

Minutes of Cheshire West and Chester Schools Forum, virtual meeting, on 13 February 2023 approved 4 July 2023

Members	Representing	Attendance
Schools and Academies		
Jan Diamond	Primary headteachers	Attended
Nicky Dowling	Primary headteachers	Attended
Ian Devereux-Roberts	Primary headteachers	Apologies
Kate Docherty	Primary headteachers	Attended
Kerry Forrester	Primary headteachers	Substitute
Beth Hacking	Primary headteachers	Apologies
Sharon Broughton	Primary governors	Absent
Duncan Haworth (Chair)	Primary governors	Attended
Lisa Rigby	Primary governors	Absent
David Nield	Primary governors	Attended
Nick Lacey	Primary governors	Attended
David Curry	Secondary headteachers	Attended
Martin Hill	Secondary headteachers	Apologies
David Rowlands	Secondary governors	Attended
Rob Williams	Secondary governors	Apologies
Neil Oxley	Special headteachers	Attended
Philip Hopwood	Special governors	Apologies
Andy Stewart	PRU	Apologies
Sian Thomas	PRU	Substitute
Deborah Beaumont	Academies - mainstream	Apologies
Simon Faircloth	Academies - mainstream	Attended
Darran Jones	Academies - mainstream	Apologies
Luci Jones	Academies - mainstream	Attended
Helen Studley	Academies - mainstream	Apologies
Cathryn McKeagney	Academies - mainstream	Attended
Emma Leach	Academies - special	Attended
Non Schools		
Cat Hirst	PVI early years providers	Absent
Vacancy	PVI early years providers	Vacancy
Kathryn Magiera	Diocese	Absent
Caroline Vile	Diocese	Apologies
Greg Foster	Unions	Absent
Geoff Wright	Unions	Absent
Rob Pullen	CWAPH	Attended
Vacancy	16-19 providers	Vacancy
Official Observers		
Councillor Robert Cernik	Cabinet Member for Children and Families	Absent
Patrick Grant	Education Skills & Funding Agency	Attended
Officers in attendance		
Natalie Cole	Finance Manager	
Charlotte Fenn	Clerk	
Debbie Edwards	Head of Education and Inclusion	
Anna Jones	Head of Health & Wellbeing Finance	

Christine Ridley Thomas Senior Manager School Intervention Co-ordination &
Schools Causing Concern

Observers

Councillor Razia Daniels Shadow Cabinet Member for Children and Families

1. Introductions and apologies

Apologies and substitutes were noted.

Duncan Haworth welcomed Patrick Grant to the meeting. Patrick introduced himself and explained that he was attending several Schools Forum meetings around the country, as an observer, as part of monitoring all schools' forums to assess how effectively they were operating.

2. Minutes and matters arising of last meeting

2.1 To agree the minutes from the meeting held 17 January 2023

The minutes of the meeting held on the 17 January 2023 were agreed as a correct record.

2.2 Matters arising

2.2.1 Item 8 Any Other Business - Fischer Family Trust (FFT)

Christine Ridley Thomas provided the following update.

Following on from the consultation with schools, it was noted that there were insufficient positive responses from primary schools to continue using FFT to make it value for money for the LA to purchase on behalf of primary schools. Primary schools had been notified of this decision and would need to purchase from FFT direct if wished to continuing using FFT.

17 of the 19 secondary schools had responded that they wished to continue with FFT making it viable for the LA to proceed with this option and recharge those secondary schools interested. Special schools had confirmed that they would purchase from FFT direct.

Rob Pullen reported that primary schools who wished to buy in were disappointed that others were opting not to, or did not respond, as they would have to purchase direct from FFT at a higher rate. It was understandable, with the current financial pressures, that some schools did not want to continue with FFT, but Rob felt that it was a shame not to continue with the group buy in as once lost it would be difficult to reinstate.

3. Council Financial Position update

Anna Jones provided a PowerPoint presentation to update Forum on the Council's in year position for Children and Families, and outline the key headlines from the Council's draft Budget Report 2023-2024 and Medium Term Financial Strategy 2024-2027.

Forum noted that, as at end of November 2022, Children & Families were forecasting a £7.2m overspend. This was mainly due to Children's Social Care forecasting an overspend of £6.8m, due to pressure on the budget for looked after children and a significant increase in high-cost residential placements. In addition, there was pressure against the staffing budget from employing agency Social Workers to fill vacant roles and Home to School transport budget also forecast to overspend due to an increase in the number of eligible pupils for SEN transport.

Anna reported that, for 2023-2027, the Council was forecasting a financial shortfall of £158.3m due to a reduction in government funding, budget pressures in Directorates and Council-wide inflationary pressures. Forum noted that the funding gap was to be partly bridged by an increase in council tax and business rates and existing savings proposals.

The key messages in the briefing were a two-year balanced budget package for 2023-2025, funding gap over 2025-2027 reduced to £29.1m after the assumed delivery of savings and raising of locally generated income. Forum noted that a number of factors could impact the budget gap in future years including actual level of Government funding, impact of the delayed Adult Social Care reforms, changes in demand for Council services and level of inflation experienced in relation to all Council costs.

The Council had a draft balanced budget for 2023 -2024 to be approved by Council on 16 February 2023.

David Nield asked if the council tax increase was the maximum it could be increased by. Anna confirmed that it was.

David Rowlands asked for clarification as to how efficiency savings were worked out and how efficient was the Council at achieving them. Anna responded that there were invest to save initiatives such as increasing in borough residential places to reduce expensive out of borough placements. The Council had a good record of delivering savings of around 80-90%.

David also asked, with the increase in SEN pupils, how the Council was managing to integrate SEN pupils into mainstream schools.

Debbie Edwards responded that, as part of the SEN review, an inclusion matters strategy was being taken to Council for approval. If approved there would be a number of working groups to take the strategy forward.

David acknowledged Debbie's response and commented that he hoped the Schools Forum High Needs subgroup would be getting updates. Debbie confirmed that Forum would receive six monthly updates.

Resolved that Schools Forum note the Council's Financial Position.

4. Early Years Funding for 2023-2024

Natalie Cole shared the report on screen and went through the report which detailed the proposed budget allocation for the early years block and funding of the two, three and four year old entitlements for 2023-2024.

Natalie reminded Forum that the report followed the principles agreed in the January 2023 Schools Forum meeting to remove the existing quality supplement and redistribute the funding to all providers through the universal base rate and put in place a new quality supplement to target the Teachers Pay and Pension Grant (TPPG) funding to eligible providers.

Natalie drew Forum members' attention to the table under paragraph 5 which reflected the increases in per child hour funding rates. Forum noted that the allocations would be updated in July 2023 from the headcounts taken at the January 2023 census.

Natalie took Forum members through the budget proposals (paragraphs 6 – 9) which included proposals on managing the significant demand and pressure on funding.

Forum noted that the new quality supplement for TPPG would be allocated to schools with maintained nursery units and academies, though an application process was being put in place to administer and target the supplement to other eligible providers. Reference was made to the proforma under appendix B.

Rob Pullen sought clarification as to what was being reviewed in respect to Education Health and Care Plans (paragraph 8). Natalie Cole responded that officers would be reviewing the contribution from the high needs block and what the drivers were that were contributing to the increase in early years children with EHCPs in mainstream settings.

Resolved that Schools Forum endorse the proposed allocation of the early years block allocation and the increase in base rate funding for 2023-2024.

5 Arrangements for funding from the High Needs Block 2023-2024

Natalie Cole shared the report on screen and took Forum members through the report which provided an update on proposed arrangements for allocations from the High Needs Block for 2023-2024 for commissioned services, places and top up funding. Reference was made to the budget proposals and allocations agreed at the January 2023 Schools Forum as set out in the table under paragraph 4.

Natalie drew Forum members' attention to the commissioned places in special schools and resourced provisions under paragraph 6 which reflected the current agreed places. Ongoing conversations with schools, about future commissioned places, were taking place following the SEND review.

Natalie drew Forum members' attention to the uplift in special school top up funding as outlined under paragraph 7.

Natalie reported that officers had meet with The Russet school last week, since the report had been published, and been working with them regarding commissioned places

and their plans going forward. It had been agreed for a disapplication of funding to be submitted to the ESFA.

Natalie confirmed that officers were working on the process for approval through the SEN Finance Panel and the new arrangements would be shared with schools once finalised.

Natalie confirmed David Nield's comment that providing extra funding to special schools was more cost efficient than going out of borough.

David Rowlands sought clarification as to how well the service estimated the places in special schools.

Debbie Edwards provided reassurance of the efficiency of estimating places going forward, the process was more robust than in the past.

Resolved that Schools Forum

- i. endorse the proposals within the report on financial arrangements for high needs pupils in 2023-2024; and
- ii. support the disapplication submission to the ESFA for The Russet School.

6 Schools Financial Value Standard 2022-2023

Natalie Cole introduced the report which updated Schools Forum on the requirements of the Schools Financial Value Standard (SFVS) submission for maintained schools.

Natalie reminded Forum members of the importance of holding a hard copy of their submission locally.

Natalie referred Forum members to the key audit findings in appendix A which sought to provide clarity over some common issues in particular to ongoing contract's accumulative commitment to a single provider taking the contract over procurement thresholds, and related party transactions.

Local guidance had also been sent out to schools regarding key points to be responded to in the submission.

Natalie also informed Forum that a training session was being held for governors, heads and business managers on Wednesday morning (15 February 2023) and places could be booked via the eCWIP website.

David Rowlands took the opportunity to thank Natalie for sending out the reminder guidance to schools.

Resolved that Schools Forum

- i. note the report; and
- ii. agreed for representatives of Local Authority maintained schools and Governing Bodies to share the update with their representative bodies.

7 Any Other Business

No items to report.

8 Next meeting

Next Schools Forum meeting Tuesday 4 July 2023.

Duncan anticipated that a High Needs subgroup meeting would take place in not to distance a future.

David Nield queried whether the 4 July meeting would be face to face or virtual. The group discussed the options, and it was generally acknowledged that virtual meetings were preferable but a face to face now and again would be welcomed. Natalie Cole reported that funding for Schools Forum venues would no longer be available for 2023-2024 so a free venue would need to be sought for any future face to face meetings.

Duncan confirmed that he would need to consider the options with officers and notify Forum members as to how the next meeting would take place in due course.