

## DUDLEY SCHOOLS FORUM

Wednesday, 13<sup>th</sup> July, 2005 at 6:00pm

### PRESENT: -

Mrs Griffiths (Chairman)  
Mr Conway, Mr Harrington, Mr Heavisides, Mrs Lewis, Mrs Lonergan, Mr Millman, Mr Patterson, Mrs Pearce, Miss Sherwood and Mr Slack, Mr Warner and Councillor Mrs Ridney

Officers – Director of Education and Lifelong Learning, Assistant Director of Education and Lifelong Learning (Resources and Planning), Assistant Director of Education & Lifelong Learning (Access and Inclusion), Mrs Cocker and Mrs Coates (Directorate of Finance, ICT and Procurement), Mr Jewkes and Mr Sanders (Directorate of Law and Property) – all Dudley MBC

### 1. MINUTES

#### RESOLVED

That the minutes of the meeting of the Forum held on 10th May 2005 be approved as a correct record and signed.

### 2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Mr Bell, Mrs Brennan, Mr Francis, Mr Leyshon and Councillor Vickers.

### 3. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES

No matters were reported under this item.

### 4. TRAINING

A verbal update was given by the Director of Education and Lifelong Learning of DMBC concerning the issue of training for members of Schools Forum. It was reported that in light of national plans to delegate further powers to Schools Forums, with the support of the Chairman a two-day residential training session was being planned for a weekend in the autumn term. Further to this, it was suggested that a meeting of the Chairman, Vice-Chairman and senior officers be held prior to the next full meeting of the Forum, in order to discuss the revision of the Schools Forum constitution in preparation for the assumption of it's new responsibilities.

In addition to this, copies of the CIPFA Introductory Guide to Education Finance in England were distributed to members for them to study in their own time.

5. MEMBERSHIP OF SCHOOLS FORUM

A report of the Secretary to the Forum was submitted informing members that all current memberships were due to expire on 30<sup>th</sup> September 2005. Consequently, nominations were being sought for the 3 period of membership beginning on 1<sup>st</sup> October, 2005. Mr Sanders informed the Forum that he would require nominations by 20<sup>th</sup> August at the latest in order to enable the formal appointment of members via the Councils decision-making machinery as required under the appointment regulations.

RESOLVED

That the contents of the report be noted.

6. FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT STANDARD – PROGRESS REPORT

A report of the Director of Education and Lifelong Learning was submitted informing the Forum of the progress of the Financial Management Standard (FMS) pilot scheme.

The report contained an explanation of what the FMS entailed, details of the various components of the standard and of the schools involved. It was reported that all eight schools participating in the pilot scheme had been asked to undertake a self-assessment process designed to show which aspects of the FMS were proving difficult to attain in order that support offered by the LEA could be focussed more specifically. The results of the self-assessments had been reported back to the section heads responsible for supporting the pilot schools and in light of these results a more tailored training and support package was to be launched in the autumn term.

In response to a question from the Chairman, Mrs Cocker confirmed that the self-assessment process had revealed several aspects of the Standard which all schools were struggling with and that the new support package would be designed to help in these specific areas.

RESOLVED

That the contents of the report be noted.

7. SCHOOL REORGANISATION – SUPPORT FOR DISPLACED STAFF

A report of the Director of Education and Lifelong Learning was submitted dealing with the issue of providing support for staff displaced as a result of the Primary Schools Review or other school proposals.

In presenting the report, the Assistant Director Of Education and Lifelong Learning (Resources and Planning) informed the Forum that the primary review would be initiated shortly and that any staff who were to be affected by closures and amalgamations of schools would need to be supported by the LEA. In relation to this the Forums attention was brought to paragraph 4.2 of the report, which stated that Governing Bodies would be expected to give 'priority consideration to the employment of displaced staff from across the Borough' meaning that in instances where it was accepted that a displaced member of staff possessed the necessary skills to do the job in question, they would automatically be invited to attend an interview.

A member of the Forum expressed concern that the wording of Paragraph 4.2 implied that displaced staff would be given priority in terms of obtaining employment, rather than obtaining an interview, and suggested that the section be reworded. The Assistant Director of Education and Lifelong Learning (Resources and Planning) agreed and gave an undertaking to ensure this was done.

In response to a question from the Chairman, the Assistant Director of Education and Lifelong Learning (Resources and Planning) confirmed that a further report addressing the financial implications of providing support for displaced staff would be submitted at a future meeting.

#### RESOLVED

That the contents of the report be noted.

#### 8. SCHOOLS RESERVE BALANCES AND STANDARDS FUND ROLLFORWARD AT 31<sup>ST</sup> MARCH 2005

A report of the Director of Education and Lifelong Learning was submitted informing the Forum of the position in Dudley with regard to school reserve balances and Standards Fund rollforwards at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2005 and providing some statistical data.

In presenting the item Mrs Cocker reported that although school reserve balances in Dudley had fallen in the financial year 2003/2004, they had risen again in 2004/2005. She added that even taking into account the fall in 2003/2004, Dudley traditionally had a level of school reserve balances higher than both that of it's neighbours and the national average. Despite commitments made by schools to utilise their available funds, the level of school reserve

balances was continuing to rise.

In relation to the statistics presented in the report, the Director of Education and Lifelong Learning of Dudley MBC outlined his view of what action was required to bring down the level of funds being held in reserve. This entailed looking at the 'planned spend' projected by schools in the financial year 2005/2006 and identifying where funding had been withheld or not spent on the projects schools had allocated it to. Once these discrepancies had been identified, it was his view that unless the school in question could provide evidence of specific unforeseen circumstances that had prevented the funding being utilised, the balance of funds held in reserve should be withdrawn and returned to the Schools Budget held by the LEA.

A member of the Forum commented that giving schools an opportunity to set out a case against their funds being withdrawn gave the impression that they could persuade the LEA into allowing them to retain their unallocated funds. It was suggested that a policy of total withdrawal of funds held in reserve be put in place to ensure that schools appreciated the LEA's resolve to stop schools withholding funds. In responding, the Director of Education and Lifelong Learning of Dudley MBC explained that in light of the school balance statistics for 2004/2005, he had already issued schools with a warning that in future all outstanding funds would be 'clawed back', unless mitigating circumstances could be proven. He added that in cases where, for example, a school building project cost less than the school had originally estimated, it would be unfair to withdraw the outstanding balance from the school's funds.

In closing the item, The Director of Education and Lifelong Learning of Dudley MBC confirmed that he would be writing to the Headteachers and Chairs of Governors of all schools in the borough explaining the course of action proposed.

RESOLVED

That the strategy of the Director of Education and Lifelong Learning of Dudley MBC of withdrawing funds from schools which do not fully allocate their resources as set out in their spending plans for 2005/2006, providing no unforeseen circumstances prevented them from doing so, be endorsed.

9. USE OF CENTRALLY HELD SCHOOL SPECIFIC CONTINGENCY 2004/05

A report of the Director of Education and Lifelong Learning was submitted on the use of centrally held school specific contingencies in 2004/05.

It was reported that the contingency was designed to provide funds to meet unforeseen 'in-year' costs and deal with emergencies and that in 2004/05 the budget had been overspent by £273, 485.

In response to a question from the Chairman, Mrs Cocker explained that the overspend would be recovered from the 2005/06 budget allocation but that the pressure on the contingency was increasing year on year. She added that it was hoped that with the introduction of the Delegated Schools Grant (DSG) a larger amount of funding could be set aside for contingencies in future.

#### RESOLVED

That the contents of the report be noted.

10. SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS (SEN) – FUNDING MATRIX FOR MAINSTREAM PUPILS

A report of the Director of Education and Lifelong Learning of Dudley MBC was submitted presenting to the Forum the proposed consultation paper to be issued in Autumn 2005, in respect of the Special Educational Needs (SEN) funding matrix for mainstream pupils.

In introducing the item, the Assistant Director of Education and Lifelong Learning (Access and Inclusion) reported that a working group consisting of LEA Officers, Headteacher and Parent and Partnership representatives had been working to review the current funding arrangements for mainstream pupils with special educational needs. It was proposed that consultation on the proposals would be conducted from September to November 2005, with a view to implementing the new funding arrangements from April 2006. Further to this, it was reported that feedback which had been obtained from Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) in the Borough had so far been encouraging.

A member referred to the wording of a table on Page 8 of the consultation paper which stated that funding of £1.8 million would be allocated to 'Pupils educated in Dudley Schools where levels of attainment at SATs are measured as significantly below average'. Concern was expressed that this wording implied that all schools producing below average SATs scores would receive additional funding, when this was not the case. It was suggested that the wording be altered to reflect the actual meaning, which was that the funds would be allocated to individual children whose SAT scores were measured as significantly below average.

RESOLVED

That the contents of the report be noted and that the alteration of the wording, as referred to above, be approved.

11. QUORUM OF MEETING

At this juncture, The Chairman left the meeting to attend another engagement.

Mr Sanders informed the meeting that the departure of the Chairman had rendered the Forum inquorate and that consequently any decisions made in the remainder of the meeting could only be carried forward as recommendations to the next meeting.

In the absence of the Chairman and Vice-Chairman, Mr Millman was appointed as Chair for the remainder of the meeting.

12. SPECIAL SCHOOLS FORMULA FUNDING REVIEW

A report of the Director of Education and Lifelong Learning for Dudley MBC was submitted informing the Forum of the progress of the review of the special schools funding formula.

Mrs Cocker reported that the formula currently used to allocate funding for special schools had been in place since the 1990's and that it no longer made adequate provision for the complex needs of children attending special schools. At present, 51% of funding allocated to special schools was done on a places-led basis. This figure was significantly lower than in comparable LEAs and it was believed that this was a contributory factor in the volatility some Dudley special schools had been experiencing recently. In light of this and other factors, a review had been initiated and it was intended that from 2006/2007 special schools funding should be allocated more equitably using a new formula. A further progress report would be submitted to the next meeting of Schools Forum.

The Director of Education and Lifelong Learning of Dudley MBC referred members to Paragraph 7 of the report which stated that a 'top up' of £300,000 had been set aside for special schools for 2004/2005 and 2005/2006. In relation to this, he explained that the introduction of the Delegated Schools Grant (DSG) and three year budgets would stop the LEA providing 'top up' funding in future and that consequently the seven special school headteachers were being encouraged to move the review forward as a matter of urgency.

RESOLVED

That the Forum be recommended that the contents of the report be noted.

13. CONSISTENT FINANCIAL REPORTING (CFR) – BENCHMARKING DATA

A report of the Director of Education and Lifelong Learning of Dudley MBC was submitted the purpose of which was to bring to the Forum's attention the benchmarking data available from the Audit Commission's Consistent Financial Reporting (CFR) Website in relation to Dudley schools financial transactions during 2003/2004.

It was reported that schools' final accounts for 2004/2005 were currently being audited and that the Audit Commission's CFR website would soon include data in relation to this. Mrs Cocker reported further that it was the LEA's wish to start issuing schools with the full CFR benchmarking data including details of specific schools in relation to each other, rather than the 'anonymous' information schools currently had access to. Booklets containing this information were distributed as appendices to the report in order that members of the Forum could view them.

After some discussion it was agreed that the LEA would circulate the data to Headteachers and Chairs of Governors on a confidential basis.

14. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

The Chairman extended congratulations of the Forum to Ms Brennan, upon whom the honour of Dame had been bestowed.

In reporting the impending departure of the Assistant Director of Education and Lifelong Learning Mrs Menghini, for her new position of Director of Education of Newport City Council, members of the Forum and the Director of Education and Lifelong Learning of Dudley MBC expressed their gratitude for her excellent service.

15. DATE OF FUTURE MEETINGS OF THE FORUM

It was noted that that the next meeting of the Forum was scheduled for Wednesday 28<sup>th</sup> September which fell two days before the expiry of the current membership of the Forum.

RESOLVED

That Mr Sanders, in liaison with the Chairman and the Director of Education and Lifelong Learning of Dudley MBC, agree an alternative date for the next meeting of the Forum after 1<sup>st</sup> October 2005 and that members be notified of the

revised date as soon as possible.

The meeting ended at 7.10pm

**CHAIRMAN**