

DUDLEY SCHOOLS FORUM

Tuesday 11th December 2007 at 6.00pm
Saltwells Education Centre, Bowling Green Road, Netherton

PRESENT

Mr Patterson (Chair)
Mrs Griffiths (Vice Chair)
Mr Bell, Mrs Blunt, Mr Conway, Ms Cosgrove, Mr Francis, Mr Harrington,
Mrs Hazlehurst, Mr Ingram, Mr James, Mr Leyshon, Mr Lloyd, Mr
Mountney, Councillor Nottingham, Mr Ridley, Mr Robertson, Mr Sorrell,
Mr Timmins, Councillor Mrs Walker, Mr Warner and Mr Wassall.

OFFICERS

Mr R Watson – Assistant Director of Children's Services (Resources), Mr
I Curnow – 14-19 & Aim Higher Partnership Manager, Mr I McGuff –
Senior School Development Adviser, Mr M Galikowski – Integrated
Services Manager, and Mrs P Rushen – General Manager – Catering &
Client Services (Directorate of Children's Services), Mrs K Cocker –
Children's Services Finance Manager, and Mrs S Coates – Principal
Accountant (Directorate of Finance, ICT & Procurement) and Mr Jewkes
– Democratic Services Officer (Directorate of Law & Property) - All
Dudley M.B.C.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of
Mrs Elwiss, Mr Hatton, Mrs Jessup, Mr Millman, and John Freeman –
Director of Children's Services.

2. MINUTES

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the meeting of the Forum held on 2nd
October, 2007, be approved as a correct record and signed.

3. CHANGE IN ORDER OF BUSINESS

RESOLVED

That Agenda Item 15 – Common Assessment Framework
(CAF) – Update, be considered as the next item of business.

4.

COMMON ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK (CAF) – UPDATE

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted on the progress made regarding the implementation of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) and the role of the Lead Professional, as set out in the Children Act 2004. The report updated Members on developments in respect of 'Swift and Easy Access', training, recruitment, and the establishment of a pooled budget, and made a number of recommendations in relation to the funding of the process.

It was reported that since the Forum had agreed, in February 2007, to the principle of allocating funds to assist the Children's Trust in meeting its statutory obligation to implement the CAF, efforts had been made to recruit five Integrated Service Managers (ISMs) to manage the integration of services within each of the Borough's five 'townships'. Although the five positions had been widely advertised, and a number of applicants had been interviewed, only one ISM had so far been appointed, with further recruitment activities now being initiated by the partner agencies. As a result of this, an underspend of £154,000 had emerged in the pooled budget established to fund the implementation of the CAF. It was proposed that these funds be returned to schools in order to support them in engaging in the Integrated Working training programme, and the Forum was also requested to approve the continuation of funding for the process for the 2008/09 financial year.

Arising from consideration of the report, a Member requested clarification as to whether the other partner agencies had now agreed to allocate their respective funding amounts to the pooled budget, as the Forum's original agreement to allocate funding to support the process had been conditional on the other partners committing the reciprocating amounts. In responding, Mr Watson stated that all partners, except for the Police and the Dudley Group of Hospitals, had now formally agreed to contribute to the pooled budget.

Members expressed deep concern that the Forum was being requested to commit funds, on behalf of the Local Authority, for a further financial year, when some partner agencies were currently refusing to pool their share of the required funds at all. Members also expressed concern that when referrals were being made under the CAF, the Lead Professionals had so far invariably been education based, meaning that the Local Authority was shouldering the majority of the burden of the CAF, both financially and operationally.

In responding, Councillor Mrs Walker, Cabinet Member for Children's Services, stated that although two of the partners had not formally approved the allocation of funding, the establishment of the CAF and the related pooled budget was a statutory requirement which had to be adhered to. She therefore suggested that progress would need to be made with partners, through the Children's Trust Executive Board, in the coming weeks and months. It was noted that an update in relation to this matter would be submitted to the next Forum meeting.

RESOLVED

1. That the proposal that 60% of any underspend in the Common Assessment Framework pooled budget at the end of the 2007/08 financial year be returned, on a pro-rata basis, to the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG), be endorsed.
2. That the proposal that the financial contribution made by the Local Authority to the implementation of the Common Assessment Framework be continued into the 2008/09 financial year, be rejected.
3. That the continuation of funding for the Common Assessment Framework in the 2008/09 financial year be reconsidered at the meeting of the Forum to be held on 5th February 2008, in the light of a further update report on the budget position to be submitted to that meeting.

5. MEMBERSHIP OF SCHOOLS FORUMS – IMPACT OF SCHOOL, EARLY YEARS AND 14-16 FUNDING ARRANGEMENTS 2008-11

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted on the requirements of the Schools Forums (England) (Amendments) Regulations 2007 relating to the membership of Schools Forums.

It was reported that under the revised regulations, due to come into force early in 2008, Schools Forums would be required to include representatives both of the local 14-19 Strategic Partnership, and of both public and private sector Early Years providers, in their membership. The amended regulations also required Local Authorities to agree with their Schools Forums arrangements for the attendance of substitutes at meetings. In view of these new requirements it was proposed that two additional posts be created on the Forum for representatives of the 14-19 Strategic Partnership and the Early Years Provider Reference Group, and that the arrangements for the attendance of substitutes at meetings be considered.

Arising from consideration of the report, Mr Warner made reference to the new provision in the revised regulations for up to one third of Forum members to be 'non-schools' members. He stated that in view of the size and diversity of the Trade Unions and Professional Associations he represented, he felt that it would also be appropriate to create an additional Forum post for a representative of the non-teaching staff associated with schools, with him continuing to represent teachers, in order to establish a more appropriate level of representation. In responding to this, Mr Robertson commented that the Special School sector was also, in his view, currently under represented on the Forum, and requested that an additional place be made available for another Special School Headteacher.

In responding to the comments made, Mrs Cocker stated that while as far as she was aware the creation of further additional posts would not clash with the amended regulations, this would need to be investigated prior to any further changes being made. It was also commented that the Forum was already verging on being unworkably large, and Members commented that the further extension of the membership would not be practical.

RESOLVED

1. That the membership of the Forum be increased by two in order to facilitate the appointment of representatives of the Early Years Provider Reference Group and the 14-19 Strategic Partnership.
2. That the Secretary be requested to formalise the wording of the Forum's arrangements for the appointment of substitutes, namely that the Member wishing to appoint a substitute should contact the Secretary prior to the date of the meeting in question giving the name of the substitute.
3. That the Secretary be requested to make the necessary amendments to the Forum's Constitution and Terms of Reference to reflect the above changes, subject to formal approval by the Cabinet Member for Children's Services.
4. That Mrs Cocker provide an update at the next meeting of the Forum in respect of any further increase in membership.

6. 14-19 REFORMS

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted on reforms to 14-19 education, and a recent funding statement made by the DCSF in relation to this.

It was reported that following the Spring 2007 DCSF consultation in relation to School, Early Years and 14-16 funding arrangements, a number of key funding decisions had been announced, detailed guidance in respect of which had now been issued recently by DCSF. The statement, a copy of which was appended to the report, set out the main 14-19 reforms which would be in place from 2008, and the funding systems which would be employed in this interim period.

In relation to the new educational options open to 14-19 year olds as a result of the reforms, it was reported that by 2013, all Local Authorities would be required to offer seventeen new national vocational diplomas. The diplomas were currently being rolled out gradually across the country via a bidding process and Dudley would be offering two diploma courses through Halesowen Consortium in 2008, with additional courses being provided from 2009.

As the Local authority needed to agree a means of funding the provision of the new diplomas in the interim period for one year (2008/09), three possible options were set out in Annex 2 of Appendix A to the report. The Forum was requested to come to a view as to which of the options it found preferable at this stage, prior to making a final decision at its next meeting. It was noted that the local 14-19 Strategic Partnership had considered the potential options and had felt that Option 2 would be the most appropriate method for 2008/09, with the situation being reviewed for future years' funding.

Arising from consideration of the report, Members raised a number of questions in relation to the cost to schools and colleges of providing the new diplomas in parallel to existing courses. In responding, Mr Curnow stated that it was expected that the new Diplomas would run alongside existing GCSE and A Level provision and apprenticeships, meaning that there would, at least in the short term, be additional costs involved. However, it was envisaged that over time the Diplomas would grow in popularity, meaning that funds would be diverted from other areas, 'following' students.

The future diversion of funding from the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) to the Local Authority was raised, and Ms Cosgrove advised that the revision of funding arrangements was currently under discussion at Ministerial level. It was her understanding that funding for post-16 provision would be reallocated to Local Authorities from 10/11.

RESOLVED

1. That the information in respect of reforms to 14-19 education, as contained in the report submitted, be noted.
2. That the proposed strategy for funding the reforms in the 2008/09 financial year, as set out in Option 2 in Annex 2 of Appendix A to the report submitted, be supported in principle, pending the submission of further information and more detailed proposals to the next meeting of the Forum.

8. SCHOOL, EARLY YEARS AND 14-16 FUNDING ARRANGEMENTS 2008-2011

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted on changes to the school funding arrangements for 2008-11 as determined by the DCSF. It was reported that following the Ministerial announcement in June 2007 which set out the broad framework for funding reform, DCSF had now issued an explanatory note detailing the changes to school and early years funding. A copy of the note was appended to the report for Members' information.

In summarising the changes described in the note, Mrs Cocker drew particular attention to alterations to the role of Schools Forums. She reported that from the 2008-09 financial year, Schools Forums and Local Authorities would retain the powers to approve contributions from the centrally retained Schools Budget of the DSG to support joint working arrangements. In doing this Schools Forums would only have to be assured that an educational benefit would result from the combined budget as the proportionality test no longer applies. Schools Forum would need to be mindful of the five 'Every Child Matters' outcomes.

RESOLVED

That the information in relation to changes to school funding arrangements for 2008-11, as set out in the report submitted and the DCSF explanatory note appended to the report, be noted.

9. SCHOOL FUNDING SETTLEMENT 2008-2011

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted on the School Funding Settlement for the 2008-2011 budget planning cycle, as announced by DCSF on 12th November 2007. The planning cycle for the forthcoming budget period was outlined and it was noted that the Minimum Funding Guarantee would be set at 2.1%, in order to encourage schools to make continued efficiency savings. In addition, the per pupil increase in unit funding guaranteed by the DCSF for Dudley in 2008/09 would be 4.3%.

Mrs Cocker reported on the overall effect of the settlement on education funding in Dudley. She stated that although per pupil funding would be increased in real terms in all three financial years covered by the settlement, continued falling pupil numbers in the Borough meant that the overall improvement to per pupil funding would be diminished. If the Borough lost roughly 700 pupils in the coming financial 2008/09 year, as was expected, the average real terms increase would amount reduce from 4.3% to roughly 2.8% per pupil.

RESOLVED

1. That the information in relation to the School Budget Settlement for the 2008-2011 budget planning cycle, as contained in the report submitted, be noted.
2. That a further report, containing more detailed statistical budget information in relation to the 2008-2011 period, be submitted to the next meeting of the Forum, in order that consideration can be given to the allocation of headroom within the 2008/09 budget.

10. ASTLEY BURF OUTDOOR CENTRE

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted on the current operational and budgetary situation at Astley Burf Outdoor Education Centre. It was reported that in recent years a number of funding issues had emerged at the centre, particularly in relation to the funding of children who received Free School Meals (FSM). Children who received FSM were not required to pay to attend the centre and responsibility for funding trips for FSM children had traditionally rested with Astley Burf, with the catering account also providing a subsidy of £6.00 per week for each FSM child. However, due to the extreme budgetary pressure currently being experienced by the catering account, this method of funding the trips was no longer viable.

Three alternative funding options designed to remedy this problem were set out in the report and the Forum was requested to determine its preferred strategy. It was recommended that option (b), the top-slicing of the DSG to make up the shortfall of £30,000 built up in 2006/07, be adopted. It was further proposed that this figure be increased annually in line with inflation and top-sliced each year in order to prevent similar pressures developing in the future.

Arising from consideration of the report, Members expressed strong support for the service provided at the Astley Burf facility and confirmed their desire to support the Centre and ensure that it continued to operate into the future. It was, however, also commented that Primary Schools did not have the degree of financial flexibility required to fund trips for FSM children themselves, and consequently would have to stop using the facility if this strategy was adopted.

However, Members were concerned that the establishment of an annual top-slice from the DSG to support the Centre would not adequately tackle the strategic problems which had developed. Members felt that a new financial model and structure were required which would be sustainable in the long term. It was therefore requested that further investigative work in this regard be undertaken.

RESOLVED

That consideration of the matter be deferred to the next meeting of the Forum, pending further investigative work in relation to the possibilities for revising funding arrangements in respect of the Astley Burf Outdoor Centre, as outlined above.

11. STAYING SAFE ON SCHOOL TRIPS

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted on the funding of the Dudley Educational Visits and Journey Service. Mr Watson reported that the service had been set up following a review of local policy and practice around school trips and outdoor adventure activities, in order to ensure that these activities were carried out with the minimum of risk to children's safety. Since the establishment of the service, all off site educational visits and journeys across Directorate had been planned, recorded and assessed, and it was felt that the service was well used and highly regarded by schools.

The service had previously been funded jointly from base budget and Standards Fund. However, due to changes to funding regulations coming into force from April 2008, that this arrangement was no longer possible. It was therefore proposed that the existing service budget of £20,000, plus an additional £2000 to fund additional staff training required from June 2008, be charged in future against the DSG.

RESOLVED

That the proposal that a budget of £22,000 for the Dudley Educational Visits and Journeys Service be charged against the DSG for the financial year 2008/09, subject to the guidance in paragraphs 13, 14 and 15 of the report submitted, be endorsed.

12. DUDLEY CATERING AND CLIENT SERVICES

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted on information relating to the School Meals Service, in response to queries raised by the Forum at its previous meeting. Mrs Rushen reported that following the meeting she had met with Mr Sorrell to discuss the issues raised, all of which she believed had now been addressed. Mr Sorrell echoed these sentiments, and thanked Mrs Rushen for her work following what had been a very positive meeting.

RESOLVED

1. That the information in respect of the service pressures currently being experienced by schools, and the consequent effect on the provision of School Catering, as contained in the report submitted, be noted.

2. That the requirement to provide hot school meals, and the expectation on Local Authorities to increase the uptake of the service, be noted.
3. That, with effect from April 2008, provision in Dudley's LMS formula for Free School Meals (FSM) be aligned to the cost, with the related formula factor being reviewed on an annual basis.
4. That, until such time that individual service level agreements are adopted for all schools; anticipated for implementation in April 2009, funding for the School Lunch Grant form part of the current cost base for the 'Buy Back' arrangements with schools.

13. STANDARDS FUND 1.2 SCHOOL LUNCH GRANT

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted on the distribution of the Standards Fund 1.2 School Lunch Grant. It was reported that this new ring-fenced Grant had been introduced by the DCSF as part of the 2008-11 funding arrangements, to replace the transitional Grants 105a and 105b which had been paid to Local Authorities and schools in the previous two financial years. The purpose of the Grant was to assist schools in the purchasing of food and small scale catering equipment, with the overall aim of improving nutrition in school catering.

Two possible methods for the distribution of the Grant were outlined in the report, and the Forum was requested to make a recommendation as to which method should be employed, given that this funding would form part of the funding under the Forum's control and, as previously agreed under agenda item 12, would form part of any 'Buy Back' agreement with Catering Services.

RESOLVED

That the proposal that with effect from April 2008, the Standards Fund 1.2 School Lunch Grant be allocated according to Method 1, as set out in paragraph 14 of the report submitted, be endorsed, with this arrangement being reviewed on an annual basis.

14. SCHOOL BALANCES

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted on an update in respect of the DCSF 5% claw-back proposal, together with information on future changes to Dudley's Scheme for Financing Schools.

Mrs Cocker reported that in view of the low level of school balances which had been 'clawed-back' at the close of the 2006/07 financial year, and the simultaneous rise in the overall level of balances both within Dudley and nationally, it was proposed that further tightening measures be introduced to Dudley's scheme for controlling surplus balances, to be partially effective from the 2007/08 financial year. It was also reported that although the Minister of State for School and Learners had decided not to implement an automatic annual claw-back of 5% of school reserves, it was a possibility that this measure could still be taken in future. With this in mind, it was particularly important that Dudley's local scheme for controlling balances was effective.

In this regard, a series of measures, details of which were included in the report, were proposed for implementation over the next two financial years, in order to improve the effectiveness of claw back and therefore make better use of funds being held in reserve. Members were requested to consider the proposals, prior to formal consultation on changes to the scheme being undertaken in the spring term.

Arising from their consideration of the report, Members reiterated their previous support for the use of claw back and expressed support for the principle of adopting stronger measures to help reduce the still increasing level of reserves. However, concerns were expressed regarding the proposed introduction of a provision preventing schools from setting aside reserves for deficit budgets. Several Members commented that a measure of this kind would leave schools unable to deal with unforeseen problems which occasionally emerged throughout the year. For example, the replacement of a broken boiler system. Concern was expressed that if schools did not have the flexibility to set aside funds for dealing with emergencies of this kind, they would not have the finances available to deal with problems and, ultimately, to ensure that schools were kept open. Members also commented that the implementation of a measure of this kind would create serious financial problems in the event of a building project running over budget or starting late, as schools would not have contingency funds available to finance the completion of work.

RESOLVED

1. That the information in respect of the DCSF 5% claw-back proposal and future changes to Dudley's Scheme for Financing Schools, as contained in the report submitted, be noted.
2. That the Director of Children's Services be requested to consider the views of the Forum, as outlined above, in relation to changes to the Dudley LMS scheme for controlling school balances, prior to making formal proposals, in the 2008 Spring Term, for amendments.

15. REVIEW OF DEPRIVATION FUNDING

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted on progress regarding the next stages of the ongoing review of deprivation funding, including a specific target set by DCSF in respect of funding provided to address deprivation during the 2008-11 period.

Mrs Coates reported that Local Authority officers and a representative of the Forum had met with the Children's Services Adviser (CSA) in October to consider Dudley's position regarding deprivation funding and the aspiration to increase to 100% the amount of this funding reaching deprived children during the 2008-2011 period.

Dudley's current deprivation data, a spreadsheet detailing which was appended to the report, indicated that 77% (£14.6 million) of the deprivation funding allocated to Dudley was targeted on deprivation. This meant that an additional 3% (£0.63 million) would have to be redirected in order to meet the minimum target of 80% set by DCSF. In order for the Local Authority to meet its own target of 100% in the next three years, it would be required at some point, in consultation with the Forum, to make changes to the funding formula. A number of possible changes in this regard which had been discussed and agreed in principle by the Headteachers Consultative Forum Budget Working Group (HTCF-BWG), were included in the report for information, together with a schedule indicating timescales for the review.

RESOLVED

1. That the information in relation to funding for deprivation and the Local Authority's progress in meeting the related DCSF targets, be noted.
2. That the proposed amendments to the Dudley LMS funding formula, designed to increase the proportion of deprivation funding targeted directly for deprivation, as set out in paragraphs 16 to 21 of the report submitted, be supported in principle, pending the submission of further information and formal proposals to future meetings of the Forum.

16. SCHOOL FINANCE REGULATIONS 2008 – SMALL SCHOOLS PROTECTION

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted on proposed amendments to the School Finance (England) Regulations, to be effective for 2008/09, which would affect current funding provisions within the Dudley LMS formula for Small Schools Protection (SSP).

Mrs Coates reported that following the approval by the Forum, in February 2007, of a revised methodology for the allocation of SSP, the planned implementation of the agreed changes had been delayed until April 2009. During this interim period, the DCSF had published the draft School Finance (England) Regulations 2008. These draft regulations stated that the method of allocating SSP currently in use in Dudley, which was based on the level of salaries paid to staff in small schools, would be prohibited. This meant that interim arrangements would have to be established for the period up to April 2009, when the new scheme previously approved by the Forum was planned to come into effect. In this regard, two possible options for the 2008/09 financial year were set out in the report, and the Forum was requested to select its preferred option, taking into account the recommendation of the HTCF-BWG, as set out in the report.

RESOLVED

That the proposal that Dudley Small Schools Protection funding for the 2008/09 financial year be allocated to the receiving schools as 'cash protected' amounts, as set out in paragraph 9(b) of the report submitted, be endorsed.

17. UPDATE ON EARLY YEARS PROVIDER REFERENCE GROUP

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted on progress regarding the work of the Early Years Provider Reference Group. Mrs Coates reported that following the establishment of the Group at the previous meeting of the Forum, the full membership, including representatives of the Local Authority and of both the maintained and PVI sectors, had met on 14th November. At this meeting, a timetable for completion of the project had been agreed, a copy of which was contained in the report.

A further update, including a draft report setting out the recommendations of the Group, would be submitted to the next meeting of the Forum.

RESOLVED

That the information in relation to the progress of the work of the Early Years Provider Reference Group, as contained in the report submitted, be noted.

18. CLOSURE OF CRADLEY HIGH SCHOOL

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted on the funding process and the latest revenue budget position in respect of Cradley High School.

It was reported that of all the pupils displaced as a result of the closure, all but four had now been reallocated, with funding 'following' them to their destination schools. The projected deficit to the revenue budget still stood at £174,000, which included the estimated cost of the 48 staff employed at the school. In relation to these staff, it was noted that a variety of strategies, including redeployment, retirement packages and temporary contracts, would be utilised to ensure that all staffing costs were neutralised by the end of the financial year.

RESOLVED

That the information in relation to the funding process and the latest revenue budget position in respect of Cradley High School, as contained in the report submitted, be noted.

19. **DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS**

It was noted that meetings of Schools Forum would be held on the following dates in 2007/08: -

- Tuesday 5th February 2008
- Tuesday 18th March 2008
- Tuesday 20th May 2008
- Tuesday 8th July 2008

The meeting ended at 8.15pm

CHAIRMAN