

DUDLEY SCHOOLS FORUM

Tuesday 20th May 2008, 6.00 pm
Saltwells Educational Development Centre,
Bowling Green Road, Netherton

PRESENT

Mr M Bell, Mrs Blunt, Mrs Elwiss, Mr Francis, Mrs Garratt, Mrs Griffiths, Mr Harrington, Mrs Hazlehurst, Mr Hudson, Mr James, Mr Millman, Mr Mountney, Mr Patterson, Mr Ridney, Mr Robertson, Ms Smith, Mr Sorrell, Mr Timmins, Mr Warner and Mr Wassall

Also In Attendance

Councillors Nottingham and Mrs Walker (Chairman of the Select Committee on Children's Services and Cabinet Member for Children's Services of Dudley MBC, respectively)

Officers

Mr J Freeman – Director of Children's Services, Mr R Watson – Assistant Director of Children's Services (Resources), Mrs K Cocker – Children's Services Finance Manager, Mrs S Coates – Senior Principal Accountant (both Directorate of Finance, ICT and Procurement), Mr R Sanders (Assistant Principal Officer (Democratic Services)) and Ms K Fellows (Democratic Services Officer) (both Directorate of Law and Property) – All Dudley MBC.

In Attendance for Item Number 6

Mr L Bradshaw – Head of Audit Services and Mr S Potter – Audit Services (both Directorate of Finance, ICT and Procurement, Dudley MBC)

1. ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN

RESOLVED

That Mrs Griffiths be elected Chairman of the Forum for the 2008/09 financial year.
(Mrs Griffiths thereupon assumed the Chair)

2. APPOINTMENT OF VICE CHAIRMAN

RESOLVED

That Mr Millman be appointed Vice Chairman of the Forum for the 2008/09 financial year.

3. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence from the meeting received on behalf of Mr S Bell, Mr Hatton, Mr Ingram, Mrs Jessup and Mr Lloyd.

4. MINUTES

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the meeting of the Forum held on 18th March, 2008 be approved as a correct record and signed.

5. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES

No issues were raised under this item.

6. REVISION OF SCHOOLS STANDING ORDERS

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted advising the Forum of changes proposed to the Council's Standing Orders for Schools.

The effect of the proposals would be to update the level of current monetary bands in relation to tenders and to enable schools to use electronic tendering.

The approval process was described by the Head of Audit Services of Dudley MBC, in connection with which he indicated that the revised Standing Orders would be agreed initially by the Directors of Finance and Children's Services and then submitted for formal approval by the full Council, via the Audit Committee and the Cabinet.

Some members expressed concern that the timescale envisaged precluded a number of Governing Bodies from having the opportunity to consider and comment on the proposed revisions and discussion ensued on whether the approval process should be extended. It was considered, however, that, in view of the delay that would otherwise result, and because the nature of the changes were to the advantage of schools, implementation should proceed as proposed.

In the discussion, the need for training for Governing Bodies on Standing Orders was raised, in response to which the Head of Audit Services confirmed that arrangements for this would be made in the near future.

RESOLVED

That the Director of Children's Services be recommended

- (1) That the proposed changes to the Standing Orders for Schools be noted.
- (2) That, subject to resolution (3) below, the proposals be implemented in accordance with the procedure and timetable described.
- (3) That the revised Standing Orders be submitted to those Governing Bodies, which have not had the opportunity to comment on them hitherto.

7. UPDATES AND AMENDMENTS TO DUDLEY SCHOOLS FORUM CONSTITUTION

Mrs Cocker reported on the current position on this issue, with particular reference to the DCSF guidance regarding special schools representation and union representation.

Regarding special school representation, Mrs Cocker confirmed that current arrangements complied with the guidance. On the issue of trade union representation, however, the guidance precluded Council employees from being members of the Forum where they met the definition of an executive member or relevant officer of the authority. In view of this, Mrs Cocker had ascertained from the DCSF that the regulations had not been designed to exclude union representation but that Schools Forum membership was permissible for the union representative when they were an employee of a Governing Body, rather than the Council.

RESOLVED

- (1) That the current position be noted.
- (2) That a Working Group comprising the Chairman and Vice Chairman of the Forum, together with the Director of Children's Services and Mrs Cocker and any other members of the Forum who wish to participate be appointed to consider the issue of union representation on the Forum and to submit proposals to a future meeting.

8. SCHOOLS BUDGET – 2007/08 FINANCIAL YEAR OUTTURN

A report of the Director of Children's Services providing financial data in respect of the outturn on the Schools Budget for the 2007/08 financial year was submitted.

The report indicated that, subject to audit, the provisional out turn comprised nett expenditure under the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) of £182.786m against a budget of £183.146m. A roll forward of DSG in respect of the centrally retained areas of £0.360m was therefore anticipated.

The report set out refunds allocated per school under the Common Assessment Framework and details per school of reserves held at 31st March 2008.

In presenting the report, Mrs Cocker indicated that some ten schools had not yet complied with the criteria for making provision for Single Status/Equal Pay through contingency funding of at least £20,000 in this regard. A number of Head Teachers and Governors then expressed extreme concerns that they would be unable to make such provision without redundancies being effected. In response, the Director of Children's Services indicated that the DCSF had been apprised of Dudley's approach and had found it to be reasonable and proportionate. He reported the terms of the DCSF guidance which made schools liable for the financial implications of Single Status and Equal Pay but also provided that Local Authorities were to work with schools in order to achieve the funding necessary. Mrs Cocker indicated that, as an option, the DSG could be top sliced to achieve the necessary funding.

In relation to the issue of claw-back, referred to in paragraph 7 of the report submitted, the Director of Children's Services confirmed that, while contingency planning had to be made for Single Status and Equal pay, claw-back arrangements would not be made without discussion with the schools concerned. He then gave examples of circumstances where claw back would be likely to be considered justifiable.

RESOLVED

- (a) That the Director of Children's Services be recommended;
 - (1) That the 2007/08 Schools Budget financial year end position at 31st March, 2008, subject to audit, be noted.

- (2) That schools' delegated reserved balances at 31st March 2008, subject to audit, be noted.
 - (3) That schools' provisional spending plans for 2008/09, as detailed in Appendix B to the report now submitted, be approved, subject to final claw-back decisions for 2007/08.
 - (4) That the concerns expressed by Head Teachers and Governors regarding the possible implications of making contingency reserves of £20,000 to cover the costs of Single Status and Equal Pay, together with the response of the Director of Children's Services thereto, be noted.
- (b) That, a separate column showing the contingency sum per school for Single Status and Equal Pay be included in future Schools' Budget reports.
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9. CLOSURE OF CRADLEY HIGH SCHOOL – UPDATE

A report of the Director of Children's Services setting out the current financial position in respect of Cradley High School for the 2007/08 financial year, and indicative data in respect of the budget position of the school for 2008/09, was submitted.

The report confirmed that funds had been earmarked for the estimated cost of possible redundancies in the sum of £594,000. Mrs Cocker reported that any unspent part of this provision could be released at a later date and she expressed the consideration that it was likely the sum would be mitigated.

A delegated budget for the school of £633,000 had been set for 2008/09, against a forecast budget required for £740,000, leaving a deficit budget of £107,000. Mrs Cocker indicated that a sum of £350,000 had already been set aside from the Delegated Schools Grant to alleviate the anticipated deficit.

The members of staff remaining at the school were itemised in the report.

RESOLVED

That the Director of Children's Services be recommended that the content of the report be noted.

10. ALLOCATION OF THE SCHOOLS BUDGET – 2008/09 FINANCIAL YEAR

A report of the Director of Children's Services indicating the proposed allocation of the Schools Budget for 2008/09, including the Section 52 Budget Statement, which would be issued to all Heads and Chairs and Governors, was submitted.

Table 1 of the Section 52 Budget Statement provided information regarding both the allocation of the Schools Budget and the Local Authority Budget. The data was classified under standard categories to aid comparison. An extract from Table 1 for 2008/09 was attached as Appendix A. The position of the Local Authority in meeting DCSF targets in respect of central expenditure within the Schools Budget was shown in the Central Expenditure Limit table.

Individual schools' delegated budget allocations for 2008/09 together with supplementary information relating to the percentage funding increase, pupil number changes and the value of funding per pupil from 2007/08 to 2008/09, was set out as Appendix B to the report.

In the discussion on this item, the Director of Children's Services referred to the implications of the reduction in primary school pupil numbers over the year and indicated the necessity to keep the issue of viability of schools under continual review as pupil numbers were not spread evenly throughout the Borough, an ongoing exercise being undertaken to review capacity figures. While, under the School Admissions Code, parental preference had to be respected, the wishes of some schools to increase their Published Admission Numbers had to be considered against the implications for other, less popular, schools.

RESOLVED

That the Director of Children's Services be recommended that the Schools Budget Data for the financial year 2008/09 extracted from the Section 52 Budget Statement, and the summary of individual schools' delegated funding, as attached as Appendices A and B to the report now submitted, be noted.

11. SINGLE STATUS/EQUAL PAY

The Director of Children's Services reported orally that work on job evaluation and equal pay was ongoing and that further information on the issue was anticipated by December, 2008.

12. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

The date of the remaining meeting in the 2007/08 academic year of 8th July, 2008 was noted.

13. OTHER BUSINESS – TRAINING BUDGET

The Director of Children's Services reported that a paper containing proposals for a training budget, in view of the importance of the issue, would be submitted to a future meeting.

The meeting ended at 7.30 pm.

CHAIRMAN