

**Minutes of Dudley Schools Forum
Tuesday, 20th June, 2023 at 6.00 pm
Microsoft Teams**

Present:

Mrs J Belcher (Chair)

Mrs J Morgan (Vice-Chair)

Miss J Colbourne, Mrs A Hannaway, Mrs V Howard, Mr M Kelay, Mr S Lanckham, Mr P Leyshon, Ms L Maskell, Mr T Reid, Mr B Roe, Ms E Stanton, Miss F Sumner, Mr K Tranter, Mrs S Watson and Mrs A Webb.

Non-Voting Officers:

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

55 **Introductions by the Chair**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting. It was noted that there had been resignations submitted from Mrs C Finnegan, Primary Head Teacher Representative and Ms A Middleton, Non-School Representative and the Chair would be sending her thanks to them for their contributions and support to the Schools Forum.

56 **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Miss A Ward, Mrs S Parkes, Mrs J Higgins, Mrs E O'Brian, Councillor R Buttery and Councillor K Lewis.

57 **Substitute Members**

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

58 **Minutes**

In referring to minute no. 50 – Head Teachers Consultative Forum – Budget Working Group (HTCF-BWG) Verbal Feedback, it was requested that the minute be amended to reflect that the work had not commenced on Pens Meadow School, however, it was confirmed that the work was undergoing a tendering process.

Resolved

That, subject to the amendment referred to above, the minutes of the meeting held on 28th March, 2023, be approved as a correct record.

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

Ms L Maskell, Primary School Headteacher Representative, provided feedback on the discussions held at the previous Head Teachers Consultative Forum – Budget Working Group (HTCF-BWG) meeting advising that the Principal Accountant had provided a session for Headteachers regarding the scheme for financing schools and that similar information had also been shared with school business leaders.

The Head of Education Outcomes and Inclusion also provided details regarding Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) based funding to Head Teachers at the Budget Working Group.

Ms L Maskell confirmed that the outstanding action concerning providing information to the Service Director Education, SEND and Family Solutions regarding the gap in support services for Reception children due to their date of birth, had now been completed.

The Budget Working Group were advised of the HTCF-BWG meeting schedule for 2023/24.

The Head of Education Outcomes and Inclusion provided an education update at the HTCF-BWG meeting and in doing so advised that Education Outcomes were waiting for clarification regarding the next steps in industrial action. It was noted that currently no commitment had been offered from the Government to provide additional funding for potential increased staffing costs, which could place schools into a deficit position and that Multi-Academy Trusts were also finding themselves in similar financial difficulties.

Updated Guidance had been received for all schools around Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) inspections moving forward, which included clarification on the timing of inspections. There had been increased pressure regarding the scheduling for OFSTED inspections due to a number of Headteachers suspending their involvement in inspections as Inspectors.

The Budget Working Group were advised that the alternative Provision Thematic Review had resulted in a draft letter being issued to the Local Authority and that a three-to-five-year strategic plan was being established.

It was noted that a renewed Education Strategy was being developed and School Leaders were being encouraged to add representations to assist in developing the strategy.

The Fair Access Protocol and processes were being renewed due to significant pressures, which included a number of families arriving into the Country who had been placed within the Borough by the Home Office, together with elective home educated children returning to main stream schools. Further to this, there were concerns regarding children missing in education which had amounted to approximately 300 pupils for this month.

The Budget Working Group were advised that the Children's Services re-design would be entering into Phase 2 and that an APP review for SEND would be due to take place shortly.

The Finance Manager and Principal Accountant presented the 2022/23 Combined Services Outturn and it was noted that costs had been subsumed within the last financial year by a number of services within the Local Authority.

The Dedicated Schools Grant Outturn and School Reserves for 2022/23 was also presented to the Budget Working Group, which included details of schools reserves and licensed deficit. It was noted that during 2022/23 schools had not entered into a licensed deficit, however, the forecast for the next financial year would prove to be difficult.

S Powell, SEND Manager also provided an update regarding the Delivering Best Value in SEND. It was noted that the programme was currently pursuing a delivery partner to support the next stages and the activity and next steps in each of the three work streams were outlined in a report submitted to the Budget Working Group.

Resolved

That the feedback provided be noted.

60 Schools Forum Membership

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted on an update in respect of Schools Forum membership changes effective from 1st May, 2023.

The Democratic Services Officer in presenting the report outlined the membership changes as a result of the recent election process. It was noted that there remained two vacancies for Academy Member Representative and Primary School Governor. It was advised that since the writing of the report a further two vacancies had become available following the resignation of Mrs C Finnegan, Primary School Headteacher Representative and Ms A Middleton, Non-School Member Representative, which would remain vacant until the next election process.

Resolved

That the updated position in respect of the membership of Dudley's Schools Forum effective from 1st May, 2023, as referred to in Appendix A of the report submitted, be noted.

61 **Schools Forum Proposed Meetings and Forward Plan for 2023/24 Academic Year**

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted on the schedule of proposed meeting dates and Forward Plan for the 2023/24 academic year.

In presenting the report submitted, the Democratic Services Officer outlined the schedule of proposed meeting dates and Forward Plan for the 2023/24 academic year. The Chair confirmed that meetings would continue to be held remotely through MS Teams with the option of a physical meeting if deemed necessary.

Resolved

That the meeting dates proposed for the 2023/24 academic year, as outlined in Table 1 of the report submitted, together with the forward plan, as attached at Appendix A to the report submitted, be agreed and endorsed.

62 **Combined Services Budget Outturn 2022/23**

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted on the financial data and service provider information in respect of the Combined Services Budget of the 2022/23 financial year, which ended 31st March, 2023.

The Principal Accountant presented the report submitted and in doing so referred Members to Table 1, which detailed the final outturn for the six combined service budgets totalling at £182,000 and was agreed by the Budget Working Group on 31st March, 2022. The contributions included £12,000 towards Astley Burf Outdoor Activity Centre, £10,000 for support, advice and guidance regarding School Visits, £44,000 for the employment of an Education Liaison Officer, £42,000 for the Safeguarding training role and £74,000 in total for Place Planning and Statistical Work combined who supported staff within the Integrated Commissioning Hubs.

It was advised that due to the reduction of the Central School Services block allocation for 2023/24, the combined budgets would cease from April, 2023 and that funding for the services would be continued through service efficiency savings or self-funding.

Resolved

That the information contained in the report, in respect of the combined services budget outturn for 2022/23 and service provision, as detailed in Table 1 of the report submitted, be noted.

63 **Dedicated Schools Grant Outturn and School Reserves 2022/23**

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted on the financial data in respect of the Schools Budget funded by the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) for the 2022/23 financial year ending 31st March, 2023.

The Finance Manager presented the report and in doing so advised that the year-end processes had been completed and that the outturn position outlined in the report submitted was provisional pending an external annual audit process, which was due to commence in July, 2023.

The Finance Manager referred Members to paragraph 9 of the report submitted and it was reported that the 2022/23 DSG outturn would be a total of £301.299m with an allocation of £131.84m being payable to Dudley's Primary and Secondary Academy Schools, which provided Dudley with a net DSG of £169.405m.

The net DSG of £169.405m would be divided to the Centrally retained budget areas of £47.127m, the De delegated budget of £0.256m, Maintained Schools and Funding for the Early Years provision of £125.080m, and Business Rates of £2.406m.

Members were referred to Appendices A and B of the report submitted, which provided a summary of the DSG allocation. Appendix B outlined the opening and closing balances for the High Needs Block, Early Years Block and Central School Services Block and it was reported that the total of the Central DSG reserves would be a cumulative deficit of £23.317m, which included the deficit closing balance of £26.676m from the High Needs Block.

The Finance Manager also confirmed that the closing position of the School Specific Contingency Reserve had been increased to £1.237m.

Members were referred to Paragraph 20, which included Tables 2-4 of the report submitted. In referring to Table 2, it was noted that the opening reserve for the School Reserve Balances from Delegated Budgets was £10.164m, however, this had significantly reduced with the closing position being £7.593m.

Table 3 of the report submitted provided further details regarding the movement in the school reserves. It was noted that reserves utilised by maintained schools during 2022/23 was £4.844m; additions to reserves during 2022/23 was £0.899m and the in year surplus balances for schools at 31st March, 2023 was £1.964m. Further to this it was noted that the Covid catch up grant reserve had largely been spent and that there was in year deficits for schools of £330,000 together with a small amount of loan repayments.

In referring to Table 4 of the report submitted, it was noted that the school trading accounts provided a closing balance of £1.931, relating to before and after clubs, extended school arrangements, cluster arrangements, adult education and leisure activities.

It was noted that six schools held greater balances than those permitted within the Balance Control Mechanism and that the Director of Children's Services and the Service Director for Early Help, Schools and SEND determined that the surplus reserves totalling £84,000 should not be removed from the schools and retained centrally.

It was also noted that two schools had set aside reserves to balance their 2022/23 budget totalling £110,000, which would not be removed from the schools and retained centrally.

It was advised that the scheme for financing schools allowed schools to use reserves to balance budgets, however, there was a provision that the Director of Children's Services would be able to claw back should reserves not be required to balance budgets. Maintained schools had been advised that as a general rule, surplus reserves used to balance 2023/24 budgets would not be removed should they not be needed to balance budgets.

The Finance Manager informed representatives that four schools ended the year with financial deficits, and that the Local Authority was working with the schools to provide details of financial plans to recover deficits, which would be deducted from the 2023/24 in the first instance and providing support in order to balance the budget in 2023/24. It was further noted that no schools operated with a Licensed Deficit during 2022/23.

It was noted that there were concerns regarding the financial position and pressures that schools would be facing regarding budgets, considering the uncertainty surrounding the pay award and continuing pressures due to inflation, however, the Local Authority was working with schools that were affected to establish ways in which they could continue to set balanced and sustainable budgets.

In response to a question raised from Miss J Colbourne, Special School Headteacher representative, the Finance Manager reassured the representative that the Finance Team were undertaking ongoing detailed work with the SEND Team regarding special school budgets and were aware of the particular structural budget issues for these schools. It was advised that the Financial Team were also contacting mainstream schools individually regarding deficit budgets and would be communicating the way forward once work had been completed.

Resolved

- (1) That the 2022/23 Dedicated Schools Grant Outturn and Accumulated Reserve, as detailed in Appendix A and B of the report submitted, be noted.
- (2) That the 2022/23 financial outturn in respect of the reserves for Dudley maintained schools, be noted.

64 **Delivering Better Value (DBV) in SEND Update**

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted in respect of an update regarding the Delivering Best Value (DBV) in SEND programme in Dudley.

The Service Director Education, SEND and Family Solutions outlined the report submitted and in doing so advised Members that spending for the High Needs Block had increased annually by 9% over the last five years and referred Members to the breakdown of the key areas which had significantly growth over the five-year period.

It was advised that Newton Europe was commissioned directly by the Department of Education (DfE) in 2022 to undertake a deep dive analysis and that three key areas were identified that had the most significant pressures on the High Needs Block. The areas identified were increased demand for specialist education provision, new Education Health Care Plan's (EHCP's) and EHCP's for young people aged between 19 and 25.

The Service Director Education, SEND and Family Solutions stated that, although there had been a reduction in EHCP's following the analysis from Newton Europe, the current demand was in line with the growth in EHCP's nationally.

It was advised that three key workstreams had been established to respond to the areas identified by Newton Europe and that a system would need to be developed to provide a sustainable budget position within the High Needs Block. The three key workstreams identified were sufficient cost-effective local provisions, ensuring early identification and intervention was appropriately met at SEND Support and commissioning cost effective and appropriate provision to support transition into adulthood.

The Service Director Education, SEND and Family Solutions provided a summary of the information contained in Table 1 of the report submitted, which reflected the development activity that had been carried out within each workstream together with the next steps.

It was noted that, going forward, ongoing discussions were being held with Special Schools to ensure budgetary requirements and needs were being met and to ensure that there would be sufficient capacity for children locally. It was noted that a 5-to-10-year sufficiency strategy around the SEND provision was being developed to enable Dudley to be in a position to plan for the future and meet future needs locally at the right level and that the data management information capability was being enhanced to provide a clear understanding of the needs and trends to ensure that Commissioning could be carried out appropriately.

It was reported that Phase 1 of the Children's Services restructure had been undertaken, which included the development of a Family Safeguarding model and Family Hubs. The Service Director Education, SEND and Family Solutions advised that Phase 2 would be carried out in Autumn, 2023, which included the redesign of Education Services and SEND services.

Representatives were informed that the SEND lead practitioner had been appointed; that the development of localised assessment centres would be commencing and that the panel process to support multi agency decision making had been reviewed and updated.

A review of the Special Education Services was being carried out to ensure the correct SEND support was being provided and that monitoring of SEND services were being established across the Borough.

It was noted that plans had been progressed in particular to develop the Integrated Early Years Service to support children starting mainstream schools.

The Service Director Education, SEND and Family Solutions referred to the key workstream regarding Commissioning of cost effective and appropriate provision to support transition into adulthood and in doing so provided a summary of the activity undertaken to date.

It was advised that the work that needed to be carried out included ensuring there was joint commissioning of services and that all multi-agency events were in arranged conjunction with parent carers and young people.

It was reported that grant funding of £1m had been secured to support the initial delivery of the DVB programme and to support system change, which would help ensure good outcomes for children within a sustainable budget.

Representatives were informed that the process to secure a delivery partner was being undertaken to work alongside the Local Authority to assist in the delivery of the DVB programme outcomes.

It was noted that the programme was supported to enable to address the ongoing increase in spend against the High Needs Block.

In response to a question raised by Mr B Roe, Primary School Governor representative, the Service Director Education, SEND and Family Solutions advised that the Local Authority was undertaking a tendering process to secure a delivery partner. It was clarified that only a proportion of the grant funding would be used for commissioning the delivery partner with a view for the funding being used for delivery of services in schools, therefore, there would be no further additional financial pressures on the High Needs Block. It was further clarified that part one of the programme had been fully funded by the DfE.

Resolved

That the report on the update of Delivering Best Value in SEND, be noted.

65 Directorate of Children's Services – Verbal Update

The Director of Children's Services advised of the financial pressures and concerns facing all Local Authorities, Schools and Settings. It was advised that work had been carried out to reduce the financial deficit for the High Needs Block, however, a further £27m deficit had been added.

It was noted that the DBV programme was government sponsored and was a funded intervention to support the Local Authority to continue with the resource that was available and that the financial position was exacerbated by the cost-of-living crisis, staffing increases and the cost of fuel and services.

It had been noted that Schools had started to set deficit budgets and it was considered that financial pressures would continue to rise within the coming years.

It was recognised that all Council's would be facing financial challenges and that there had been an overspend on the Children's Services general fund of £4m at the end of 2022/23 financial year. Discussions were being held with Elected Members, MP's, the Department of Education (DfE), and the association of Directors of Children's Services together with the DfE Regional Director concerning ongoing financial pressures. It was further recognised that schools spending would be sustainable given the increases that had been put in place for the current financial year, however, further work would need to be undertaken to look at financial sustainability.

Members were advised that phase one of the redesign regarding family safeguarding implementation and family hubs would start on 10th July, 2023, however, the recruitment process was currently being undertaken.

It was advised that a draft letter had been received regarding the alternative provision strategic review, that comments had been submitted and a response would be provided in due course. It was further advised any key messages would be shared with School Forum Representatives once the letter had been finalised.

Resolved

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

The meeting ended at 6.45pm

CHAIR