

Minutes of Cheshire West and Chester Schools' Forum, virtual meeting, on 16 January 2024 approved at the 12 February 2024 meeting

Members	Representing	Attendance
Schools and Academies		
Jan Diamond	Primary headteachers	Attended
Nicky Dowling	Primary headteachers	Attended
Kate Docherty	Primary headteachers	Attended
Beth Hacking	Primary headteachers	Absent
Vacancy	Primary headteachers	Vacancy
Sharon Broughton	Primary governors	Absent
Lisa Rigby	Primary governors	Absent
Nick Lacey	Primary governors	Attended
Vacancy	Primary governors	Vacancy
David Curry	Secondary headteachers	Attended
David Rowlands (Vice Chair)	Secondary governors	Attended
Vacancy	Secondary governors	Absent
Neil Oxley	Special headteachers	Attended
Philip Hopwood	Special governors	Apologies
Andy Stewart	PRU	Absent
Deborah Beaumont	Academies - mainstream	Attended
Simon Faircloth	Academies - mainstream	Attended
Darran Jones	Academies - mainstream	Attended
Duncan Haworth (Chair)	Academies - mainstream	Attended
Cathryn McKeagney	Academies - mainstream	Attended
Karen Vitalis	Academies - mainstream	Attended
Vacancy	Academies - mainstream	Vacancy
Vacancy	Academies - mainstream	Vacancy
Michelle Duval	Academies - special	Attended
Non Schools		
Vacancy	PVI early years providers	Vacancy
Vacancy	PVI early years providers	Vacancy
Kathryn Magiera	Diocese	Absent
Caroline Vile	Diocese	Absent
Greg Foster	Unions	Attended
Geoff Wright	Unions	Absent
Ian Devereux Roberts	CWAPH	Attended
Vacancy	16-19 providers	Vacancy
Official Observers		
Councillor Adam Langan	Cabinet Member Children & Families	Absent
	Education Skills & Funding Agency	Absent
Invited Observer		
Councillor Lynn Stocks	Shadow Cabinet Member for Children and Families	Attended
Officers in attendance		
Helen Brackenbury	Executive Director of Children and Families	
Andrew Brindley	Senior Finance Manager	
Debbie Edwards	Head of Education and Inclusion	
Charlotte Fenn	Clerk	
Debra Goodall	Head of Health and Wellbeing Finance	

Christine Ridley Thomas
Lynsey Taylor
Kate Thomson
Simon Riley

Senior Manager School Intervention and SCC
Finance Manager
Schools HR Manager
Chief Operating and Finance Officer

1. Introductions and apologies

Duncan Haworth informed Forum that the meeting was being recorded.

Apologies were noted.

Duncan reported the following updates to Forum membership: -

- Cat Hirst - PVI representative had resigned.
- Helen Studley - Academies representative's term of office had ended.
- Karen Vitalis - new Academies representative.
- Kathryn Magiera - Diocese representative's term of office had been extended.

Simon Riley, new Chief Operating and Finance Officer was welcomed to the meeting as an observer. Simon's background was in Education finance, had worked with Schools Forums over many years, was Chair of the SEND Implementation Board, and lead on behalf of the council treasury on SEND discussions with central government.

Andrew Brindley, new Senior Finance Manager was welcomed to the meeting; Andrew had been working in school finance since 2011.

2. Minutes and matters arising of last meeting

2.1 To agree the minutes from the meeting held 10 October 2023

The minutes of the meeting held on 10 October 2023 were agreed as a correct record.

2.2 Matters arising

None to report.

3. Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) 2023-24 Forecast Outturn at Third Review

Lynsey Taylor introduced the report which updated Forum on the financial outturn and the third review.

The service was forecasting an overspend of £5.4 million on DSG budgets which was a worsened position compared to the previous forecast. Forums attention was drawn to the key variances summarised in the table under paragraph 6.

It was noted that at the end of 2022-2023 there was a deficit of £2.7 million on the DSG reserve but the forecast was now a deficit of £8.1 million.

Officers were looking to mitigate this wherever they could and bring the deficit down.

David Rowlands asked if the deficit was destined to increase over the next few years as was the case in other authorities or were we worse off than others. Lynsey confirmed that it was a national problem, all authorities were facing with the same issue where High Needs funding wasn't keeping up with the need.

Nikki Dowling questioned the use of speech and language therapy services funds, where there had been slippages in investment, being used to offset the deficit.

Lynsey responded that the underspend was related to a specific contract where the inflation figure applied was higher than required. Debbie Edwards added that the recruitment process for that service had been slow at the beginning, hence the slippage, but they were now fully staffed and able to implement the service.

Nikki advocated, from a school perspective, that the money be reinvested in the much-needed speech and language therapy service rather than used for the deficit.

Simon Riley added that most Local Authorities were seeing the finance and demand for higher needs going way out of balance, Cheshire East have a deficit of over £50 million and Oxfordshire £200 million, so was a multi-billion issue across Local Government. The Council's commitment was to responsibly manage the investment in higher needs to create a sustainable model but being realistic that the Authority wouldn't necessarily reduce the deficit in the short term. The Authority were engaging with the DfE for sustainable funding for higher needs and had a DSG management plan. Simon urged Forum members to lobby government through their own unions and governing bodies to say they need to put funding on a proper footing, as the Authority could not solve the issues on their own.

Resolved that the Schools' Forum note the Third Review position on the DSG and next steps.

4. Central School Services Block (CSSB) 2024-2025

Lynsey introduced the report which looked at the Central School Services Block for 2024-2025 and required Forums' approval for the items listed to be charged against the CSSB.

Lynsey referred Forum members to the breakdown of the CSSB in table 1.

Lynsey drew Forums attention to the list of central licences purchased by the DfE for state funded schools. It was noted that the allocation figure might change as officers were awaiting from DfE the central licences charge for 2024-2025; any necessary adjustment would be taken from the contribution to responsibilities funding line.

David Curry asked, in terms of bench marking and best practice, was the £42k, for example, for servicing Schools Forum in line with statistical neighbours. Lynsey responded that she thought it was but would have to look further into this as she did not have this information to hand at this time. David felt that having this information would give Forum the confidence in agreeing the figures.

David Rowlands asked if the admissions figure covered the actual costs of this work. Lynsey confirmed that was the budget for the admissions team.

David Curry added that, as it was a significant sum, it would be helpful to have some benchmarking and a breakdown of what it costs to facility admissions verses the number of appeals, especially as the authority bordered a number of other authorities and might be doing more appeals than others.

Following Duncan's request, Lynsey agreed to do some background work on the number of appeals and benchmarking in future.

David Rowlands asked if savings were made by paying for the licenses in one lump, did the schools see the savings.? Lynsey responded that the government bought the licences centrally, so the schools didn't have to purchase them individually.

Duncan went through each line of the CSSB and sought Forum's approval where appropriate.

Resolve that Schools' Forum:

- i. approved unanimously the amounts on each line within the CSSB for 2024-2025; and
- ii. noted the responsibilities of the local authority for all schools in the Cheshire West and Chester area.

5. De-delegation proposals 2024-2025

Lynsey went through the report and the services to be de-delegated by maintained schools for 2024-2025.

Forums attention was drawn to the consultation outcomes from maintained schools under paragraphs 5-10. It was acknowledged that the respond was low, possibly due to the consultation going out over the Christmas period. Forum was asked to note and take into account the proposed levels of de-delegation, under paragraph 11, when they came to vote.

Greg Foster asked what had happened to the trade union money coming in from special schools. Lynsey responded that the trade union charge for special schools would have to be through an SLA or charged separately, de-delegation from special schools wasn't permissible under the regulations. Andrew Brindley added that de-delegation only applied to primary and secondary schools as the funds were coming from the schools block, higher needs was funded from a separate block so was not included. However it was noted that the only reason School Improvement had been included was that it was permissible to de-delegate School Improvement from special schools as well as primary and secondary.

Nick Lacey commented on 16 being a very low response across the whole of primary schools. Lynsey acknowledged this was partly due to it being done during the Christmas holiday period.

Duncan drew Forum members attention to the request form Trade Unions for additional funding from schools to enhance capacity for representation by 0.1 FTE per week, as a result of increased membership numbers.

Greg Foster made an impassioned plea for the additional funding especially in light of advice put out by the NEU, during Covid, that anyone working in schools could use section 44 and believed this single act saved many lives. Greg cited the additional case work and training NEU reps did during this period. Schools and education were facing a major crisis, particularly in recruitment and retention, low pay, excessive accountability and Ofsted driving people out of the profession. Greg believed the best bet for winning for schools was the trade union movement and providing the additional funding would allow for more case work and time for organising any future actions taken by the union.

Nikki Dowling sought clarification as to whether the additional funding was solely for the NEU or all the unions. Greg confirmed it would go into the trade union funding across all the union reps.

Kate Docherty sought confirmation as to whether all the union posts had been filled as previously some had been vacant. Greg confirmed that they had and acknowledged that the budget had been underspent in previous years due to vacancies but would be spent in full this year. Greg added that the local NAHT rep was also currently the NAHT president of the national union.

Resolves that Schools' Forum (maintained school representatives) agreed the services to be de-delegated to the Local Authority for 2024-2025 as detailed for:

a) Contingencies to cover the cost of staff on suspension (primary and secondary representatives separately)

Primary Vote: Yes - unanimous

Secondary Vote: Yes – unanimous

b) Free school meals eligibility assessments (primary and secondary representatives separately)

Primary Vote: Yes - unanimous
Secondary Vote: Yes – unanimous

c) Covering the cost of staff on for maternity/paternity/adoption leave (primary representatives only)

Primary Vote: Yes - unanimous

d) Pooling of funding to cover the costs of trade union facilities time (primary and secondary representatives separately)

Primary Vote: Yes - unanimous
Secondary Vote: Yes – unanimous

e) School improvement team delegation in line with the option chosen in 2023-24 (primary, secondary and special/alternative provision representatives separately)

Primary Vote: Yes - unanimous
Secondary Vote: Yes – unanimous
Special/alternative provision Vote: Yes – unanimous

f) Increase pooled funding for Trade Union Facilities time (primary and secondary representatives separately)

Primary Vote: No - unanimous
Secondary Vote: No - Yes 1 / No 1 – casting vote by Chair No

6. Growth Funding 2024-2025

Lynsey Taylor introduced the report which provided Forum members with an update on how growth funding was allocated in 2023-2024 and was seeking approval to set a growth fund of approximately £351k for 2024-2025, and to continue with the current growth funding criteria and methodology.

Lynsey reported that the growth fund could be up to £777k but following consultation with the School Planning department and Education Inclusion they had requested £351k.

Lynsey drew Forums attention to paragraph 3.3 which listed what the growth fund could be used for.

Forum noted that the 2023-2024 growth fund was set at £502k and was forecast to spend £132k.

Approval was sought for a growth fund of £351k, the remaining £426k to go back into the schools block and be allocated to schools.

No comments or questions from Forum to report.

Resolved that the Schools' Forum

- i. notes the content of the report and
- ii. approves the amount and proposals relating to the operation of the growth fund for 2024/25 onwards. Vote: unanimous

7. School Funding Update 2024-2025

Lynsey Taylor introduced the report which detailed the draft School Allocation and Funding Formula for 2024-2025 and took into account the decisions taken previously.

Lynsey drew Forums attention to the outcome of the consultation, 30 out of 33 agreed to the continuation of the existing 0.5% transfer from schools block to high needs block.

Kate Docherty supported the proposal but voiced her concerns that, despite authorities plans to tackle the rising numbers in higher needs, they were not addressing the issue. It seemed that year on year, they were continuing to approve this movement of funds, and suggested needed a more radical approach as higher needs continued to put pressure on the schools block and school budgets. Kate also acknowledged that this was a national issue.

In response, Helen Brackenbury commented when doing a stock take with other authorities on higher needs, the authority was in an improved position than many others but recognised that it continues to be challenging and could remain challenging for a number of years. The service had worked extensively to restructure the SEND team but acknowledged there was a huge mountain to climb for both the authority and partners including health colleagues. Couldn't give any assurances that we won't not require a similar approach next year, the situation was not improving or getting better but the authority was doing everything within its power to do that and make those changes.

Debbie Edwards added that the authority does have a plan which was shared as often as could and was constantly reviewed in terms of demand and sufficiency and the national picture, being as creative as can, flexing the plan with partners where appropriate and getting partners to share the journey and take responsibility where required.

Duncan drew Forums attention to appendix B, referenced under paragraph 4.4, which contained the draft indicative School Block allocations for 2024-2025. The appendix had been circulated separately to Forum members that day.

David Curry sought clarification regarding the MSAG (Mainstream School Additional Grant), that was allocated separately last year, and whether they were getting the MSAG in 2024-2025. Lynsey confirmed that the MSAG was a separate grant for 2023-2024 but for 2024-2025 it was included in the indicative allocation.

Resolved that Schools Forum:

- i. approve the proposed indicative allocations for the 2024-2025 DSG budget (vote: unanimous),
- ii. approve the continuation of the existing 0.5% transfer from schools block to high needs block for 2024-2025 (vote: unanimous); and
- iii. endorse the draft funding formula submission to the ESFA as outlined in appendix A (School, Academy and PVI representatives - vote: unanimous).

8. Council Financial Position

Lynsey Taylor reported that the situation for the whole of the Council at the third review was an underlying overspend of £23 million, after mitigating actions the overspend had reduced to £6.1 million. Council faces significant challenges predominantly from Adults and Childrens services, but this was a national issue for all Councils. Spending growth in these areas was unsustainable and mitigating actions were being taken to bring spending back to a level that could be afforded. Council had taken a number of actions such as introducing the Spending Review Panel and MARS (Mutually Agreed Resignation Scheme) to help reduce in-year financial pressures and continued to look at ways of reducing costs.

Simon Riley added, in addition to the pressures highlighted for this financial year, the level of growth put in for next year of £50 million and the level of savings expected, £29 million, were the highest CW&C had ever had to make in one year. The Council had tried to be realistic about demand but the sustainability and costs for Children Social Care was a national problem which were experiencing here in terms of securing placements for looked after children. Adults Social Care had seen significant increase in costs of mental health and inflation linked to wages across the board. On a trajectory over the next three years trying to redesign the Council to be a sustainable model going forward, want to be ahead of the curve and not declaring bankruptcy as some councils are. Simon acknowledged what everyone had done but highlighted the need for everyone to work together to create a sustainable future, working in partnership and coproduce the best solutions for the borough.

Forum noted the Council's financial position.

9. Any Other Business

None to report

10. Next meeting

Next Schools Forum meeting Monday 12 February 2024.