

**Minutes of Dudley Schools Forum
Tuesday, 16th April, 2024 at 6.00 pm
Microsoft Teams**

Present:

Mrs J Belcher (Chair)
Mrs J Morgan (Vice-Chair)
Mrs R Cox, Mr C Finnerty, Mrs E Game, Mrs M Harris, Mr P Leyshon, Ms L Maskell, Mrs E O'Brien, Mrs S Parkes, Mr B Roe, Miss F Sumner, Mr K Tranter, Mrs V Turner, Miss A Ward, Mrs S Watson and Mrs A Webb

Non-Voting Officers:

C Driscoll (Director of Children's Services), C Ludwig (Finance Manager), M Palfreyman (Head of Education Outcomes and Inclusion), S Powell (Head of SEND and Children's Disabilities Team), S Thirlway (Service Director Education, SEND and Family Solutions), J Wilson (Senior Principal Accountant) and G Gray (Democratic Services Officer).

Also in Attendance:

Councillor K Lewis (Chair of Childrens Services Select Committee)

49 Introductions by the Chair

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

50 **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Mr S Lanckham, Mrs V Howard and Mrs E Stanton.

51 **Substitute Members**

There were no substitute Members appointed for this meeting of the Forum.

52 **Minutes**

Resolved

That, the minutes of the meeting held on 27th February, 2024 be approved as a correct record and signed.

53 **Matters Arising from the Minutes**

No issues were raised under this agenda item.

54 **Head Teachers Consultative Forum – Budget Working Group Verbal Feedback**

Ms L Maskell, Primary School Headteacher Representative, provided feedback on the discussions held at the Head Teachers Consultative Forum – Budget Working Group (HTCF-BWG) meeting. It was reported that discussions had been carried out at the Budget Working Group concerning budget restraints and it had been noted that the extent of the savings needed and the reorganisation of the Local Authority was now in the public domain.

It was reported that the rationalisation plan for the Local Authority Estates would be implemented imminently and that Netherton Arts Centre had been added to the established list of Council properties that would be affected. It had been noted at the Budget Working Group that should any interests received from external education providers in regard to eligible properties would need to be submitted to Children's Services to ensure it aligned with the Dudley Education Strategic Plan.

The Budget Working Group were advised that there were currently twelve Headteacher vacancies across maintained and Academy schools within the Dudley Borough and that four Headteachers had been appointed, however, it was noted that potentially there could be further resignations to be received towards the end of April.

It was reported that five Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) inspections had been carried out since the previous meeting in February, 2024 and that a new Ofsted complaints procedure had been established to raise concerns regarding the conduct of inspectors.

It was noted that the Household Support Fund would continue for a further six months and reference was made to the Dudley Community Toothbrush Scheme, the Health Related Behaviour Questionnaire and the Property Proofing project.

It was advised that there continued to be issues within Schools concerning outbreaks of Measles and Covid related cases.

The Budget Working Group were advised that Delivering Better Value (DBV) workshops had been undertaken and that 104 representatives from Primary and Secondary sectors had been in attendance.

It was noted that three schools had expressed an interest in regard to Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) bases, however, the Local Authority had advised that there was capacity for additional bases in particular from Secondary settings.

Options for Alternative Provision and Inclusion Strategy Development were being appraised and further information would be shared in due course.

The data regarding exclusion and suspensions were being scrutinised on a monthly basis, however, there had been an indication of a rise in incidents, that would be shared with Headteachers.

It was reported that a number of Schools were being converted to Academy status, which included: Thorns Primary School, Withymoor Primary School, Gig Mill Primary School, Newfield Park Primary School, Hawbush Primary School as well as continued preparations for Coseley Free School. It was further advised that a new site had been identified for Eton Star Dudley with a projected opening date in 2026.

Resolved

That the feedback provided be noted.

55 **Schools Forum Membership – Verbal Update**

The Democratic Services Officer provided a verbal update and referred to the change of representation for Primary School Representative in that Mrs E Game had replaced Mrs A Hannaway following her resignation and would continue in the term of office until 31st October, 2026. Reference was also made regarding the Spring Election process.

In response to a query from Mrs E O'Brien, Non School Member Representative, regarding when her term of office expired, the Democratic Services Officer advised that a response would be provided in writing in due course.

Resolved

That the verbal update on the Schools Forum Membership, be noted.

56 **Dedicated Schools Grant Budget Process 2024/25 – Final Update**

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted to provide the Forum with a final update in respect of the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) budget planning process for 2024/25 and to carry out the annual consultation on financial issues, as required by the Schools Forum (England) (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 as amended by the School and Early Years Finance (England) Regulations 2021.

The Finance Manager presented the report in detail, and in doing so, referred Representatives to Table 1 of the report submitted, which outlined the current total provisional DSG for 2024/25. It was noted that there had been a slight increase within the Early Years funding block, together with an adjustment within the High Needs Block, which related to recoupment and direct provision by Academies.

The Finance Manager referred Representatives to various paragraphs in the report submitted, which outlined in detail information concerning funding for High Needs, SEND Services, alternative provision, and Early Years funding.

Reference was made to a number of revenue grants as set out in the report submitted, in particular the Pupil Premium being the most significant grant that would be distributed to schools. The Finance Manager reported that the rates of the Pupil Premium would increase from 1.5% to 1.7% for 2024/25 and that the funding would continue to be based on the October census.

It was noted that the Physical Education and Sports Grant would continue for 2023/24 and would remain for the 2024/25 academic year. The Universal Infant Free School Meal Grant had increased for the 2023/24 academic year to £2.53 per meal, however, it was anticipated that the funding rate per meal for 2024/25 would be announced in June, 2024 by the Department for Education (DfE).

It was advised that the Teachers Pay Grants and Teachers Pension Grants from 2018 and 2019, together with the supplementary grant and the mainstream schools additional grant was now accumulated within the main funding formula allocation.

Representatives were referred to the Household Support Fund as set out in the report submitted and the Finance Manager reported that the Chancellors Budget from March, 2024 would provide Local Authorities with an extension of funding for the first six months of 2024/25 and that holiday vouchers for free school meal children would continue.

The Finance Manager reported that the Hardship Fund and the Holiday Activity Fund would continue for 2024/25 and the Recovery Premium Funding grant would continue throughout 2023/24. It was advised that all current funding for the National Tutoring Programme (NTP) would need to be spent by the end of the 2023/24 academic year in view of the programme being ceased by the end of the year.

Funding would be provided for two additional grants for the 2024/25 academic year, which included the Teachers Pay Additional Grant, which supported schools with the Teachers Pay awards and the Teachers Pension Employer Contribution Grant, which compensated schools for the increase in employers contributions to teachers pension costs.

The Finance Manager further outlined the information as detailed in the report submitted regarding the Basic Need Capital Grant, the School Building Condition Allocations and the Capital Funding to Support SEND.

In response to a query raised by Mrs R Cox, Academy Member Representative regarding the band funding matrix and whether the funding would be reviewed to tie in with the rise in costs, the Finance Manager advised that the Local Authority were conscious that the matrix band funding had not increased and that the average cost of an Education Health Care Plan (EHCP) had risen, however, it was advised that this would be reviewed regularly.

The Head of SEND and Children's Disabilities Team further explained that the matrix funding would be included within the work undertaken on the Delivering Better Value for SEND together with the relationship this had to the Sufficiency Strategy.

In response to a comment raised by Mrs S Parkes, Primary School Headteacher Representative regarding the review of Notional SEND, the Finance Manager commented that the figure for Notional SEND was set by the DfE, however, the Local Authority were conscious of the issues and were continuing to undertake discussions with the DfE regarding the Notional SEND figures.

Resolved

- (1) That the updated information in respect of the Dedicated Schools Grant and the annual consultation on financial issues for the 2024/25 financial year, be noted; and
- (2) That the information reported on that there had been no request to transfer budgets between the funding blocks for 2024/25, be noted.

57 Dedicated Schools Grant Projected Outturn Update 2023/24

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted on the latest financial forecast in respect of the Schools Budget for the 2023/24 financial year ending 31st March, 2024.

The Senior Principal Accountant presented the report and in doing so, advised that the current allocation of the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) was currently £319.443m, which included £2.412m business rate allocation and it was noted that going forward business rates would be centralised, therefore, funding would no longer be received directly through the DSG and would be provided through a separate funding stream administered by the DfE for schools.

It was reported that the business rate included £145.360m allocated to Academy Schools, which the Local Authority would not receive and that the remaining balance of £171.167m was reflected within the various funding streams. It was advised that £53.169m of the funding related to the Central Block, which included the High Needs Block deficit position of £4.646m and that funding of £118.267m would be received for mainstream primary and secondary schools maintained by the Local Authority together with nursery education.

The Senior Principal Accountant stated that the centrally retained budget reflected funding of £0.76m for 76 places for Cherry Tree Home and Hospital Pupil Referral Unit, and that £1.064 had been received in regard to the post 16 funding for Old Swinford Hospital School which would be paid by a grant directly to Old Swinford Hospital School.

It was anticipated that there would be an overspend of £7.449m in regard to the High Needs Block, however, it was noted the amount included £4.646m from the budget reserves. It was noted that as a result of top up placements and EHCP's there had been a slight increase regarding the Outturn that had been presented at a previous meeting of the Schools Forum.

It was reported that the Central Schools Service block evidenced an overspend of £0.402m as a result of pressures from outer Borough placements; that there was a saving of £0.037 regarding the Early Years Block, and that there would be an overspend of £23.317m concerning Reserve Transfers, which reflected the deficit position of the High Needs Block from 2022/23.

The Senior Principal Accountant referred Representatives to Appendix A and B of the report submitted, which outlined in detail any overspend within each budget area. In referring to Appendix A, it was advised that there would be a saving of £0.037m in relation to the Early Years Block; that there would be an overspend of £3.223m in regard to Centrally retained budgets and that there would be a £27.963m historic deficit from the High Needs Block, which included £4m being used from budget reserves.

In referring to Appendix B the Senior Principal Accountant outlined the estimated reserves for the end of the financial year and in doing so advised that £246.386m had been paid to schools from the Schools Block; that there would be an overspend of £34.125m in regard to the High Needs Block; that there would be a reserve amount of £3.026m regarding the Early Years Block and that it was anticipated that there would be a reserve of £0.050m within the Central School Services Block.

Resolved

That the 2023/24 forecast outturn position as at 31st January, 2024 in respect of the centrally retained areas of the Schools Budget, which was funded by the Dedicated Schools Grant, be noted.

58 **School and Early Years Finance and Childcare (England) Regulations 2024**

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted in respect of the latest amendments to the School and Early Years Finance and Childcare (England) Regulations 2024 as advised by Central Government.

The Senior Principal Accountant presented the report and referred Members to the Lower Prior Attainment Factor that would be used within the National Funding Formula (NFF). It was reported that historically Local Authorities were required to use 2019 assessment data for the Low Prior attainment funding in view of the Covid-19 pandemic, however, assessment data was now available from 2022 to be used within the NFF calculations for 2024/25.

In regard to the Growth and Falling Rolls Funding, it was advised that it had been agreed with Local Authorities to provide funding to Schools or Academies that would provide extra classes in order to meet basic needs within the area. It was noted that the operation of Falling Rolls Funding would be at the discretion of the Local Authorities for 2024/25.

Representatives were referred to new funding available in regard to Early Years Funding and that the programme would now be extended to two-year-old children and children aged from 9 months old.

It was noted that the Social Deprivation for Early Years continued to maintain the mandatory social deprivation supplement in respect of three- and four-year-old children, and that this would be optional for disadvantaged two-year-old children. It was advised that the funding available within the budgets had increased to £91,000.

It was advised that the Early Years Pupil Premium (EYPP) regulations had been extended to all children that were eligible for new Free Early Years Entitlement (FEYE); that there was a requirement to pay £0.68p per hour per child funding rate and that the Local Authority would match the funding rate.

The Disability Access Fund eligibility had been extended to two-year-old and 9-month-old children and that there was a requirement to pay £910 funding rate. It was noted that the Local Authority would match the funding rate for the Disability Access Fund.

It was reported that the Early Years 95% pass through Requirement rate had now been extended to include two-year-old children and children over the age of nine months and that the Local Authority were estimated to be paying 97.5% for three to four year old children, 98.68% for two year old children and 100% for under two year old children and that the 12% Early Years Discretionary Funding Cap had been increased within 2023/24 and would continue to be paid within 2024/25.

It was advised that the current Local Authority Funding Rates: Two-year-olds would be calculated using the methodology operated to fund Local Authorities for delivering the disadvantaged two-year-old entitlement. It was stated that a separate single funding formula would be in place for children aged two and under and that the Special Educational Needs Inclusion Fund would provide the same allocation of £120,000.

The Senior Principal Accountant reported that data collection for the Early Years Census had been altered to reduce administrative burdens for Early Years Childcare providers.

In response to a query raised by Mrs R Cox, Academy Member Representative regarding the analysis for Falling Rolls Funding to consider how many schools might be eligible for the funding, the Senior Principal Accountant advised that the allocation of funding would be dependent on the criteria and would be allocated through the falling roles projection. It was noted that although the Local Authority had not been required previously, the funding could be looked into going forward to be included within the formula.

The Finance Manager commented that further consultation and consideration would need to be given regarding the funding, however, it was considered that should a Falling Rolls Fund be established for several schools, the amount would be minimal.

Resolved

That the amendments to the School and Early Years Finance (England) Regulations 2024 as advised by central government, be noted.

59 **Directorate of Children's Services – Verbal Update**

The Director of Children's Services referred to the Council's budgets and commented that the finance team were working towards closing the accounts for the end of the financial year. It was noted that there would be a considerable overspend for 2023/24, which would go into the low level of the Council's budget reserves and the priority would be to continue to work on identifying savings or to increase income across the Council.

It was advised that there was a legal balanced budget that had been set for the financial year, however, there were continued increase in pressures and many challenges across Children Services and Adult Services who were experiencing a growth in demand.

In regard to the £34m High Needs Block cumulative deficit, it was noted that there was a DfE statutory override in place, therefore, the Council would not need to include the amount within the balance sheet, however, it was advised that the DfE override was expected to end by the end of March, 2026, which would have a significant impact on the Council's financial status.

The Director of Children's Services referred to the imminent Local Elections together with the Police and Crime Commissioner and the Mayor for the Combined Authority, which was due to take place on 2nd May, 2024.

It was reported that Councillor R Buttery, Cabinet Member for Children's Services would be stepping down after the Elections in May and the Director of Children's Services together with the Chair expressed their appreciation for the continued support that she had provided to the Dudley Schools Forum and to the Children's Services Directorate.

Resolved

That the verbal update on the Directorate of Children's Services, be noted.

The meeting ended at 6.45pm

CHAIR