

BOURNEMOUTH, CHRISTCHURCH AND POOLE COUNCIL
SCHOOLS FORUM

Minutes of the Meeting held on 25 September 2023 at 10.00 am

Present:-

Geoff Cherrill – Chairman

Patrick Earnshaw – Vice-Chairman

Present: Russell Arnold, Mark Avoth, Kate Carter, Lauren Dean, Ben Doyle, Linda Duly, Phillip Gavin, Brigid Hincks, Marie Lane, Dorian Lewis and Sean Preston

Officers Cathi Hadley – Director of Children's Services

Present: Nicola Webb – Assistant Chief Finance Officer
Steve Ellis – Management Accountant Children's Services
Paul Reidy – Project Manager
Mary Diffey – SEND Service Manager
Lindsey Sloan – Pathways Co-ordinator
Jeanette Yorke – Child Development and School Readiness Lead

1. Apologies for Absence

Apologies were received from Jacqueline Page, Jon Chappel, Esther Currey and Nadine Lapskas and from Dorian Lewis for a later arrival.

2. Declarations of Interest

There were none made on this occasion.

3. Election of Chair

Nominations were sought for the position of Chair for the Forum for the remainder of the academic year or until the reconstitution of the Schools Forum. A nomination was received and seconded for Geoff Cherrill to continue as Chair. There being no further nominations received it was:

RESOLVED That Geoff Cherrill be appointed Chair for the 2023/24 academic year.

4. Election of Vice-Chair

Nominations were sought for Vice-Chair for the Forum for the remainder of the academic year or until the reconstitution of the Schools Forum. A nomination was received and seconded for Patrick Earnshaw to continue as Chair. There being no further nominations it was:

RESOLVED that Patrick Earnshaw be appointed Vice-Chair for the 2023/24 academic year.

5. Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes were agreed as a correct record subject to the inclusion of Patrick Earnshaw in the list of apologies.

6. DSG July Settlement 2024-25

The Assistant Chief Finance Officer presented a report, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member and a copy of which appears as Appendix 'A' to these Minutes in the Minute Book. The Forum was advised that the report included the the DfE July DSG announcements for the schools, high needs, and central school services blocks. There was a separate announcement around the early years block and this would come forward at a later date.

The report also contained the latest position for the DSG accumulated deficit and the details of the DfE Safety Valve Intervention programme that the council had been invited to join. In terms of the national funding formula the position was similar to the previous year.

A query was raised around the increase in the High Needs Block funding as there was a minimum 3 percent increase but only a 2.8 percent increase was outlined. It was explained that the 3 percent only applied to the national funding formula part but not the place or the import/export parts which were still the same as last year, suppressing the figure.

RESOVLED that the report be noted.

7. High Needs Update

The Child Development and School Readiness lead presented a report, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member and a copy of which appears as Appendix 'B' to these Minutes in the Minute Book. The Forum was informed that in January 2023, the Forum had agreed that the surplus schools block funding should be transferred to support the early years high needs budgets. The surplus was estimated at £180,000 though the final outturn figure was £360,000. The Forum was advised that there were plans to set up a Dingley's Promise centre within the nursery space at the Kinson and West Howe Family Hub. It was explained that Dingley's Promise was an established, experienced organisation with a strong, positive track record for supporting early years children with SEND.

In response to a question it was explained that Dingley's Promise would work with families and nursery settings to help ensure children were settled and would then move into mainstream provision. It was noted that the £180k was being invested so that the project could run for a year. It was an early intervention and prevention model from which savings should arise later on. Funding for an additional year of the project would need to be looked into once results from the project begin to come in. Savings should come from having more children in mainstream rather than specialist provision.

A member commented that the early years sub-group had not been consulted on this previously but welcomed intervention in this area as there appeared to be more and more children with SEN.

It was suggested that further information should be shared with infant and primary schools about the process, possible through the headteacher briefing.

It was suggested that the £180k above the original estimate could be utilised for the second year of the project, however it was confirmed that this was used to invest in early years settings across the board.

RESOLVED that

Schools Forum note the recent activity undertaken using high needs block funding.

8. Transfer from Schools Block

The Director of Children's Services presented a report, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member and a copy of which appears as Appendix 'C' to these Minutes in the Minute Book. The Forum was advised that each year since 2019, BCP Council had spent more on SEND provision than available from the high needs block allocation, to deliver the services required by statute. This expenditure was not allowed to be covered by Council Tax under the relevant legislation. BCP Council's cumulative high needs block deficit had grown to £35.8m at the end of March 2023.

It was explained that this pressure had arisen from a number of factors driven by the 2014 SEND reforms. The 2023-24 in-year budgeted high needs funding shortfall due to the growing demand totalled £27.1m, meaning that by March 2024 the deficit will have grown to £62.9m. The DSG Management Plan would be used to submit a proposal to the DfE for the Safety Valve Programme. There was a plan setting out the Council's strategy for reforming its high needs system, enabling it to function sustainably and in the best interests of children and young people. It was noted that there would be a consultation in October and the purpose of the paper was to outline the options going forward.

In response to a question regarding funding it was noted that all agreements with other councils were different depending on different circumstances but could be accessed through the DfE website. It was noted that there wasn't really any figures available at present as this would depend upon future conversations with government but as a minimum it was thought it would be half a percent transferred from the school block.

The main role for the Schools Forum would be consider the methodology for the transfer. It was highlighted that it would be important that the information was shared very carefully with schools and headteachers. There was already significant pressure on schools from SEN requirements and communications around this would need to be handled carefully.

Members raised the minimum funding levels for schools and explained there was already a significant challenge. It was suggested that it would be useful for comparison data for what the other local authorities had received to be shared to help inform the consultation.

In response to queries around the timing of the decision it was noted that this would need to be decided once the government had made its decision but it was expected that the Forum meeting in January could then look at the methodology. There was concern that this was looking short term which was difficult for forward planning. In response it was confirmed that this was unlikely to be a one year agreement but probably five years.

RESOLVED that the Schools Forum considered and commented on the options for a transfer from the schools block to fund the in-year deficit.

9. Schedule for Reconstitution of Schools Forum

The Chairman introduced the report, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member and a copy of which appears as Appendix 'D' to these Minutes in the Minute Book. The Forum was advised that the Schools Forum operational and good practice guidance was updated in March 2021 and the Terms of Reference for the Forum needed updating to reflect these changes. Additionally, the Forum Membership needed refreshing to meet the proportional representation across primary and secondary schools and academies, by phase of school and type of school. Representation is also required from special schools, academies, AP schools/ academies and PRU's. There must also be representation from other sectors including Early Years and Post-16 providers, and Diocesan representatives.

It was noted that there was an increase in Forum membership from 19 to 20 school members to reflect an additional secondary school representative in accordance with the school population. Expressions of interests to sit on the Forum would be sought. Timetables for the reconstitution were outlined and it was noted that members would need to be in place by the time of the next scheduled meeting.

The timeframe for the provision of reports was discussed and the possibility of releasing papers earlier would be considered. It was noted that the current proposals for the Constitution could be agreed but if any further changes were needed these could come back to the Forum if required.

10. Forward Plan

The Forward Plan was noted.

11. Dates of Future Meetings

It was noted that the date for the next meeting was Monday 20 November.

12. Any Other Business

There was no further business on this occasion.

The meeting ended at 11.06 am

CHAIRMAN