.42 per pupil. A short survey had been sent to schools, on behalf of Schools Forum, seeking views on de-delegation in order to help inform Forum's decision if one was required to be made at the January Forum.

Duncan Haworth reported that the Schools Forum Finance subgroup had supported the Local Authorities response to the consultation and submitted a response accordingly.

Rob Pullen sought clarification as to whether the service would be through de-delegation or buy back.

Natalie responded that the intention was for it to be through de-delegation rather than a traded service initially to allow time to look at what services could be traded, the de-delegation could be looked at as an insurance policy.

Councillor Cernik sought clarification as to what would happen where schools converting to Academies needed School Improvement and how any short fall would be covered.

Natalie responded that there would be a short fall if funds were not de-delegated, Officers would have to reprioritise funds to cover the core activities at the detriment to other initiatives. It was also noted that the SIMB grant was to fund maintained schools and not Academies, different funding was available for schools converting to Academies. It was also noted that the DSG element of the School Improvement budget was being removed (reference paragraph 9).

David Curry reported that the consultation proposal would be raised at CWASH and would invite Christine Ridley Thomas, (School Improvement Manager) to attend. David also raised concerns as to where schools could go to get support as schools no longer had the Teaching School Alliances and support had been fragmented out to teaching hubs. David was also very concerned at the timescale for the proposed changes which was 'ridiculous'.

Natalie informed Forum that Christine Ridley Thomas had taken the proposals to CWEIB (Cheshire West Education Improvement Board) who had raised similar concerns.

Forum members asked if the current funding was sufficient.

Natalie responded that the costs could vary from one year to the next due to the needs. It was noted that there was an option to de-delegate less than the current amount and if not spent, it would be ringfenced and carried forward for maintained schools.

It was noted that Forum members valued the School Improvement mechanism and were aware that it would not work if schools had to buy support that they could not afford.

Rob Pullen confirmed that the proposals were on the CWAPH agenda for tomorrow's meeting.

Alan Brown asked if the ASIA (Associate School Improvement Adviser) role came under this area. Natalie confirmed that they did but would need to refer to Christine Ridley Thomas as to what the impact would be on the provision on offer.

It was acknowledged that de-delegation would collectively be for the greater good, but schools would need to feel they were getting a good service.

Duncan Haworth reminded Forum that it was in everyone's interest to respond to the survey sent out on behalf of Schools Forum.

Resolved that Schools Forum note the report

5. Summary of the Comprehensive Spending Review and Autumn Budget 2021 Announcement

Natalie Cole took Forum through the report which summarised the recent national funding announcements.

It was noted that the announcement was largely good news as there was more funding than expected, however the announcement did not refer to the SIMB proposals.

Councillor Cernik acknowledged that funding had dropped yearly since 2010 and this uplift, although welcomed, would not bring it back to those levels. Natalie commented that the growth in population had also not been recognised in the announcement of extra funding.

Further details regarding the impact on funding for Cheshire West and Chester were expected to be announced on 15 December.

Resolved that Schools Forum note the report.

6. Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) 2021-2022 Forecast Outturn at Second Review

Natalie Cole went through the report which provided an update on the financial forecast outturn position for 2021-2022 for centrally held DSG.

It was noted this was a worsened position compared to the forecast balanced budget reported in July and was largely due to the increased number of SEN placements in independent schools. Being in deficit was a new situation for CW&C and work was being done on a recovery plan which would be brought to Forum in January. However, it

was noted that the Local Authority would struggle to set a balanced budget next year, though the position might change once they knew the 15 December funding notification.

The Local Authority would be seeking to re-confirm the existing (not additional) 0.5% transfer for another year in 2022-23, views were being sought as part of the current survey sent out on behalf of Schools Forum.

Resolved that Schools Forum note the report.

7. Any Other Business

Vice-Chair and Finance and High Needs subgroup vacancies

Duncan Haworth reminded Forum that they were still looking for a Vice-chair and subgroup members. Those interested should contact the Clerk.

8. Next meeting

Change of dates/cancellation

Finance subgroup - 14 December 2021 cancelled

Schools Forum – 11 January changed to Tuesday 18 January 2022 4.30 - 6.30 virtual.

Finance subgroup - 18 January changed to Monday 24 January 2022 2.00 - 4.00 virtual.