

Minutes of Cheshire West and Chester Schools' Forum, virtual meeting, on 16 July 2024 – subject to approval at next Schools Forum

Members	Representing	Attendance
Schools and Academies		
Jan Diamond	Primary headteachers	Apologies
Nicky Dowling	Primary headteachers	Attended
Kate Docherty	Primary headteachers	Attended
Beth Hacking	Primary headteachers	Absent
Michelle Ashfield	Primary headteachers	Attended
Sharon Broughton	Primary governors	Absent
Lisa Rigby	Primary governors	Absent
Vacancy	Primary governors	Vacancy
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	Attended
Deborah Beaumont	Academies - mainstream	Apologies
Simon Faircloth	Academies - mainstream	Apologies
Duncan Haworth (Chair)	Academies - mainstream	Apologies
Cathryn McKeagney	Academies - mainstream	Absent
Karen Vitalis	Academies - mainstream	Attended
Vacancy	Academies - mainstream	Vacancy
Vacancy	Academies - mainstream	Vacancy
Vacancy	Academies - mainstream	Vacancy
Michelle Duval	Academies - special	Attended
Non Schools		
Natasha Kirkwood	PVI early years providers	Attended
Paula Adolph	PVI early years providers	Attended
Kathryn Magiera	Diocese	Absent
Caroline Vile	Diocese	Absent
Greg Foster	Unions	Apologies
Anita Barnes	Unions	Substitute
Geoff Wright	Unions	Absent
Ian Devereux Roberts	CWAPH	Attended
Vacancy	16-19 providers	Vacancy
Official Observers		
Councillor Adam Langan	Cabinet Member Children & Families	Absent
Olivia Shaw	Education Skills & Funding Agency	Attended
Officers in attendance		
Charlotte Fenn	Clerk	
Carolyn Davis	Senior Manager Education and Inclusion	
Rachel Ridgeway	Finance Manager	
Lynsey Taylor	Finance Manager	
Apologies (Officers)		
Debbie Edwards	Head of Education and Inclusion	
Helen Brackenbury	Executive Director of Children & Families	

1. Introductions and apologies

David Rowlands was acting as chair as Duncan Haworth was not available.

The Clerk informed Forum that the meeting was being recorded.

Apologies were noted.

The Clerk reported the following update to Forum membership: -

New representatives:

Michelle Ashfield The Arches Community Primary School - Primary Heads rep
Paula Adolph S4YC - PVI rep – previous PVI rep left in 2020, welcomed back to the group.

Resignations/term of office ending:

Darran Jones Academies rep - term of office ended April
Nick Lacey Primary Governor rep – resigned April

It was noted that the Clerk was seeking nominations to fill the vacancies.

David Rowlands asked colleagues wishing to speak to announce themselves and who they represented for the benefit of the new members.

2. Minutes and matters arising of last meeting

2.1 To agree the minutes from the meeting held 12 February 2024

The minutes of the meeting held on 12 February 2024 were agreed as a correct record.

2.2 Matters arising

2.2.1 Item 4 Arrangements for funding from the High Needs Block 2024-2025

Neil Oxley provided an update to the current state of affairs in special schools and the demands on places. Neil acknowledged that the funding pressures faced by the special school sector were the same for the maintained sector. Neil reminded Forum that about a year ago there was a moratorium on no more children to attend special schools, that had significantly changed, and all special schools were being instructed to take over their pupil admission number (PAN) which was putting significant stress on the sector. Neil referred to a document which showed the additional numbers, over PAN, special schools were expecting to take for 2024-2025; this document would be circulated with the minutes. These additional places impacted on cost and were putting pressure on schools where they had stated they could not meet pupil needs, including going through parental tribunals and being instructed to

take the pupil even though had given reasons why they can't. A number of special schools had stated they had safety concerns because of the increase in pupils on a site designed to cater for significantly less pupils, and three out of the eight LA special schools (38%) were facing a deficit budget.

David Rowlands commented that this was a very serious situation where special schools were having to take more pupils than their PAN suggests at a rate which was underfunded and suggested that Schools Forum write to CW&C MPs drawing attention to the problem, urging them to do what they could to encourage the new government to take appropriate action.

Neil added that the new Secretary of State for Education, in a presentation today, had acknowledged the situation regarding SEN and high needs by using the phrase 'I know the situation is broken', and would be interested to see what attempts were looked at to address it.

David Rowlands felt it made sense, as a Schools Forum, to remind all of those who could have some influence that they need to use it.

Resolved that Schools Forum write to:

- i. CW&C MPs drawing attention to their concerns and urging them to do what they can to encourage the new government to take appropriate action; and
- ii. Secretary of State for Education drawing attention to their concerns

3. Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) 2023-2024 Final Outturn

Lynsey Taylor introduced the report on the 2023-2024 final outturn position for the centrally held DSG budget and reserve.

Lynsey drew Forums attention to the DSG deficit reserve brought forward from 2022-23 and the in-year overspend for 2023-24 amounting to 7.482 million deficit for 2024-25. It was noted that the deficit was mainly due to pressure around high needs as outlined in paragraph 4.

Lynsey referred to the next steps and the SEND Implementation Board working with a consultant to implement the recommendations from the High Needs Strategic Review to help reduce the deficit.

David Rowlands commented that Forum should be pleased that the Implementation Board was looking at how the service could spend money more effectively.

Ian Devereux Roberts commented, in light of the report and Neil's update on the challenges for the special schools' sector, these challenges were replicated within mainstream primary and raised concerns that primary colleagues were dealing with the here and now with the significant challenges of pupils with complex needs within their settings as no places were available in special schools. Ian stated that time seemed to be running away and we were not moving forward and implored the Implementation Board to be mindful of the

significant challenges schools were facing currently. Ian was aware that needed to clawback the significant deficit but that was not helping colleagues and children currently in settings.

Nicky Dowling asked for assurances, from the SEND Implementation Board, that the two points just raised were part of the strategic review, as felt that although the challenges special schools were facing has been raised no solutions had been offered locally, and special schools should be consulted around what solutions they felt would be acceptable.

Resolved that Schools Forum note the final outturn on the 2023-2024 centrally held DSG and reserve and next steps.

4. Maintained School Balances Financial Year 2023-2024 and Academy Balances 2022/2023

Lynsey Taylor introduced the report which informed Schools Forum of the final outturn position of maintained schools in the Borough for the 2023-2024 financial year. Lynsey drew Forums attention to the School Balances draft outturn position 2023-2024 of a net surplus, as outlined in paragraph 4. It was noted that this surplus had reduced from the previous year.

Lynsey also drew Forums attention to the breakdown by sector and the number of schools with surplus and deficit balances as shown under paragraph 5.

Lynsey referred Forum members to appendix A and the Academy balances for 2022-2023. It was noted that Academies finances ran on an academic year, whereas maintained schools' finances ran on a financial year, the balances were not comparing like for like.

Lynsey drew Forum members' attention to the increase in the number of schools ending the year with deficit balances, from 19 in 2022-2023 to 29, of which 20 were unable to set a balanced budget for 2024-2025.

David Rowlands commented that it was a matter for concern that more schools were struggling with deficits.

David Curry wanted it noted that some of the school surpluses were due to prudent budget setting by putting in a 3 percent pay award for teachers and support staff to support potentially unfunded or part funded pay awards, as was the case last year. It didn't help when government could see that schools look like they have surplus funds with which they can fund a pay award.

In light of Neil's comments David supported a more general letter on funding, per say, as there was a clear issue with the funding formula. David sited his school, as an example, as it got funding support from the Authority as the formula did not allow his school to be funded appropriately, and schools like his, as they did not meet the £5,995 dimensions. Also of concern was the issue, going forward, if schools do get pay awards it is per pupil and put into the main formula and lots of schools were disadvantaged as a result. The formula needed looking at to make

it more equitable to ensure schools weren't disadvantaged one year or the following year from to a pay award.

Neil added to David's comments regarding pay awards in relation to support staff which were unfunded, as this was an area of concern particularly for special schools who had a high number of support staff in their structure.

Resolved that Schools Forum note the outturn position and movement in balances for both schools and academies.

5. Updated guidance on the Scheme for Financing Schools for 2024-2025

Lynsey Taylor 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) and the amendments to be incorporated in the Cheshire West and Chester Scheme.

It was noted that a draft copy of the Scheme for Financing Schools should have been received by all schools and Forum members to review.

Lynsey drew Forum members' attention to the changes, outlined in paragraph 4, relating to borrowing by schools and the introduction of International Financial Reporting Standard 16 (IFRS16) regarding finance leases and requested Forums approval for the revisions to the scheme.

There were no comments to report.

Resolved that Schools Forum (maintained schools only) approve the revisions to the scheme which would be reflected in the updated Scheme to be published July 2024 (vote: unanimous).

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

The Clerk introduced the report to review the Schools Forum's membership, constitution and terms of reference and ensure that the composition of the Schools Forum was compliant with the regulations.

The Clerk reported that officers had reviewed the pupil numbers based on the current make up of schools and academies and had determined that there was no need for a revision of membership. It was also noted that no formal revisions to the Schools' Forum regulations have been issued by the DfE.

The Clerk drew Forum members' attention to a number of vacancies, nominations had been sought but not all vacancies had been filled and the deadline for nominations had been extended to 13 September. Forum members were asked if they were aware of anyone who might be interested in serving on the Schools Forum to contact the clerk for more information.

David Rowlands endorsed the Clerk's plea for more people to fill the vacancies and commented that it was a group that could have some influence and was much more effective at influencing if it had full membership.

Resolved that Schools Forum note that

- i. Officers had determined that the pupil ratio does not warrant a revision of the Schools Forum membership at this time; and
- ii. there were no changes to the constitution and terms of reference.

7. Any Other Business

None to report.

8. Next meeting

Next Schools Forum meeting Tuesday 8 October 2024.