

SCHOOLS FORUM

WEDNESDAY, 13TH DECEMBER, 2023

Present: Geoff Cherrill (Maintained Special) – **Chairman**

Kate Carter, Academies - Primary
Kate Curtis, Academies - Primary
Sean Preston, Academies - Primary
Heather Waugh, Academies - Primary
Mark Avoth, Academies - Secondary
Paul Gray, Academies - Secondary
Michelle Dyer, Academies - Secondary
James Sankey, Academies - Secondary
Sian Thomas, Special Academy
Ben Doyle, All Through Academies
Russell Arnold, Alternative Provision Academy
Brigid Hincks, Maintained Primary (Governor)
Chris Barnett, Maintained Secondary
Vicky Peters, Early Years
Linda Duly, Early Years
Dr Dorian Lewis, 14-19 Provision

Officers in attendance: Amanda Gridley, Early Years Services Manager
Jo Collis-Heavens, Group Accountant
Steve Ellis, Accountant - Education
Nicola Webb, Assistant Chief Financial Officer
Sharon Muldoon, BSF Transformation Consultant
Paul Reidy, Project Manager (Major Change & PPMO)

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies were received from Natasha Ullah, Secondary Academy representative.

2 Declarations of Interest

None received

3 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting were agreed as a correct record subject to the inclusion of Cllr R Burton, Portfolio Holder for Children's Services in the list of attendees as an observer member.

4 Reconstitution of the Schools Forum

The Chair advised that this would normally be an opportunity for everyone to introduce themselves for new members but as there was a large agenda this would be left until the end of the meeting if time available.

Seven members attended the session on Monday with the Chair for an informal welcome chat about the forum.

5 Dedicated Schools Grant Budget Monitoring 2023/24 at Quarter 2

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 this was an information report which detailed the projected year end position, which was that the budgeted funding gap of £27.1 million will be realised across all DSG blocks. The cumulative deficit at 31 March 2024 is forecast to be £62.9 million including the schools block variance, which had not yet been referenced in the deficit management plan. The Forum was reminded that there was not a balanced budget set which was mostly due to the High Needs Block.

The outturn forecast was broadly where it was expected to be. A funding gap of £27.1 million had been budgeted for. The forecast for the High Needs block was still based on assumptions but was looking balanced. The Forum was informed that there was forecasted to be £69.2 million deficit at the end of the year. It was noted that this had been flattened slightly by the delivering better value program but not sufficiently to balance the budget. There was a declining population of under 4's at present and there would be changes coming up to Early Years funding.

Action to note report: Noted

6 Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) Management Plan

The Interim Education Director 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 the DSG accumulated deficit had grown rapidly from £3.6 million in April 2019 to £35.8 million by March 2023, with £63.4 million estimated by March 2024 from the high needs funding gap. As a result of the high deficit, BCP was invited to join the DfE's Safety Valve (SV) Programme in July 2023. Local authorities with SV agreements were asked to focus on one mission statement: to develop plans to reform their high needs systems as quickly as possible to provide a good service within their available funding, normally by the end of a maximum five-year period. The deficit growth over 2023-24 reflected an annual DSG high needs funding gap of £27.5 million. The Council was required to undertake temporary borrowing to fund the cash payments. The borrowing cost was estimated to cost the council £2.5m in 2023-24 and was to the detriment of services that it would otherwise be able to provide. The report outlined the progress made in developing a deficit management plan and next steps underway.

There was a new SEN strategy in development with eight priority areas which would be sent to schools in January. There had been a significant increase in the number of children accessing independent SEN placements. There was £38 million leaving the state-funded schools sector moving into independent provision.

The Assistant Chief Finance Officer advised that there were two scenarios outlined in the paper to balance the budget in 5 years. It was noted that the first provided a sense of scale but was not realistically achievable. The second scenario also presented a number of challenging assumptions but would potentially be deliverable. It would mean a restriction to EHCP support and moving children from independent specialist school to local provision. Assumptions were being looked at further to reduce spend but it was expected that this would take longer than the five-year period proscribed by the DfE. This made it a very challenging environment to meet this from both a financial point of view and to meet requirements for children and families. It was important to think collectively how a balanced budget could be delivered.

The Director for Children's Services advised that £124 million would be needed over the first five years from the schools block to balance the budget. It was not expected that this would be agreed to. There was a robust plan but this would not be what was required to get a deal from the safety valve programme.

Scenario 2 which outlined the £27 million deficit at year 5 had a list of assumptions and the DfE recognised that these assumptions were not unambitious. These included the changing landscape of post 16 provision and fewer pupils moving to specialist schools from the primary sector. The budget had been taken as far as it could be but there was still a forecast £27 million deficit.

In response to a question, it was confirmed that the Council had been invited by the DfE to be part of the Safety Valve Programme and this had been agreed by the Chief Executive. The consultation process was being gone through now, the scenarios were not all worked up in time for the consultation process and were still being worked through and the consultation period was still ongoing, and views were still being sought on scenarios.

The report requested that the Forum make recommendations to the Council concerning the deficit management plan. An example given was for a 10 percent transfer from the schools block.

A 10 percent transfer was not specifically included within the consultation process and a member felt that due to this the consultation was flawed. The Chair made an alternative recommendation as it was not felt that the Schools Forum was in a position to make a recommendation to Council at this time. Due to the further information shared on this issue the Chair proposed and it was resolved:

RESOVLED that the Forum request that the Council come back at the earliest opportunity with 2 alternative models. At least one of these models be a 10 percent reduction including the impact across all schools.

Voting: Unanimous

The Chair requested that this also comes back to Forum members in good time in order for it to be shared with the representative groups.

It was requested that in future that BCP Council's consultation needed to comply with the relevant section of the "Schools Operation Guide" in order to ensure that the consultation was clearer and operated within the recommended timeframes.

It was also noted that a one year funding proposal was not sufficient to enable head teachers to set three year budgets. It was noted that only those in the safety valve programme were able to move away from the one-year timeframe. It was suggested that an ongoing transfer should also be modelled if the Council were within the Safety Valve Programme.

(Note: This recommendation was proposed and agreed following the recommendations agreed under the Schools Funding Consultation and Budget Proposals 2024)

7 School Funding Consultation and Budget Proposals 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 C to these minutes in the Minute Book. The report included the outcome of the school funding consultation for 2024-25 and outlined proposals for the DSG budget. These included that surplus schools block funding be transferred to support the high needs budget. The report also considered how a higher level of transfer could be achieved through mainstream schools contributing from national formula allocations. The amount of the transfer proposed for 2024-25 would be considered with the DfE as part of the deficit management plan discussions in December and January 2024. The consultation also included proposals for a revised growth fund policy and considered funding allocated through the central school services block for 2024-25.

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The Forum was advised that the consultation went out in November although there was a glitch in the online form. Most responses were received by the deadline and a number after this from a total of 65 schools (which included a single response from a Multi Academy Trusts covering a number of schools).

The appendix with consultation responses was circulated to Forum members on the preceding Monday with information from schools. It was noted that early years' representatives were included as schools Members for voting.

There was a surplus of block funding coming from growth fund. If there was a surplus it would be recommend that this would move across to the High Needs Block and would need to help with reducing the deficit in some way. There was a high level of support for surplus to be used in this way. The Forum was provided with an outline of the response received.

The report outlined that the Forum must be consulted on the local funding formula for mainstream schools and agree a range of central DSG budgets The Chair went through each recommendation in turn which were voted on by the appropriate Forum Members as follows:

1. Agree that as a minimum, surplus school block funding after the NFF has been applied can be transferred to support pupils with high needs.

For - 13, Against – 0, Abstain – 1

2. Agree if further school block funding can be transferred to support pupils with high needs, with NFF allocations reduced, to provide a funding transfer of at least 0.5% in total.

For - 0, Against – 13, Abstain – 1

3. Agree if a transfer above 0.5% can be considered with the DfE.

For - 0, Against - 13, Abstain 1?

4. Agree that the funding for the central schools service block is allocated fully to support the central services supporting all schools.

For - 14, Against - 0, Abstain 0

5. Recommend to Council how the NFF should be adjusted (if agreed) to provide funding to transfer to high needs – The related recommendation at 2 was not agreed.

6. Recommend to Council how the NFF should be adjusted if there is a shortfall in school block funding (without there being a transfer to high needs). The Chair outlined that this meant that a recommendation be brought back to the Forum by BCP in January 2024

For - 14, Against 0, Abstain 0

7. Agree the growth fund policy for 2024-25.

For - 14, Against - 0, Abstain 0

The Director of Children's Services thanked the Forum for their time and consideration of these issues and would take the issues raised by the Forum on Board. The Chair acknowledged that this situation was rapidly changing and that the process had moved on from when the consultation was initially formulated, and this was not reflected fully within the consultation.

8 Early Years Funding Update 2024/25

The Early Years Services Manager presented a 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 report presented an overview of upcoming changes to childcare support and an approach to 2024-2025 Early Years Single Funding Formula development. The Forum was advised that the government had launched the most ambitious childcare expansion to date to begin in 2024. There would be an increase in funding provided for 15 hours which was currently from 2-year-olds which would in future also be provided to children from 9 months old from September 2024. This would then increase to 30 funded hours from the following September.

It was noted that the Local Authority must consult Schools Forum on the Local Funding Formulae for Early Years. The Forum was advised that there was still a lot of work to do with providers. Extra money had been put into the sector last year in a supplementary grant from the government which was distributed to the sector as quickly as possible.

There was significant work to do over the next few months to bring a new formula forward for Schools Forum approval in February 2024 in line with the Cabinet schedule. It was noted that there were still many challenges for the sector Recently been given the funding formula for next year. Meeting with early years sub-group about the formula in Jan and will come to forum in Feb for approval in line with Cabinet schedule.

It was noted that the sector was grateful for the support received from the schools Forum.

9 Forward Plan

Reconstitution not quite finalised there are still a couple of vacancies still, these will be shared.

10 Dates of Future Meetings

15 Jan 2024

The Chair requested that this meeting be moved back by one week if possible. It was also noted that an additional meeting would be needed in February.

11 Any Other Business

It was confirmed that anyone who was not able to attend the forum meetings could send someone else on your behalf from the same sector.

There was not an opportunity for all members to introduce themselves at the meeting so this would happen at the meeting in January.

Duration of the meeting: 3.00 - 4.45 pm

**Chairman at the meeting on
Wednesday, 13 December 2023**