

Minutes of Cheshire West and Chester Schools Forum, virtual meeting, on 7 July 2020 - subject to approval

Members	Representing	Attendance
Schools and Academies		
Alan Brown	Primary headteachers	Attended
Julie Chambers	Primary headteachers	Attended
Sarah Curtis	Primary headteachers	Attended
Ian Devereux Roberts	Primary headteachers	Apologies
Kate Docherty	Primary headteachers	Attended
Duncan Haworth (Chair)	Primary governors	Attended
Helen Hill	Primary governors	Apologies
Paul Healey	Primary governors	Apologies
Kath Lloyd	Primary governors	Attended
David Nield	Primary governors	Attended
David Curry	Secondary headteachers	Attended
Mike Holland	Secondary headteachers	Attended
John Freeman	Secondary governors	Attended
David Rowlands	Secondary governors	Attended
Mike McCann	Special headteachers	Attended
Phil Hopwood	Special governors	Attended
Katie Tyrie	Nursery headteachers	Apologies
Andy Stewart	PRU	Attended
Sarah Connolly	Academies - mainstream	Attended
Darran Jones	Academies - mainstream	Attended
Luci Jones	Academies - mainstream	Apologies
Jason Lowe	Academies - mainstream	Attended
Helen Studley	Academies - mainstream	Apologies
Lyndsay Watterson	Academies - mainstream	Attended
Marie Allen	Academies - special	Attended
Non Schools		
Sue Anderson	PVI early years providers	Attended
Kathryn Magiera	Diocese	Absent
Caroline Vile	Diocese	Attended
Greg Foster	Unions	Absent
Geoff Wright	Unions	Absent
Rob Pullen	CWAPH	Attended
Vacancy	PVI early years providers	Vacancy
Vacancy	16-19 providers	Vacancy
Non-voting Observers		
Councillor Robert Cernick	Cabinet Member for Children and Families	Apologies
Officers in attendance		
Mark Parkinson	Director of Education and Inclusion	
Natalie Cole	Finance Manager	
Charlotte Fenn	Clerk	

1. Introductions and apologies

Apologies were noted.

It was noted that Councillor Cernick had a prior meeting so would be late attending Forum.

Duncan Haworth welcomed two new academy representatives to the group: -

Darran Jones Head of Christleton High School part of The Learning Trust
Sarah Connolly CFO Concordia Multi-Academy Trust

Duncan reported that Caroline Vile Head of Ellesmere Port Catholic High had been re-elected as diocese representative; and Paula Adolph, representing PVI early years providers, had resigned and a new representative was being sought.

2. Minutes and matters arising of last meeting

2.1 To agree the minutes from the meeting held 10 February 2020

The minutes of the meeting held on the 10 February 2020 were agreed as a correct record.

2.2 Matters arising

2.2.1 Item 2.2.1 Early Years Provider Hub

Natalie Cole informed Forum members that a letter had been circulated to early years providers on 3 June regarding the introduction of the new funding system. It was noted that all current data would be merged over from the previous system.

2.2.2 Item 2.2.2 Any Other Business - Funding Gypsy Romany Traveller (GRT) Pupils

Mark Parkinson reported that the letter had been redrafted, following input from Simon Kidwell and Sharon Wyatt, but as current events had taken over the letter had not been sent and would be revisited in due course.

2.2.3 Item 5 Special Educational Needs (SEN) funding for mainstream and special schools - funding from the High Needs block 2020-2021

It was noted that the Schools Forum High Needs subgroup was being reconvened.

3. Updated guidance on the Scheme for Financing Schools for 2020-2021

Natalie Cole introduced the report which updated the Schools Forum on the changes in the latest guidance on Schemes for Financing Schools issued by the Department for Education (DfE) in March 2020 and the amendments to be incorporated in the Cheshire West and Chester Scheme.

Natalie referred Forum to paragraph 5 outlining the change to practice, allowing all primary and secondary maintained schools to join the risk protection arrangement (RPA) collectively through de-delegated funding. It was noted that the outcome of the consultation and publication of the scheme was issued after the de-delegation decision had been submitted for 2020-2021 but would be considered for next financial year.

Resolved that Schools Forum (maintained schools only):

- i. approve the revisions to the scheme to be reflected in the updated Scheme published July 2020 (vote unanimous); and
- ii. note the new arrangements for maintained schools to access the Risk Protection Arrangement and the provision of further information in the autumn term.

4 Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) 2019-2020 – Final Outturn

Natalie Cole introduced the report on the 2019-2020 final outturn position for the centrally held DSG budget.

Natalie drew Forum members' attention to the change in outturn position from an overspend of £0.658m to an underspend of £0.034m since the last review. It was noted that the change was mainly due to an underspend on the Early Years block due to low take up of three and four-year-old free entitlement hours and grant adjustment based on the January census.

Natalie referred Forum members to paragraph 5 which outlined the significant variances against budgets across the funding blocks; and the table in paragraph 6 which summarised the changes.

Natalie drew Forum members attention to the views of the finance subgroup outlined under paragraphs 9 and 10. It was noted that the subgroup had discussed concerns regarding the additional financial pressures on early years providers and their view was that the underspend on early years funding should be allocated to providers in a phased approach.

Natalie reported that, in view of the overspend, Schools Forum High Needs subgroup would be reconvened with a view to mitigating the ongoing pressures against the High Needs Block.

Sue Anderson sought clarification as to why the £200k transferred to early years in 2019-2020 from the High Needs block (paragraph 10) had not been used. Natalie explained that these funds had not been claimed and were being reinstated to be used to fund high needs pressures.

Sue Anderson raised concerns regarding the new assessment process and her fears that it would prevent settings accessing funds. Natalie advised that this was something that could be picked up through the Early Years reference group.

Sue Anderson thanked Forum for allocating more funds to the Early years sector.

Resolved that the Schools Forum: -

- i. note the final outturn on the 2019-2020 centrally held DSG; and
- ii. endorse the planned allocation of the unspent reserve as recommended by the Schools Forum Finance Subgroup and detailed in paragraphs 8-10 (vote: unanimous).

5 Maintained School Balances Financial Year 2019-2020 and Academy Balances 2018-2019

Natalie Cole introduced the report for the final outturn position of maintained schools in the Borough for the 2019-2020 financial year and the last reported position for academy balances.

Natalie went through the paper and drew Forums attention to paragraph 6-9 which outlined the movement and range of balances held by each sector and referred members to a separate annex entitled 'Financial Year 2019-2020 Analysis of School Balances' for the individual school balances.

Natalie reminded Forum that the balance control mechanism (BCM), as previously agreed with Forum, was not in operation during 2019-2020. However, it was noted that officers continue to report balances in excess of the BCM thresholds and these had been discussed at the last Finance subgroup meeting.

It was noted that as a result of discussions with the Finance subgroup a recommendation had been put forward for Heads Association representatives to discuss excessive surplus balances with their colleagues.

David Curry sought clarification as to what was expected from CWASH. Officers responded that there was a need to look at their sector as a whole; establishing the reasons behind ongoing excessive balances, raising any concerns, considering what actions to put in place to tackle schools with long term balances; ask the question are we confident the sector is using their resources responsibly; possibly consider whether the BCM should be reinstated.

Following a request, Natalie agreed to present the data to Heads Associations to enable the associations to have an open discussion.

Lyndsay Watterson, as a member of the Finance subgroup, said that she was happy to speak to CWASH.

Philip Hopwood sought clarification as to which body was responsible for underspends, who was assuring that an underspend was justifiable and were there any criteria to justify an underspend.

Natalie responded that schools had responsibility as did the LA but acknowledged that as there was no longer a BCM there was a gap in the process.

In response to a question as to whether balances had increased or decreased since the BCM had stopped, Natalie responded that there had not been a big impact on submissions. It was noted that some schools had maintained an underspend over many years, part of the issue was that there were no incentives as excessive balances had never been clawed back whilst the BCM had been in operation.

Mike McCann stated there was a need to recognise those schools that were moving in the right direction and the work they had put in and confirmed that this item would be put on the October CWASSH agenda.

Sue Anderson questioned what would happen to the seven schools in deficit if they were unable to set a balanced budget, would they be 'bailed out' as had another school recently.

Officers responded that the school in question had not been 'bailed out', this was not permissible under the regulations; the funding arrangement put in place was as a result of the Academy conversion.

It was noted that some of the schools in deficit were small rural schools in challenging circumstances. Some historic deficits were working their way through the system and processes had been put in place to monitor schools by way of a Notice of Concern.

Resolved that Schools Forum

- i. note the outturn position and movement in balances for both schools and academies and the mechanisms in place to support schools with deficit balances (maintained schools only); and
- ii. task Heads association representatives to discuss excess surplus balances with colleagues and to report challenges and concerns at the next Schools Forum meeting.

6 Annual review of the Cheshire West and Chester Schools Forum's membership, constitution and terms of reference

Charlotte Fenn introduced the report which reviewed the Schools Forum's membership, constitution and terms of reference to ensure that the composition of the Schools Forum was compliant with the regulation.

Forum members attention was drawn to appendix 4 and the Schools Forum High Needs subgroup. Charlotte reported that, as the group was being reconvened, the current membership would be revised to include Duncan Haworth and Debbie Freeman, Senior SEN Manager as the supporting officer. It was also noted that Clare Morgan, Head Weaverham High School, was to be invited to join the group as an observer as she represented secondary schools on the SEND Strategy Group.

Resolved that Schools Forum note

- i. that Officers have determined that the pupil ration does not warrant a revision in the Schools Forum membership at this time; and
- ii. the changes to the constitution and terms of reference to allow, in light of the coronavirus pandemic, for schools' forums meetings to take place by remote means.

7 Any Other Business

Duncan Haworth informed Forum that Mark Parkinson was retiring at the end of term and, on behalf of Schools Forum, thanked Mark for his contribution to the work of the local authority and support to schools over the years and wished him all the best for the future and retirement.

8 Next meeting

Date to be confirmed.