

SCHOOLS FORUM

A meeting of Schools Forum was held on Tuesday 27 June 2023.

Present: Helen Gregory (Chair), Cllr Carol Clark, Cllr Lisa Evans, Richard Henderson, Louise Spellman, Edwin Squire, Judith Stanyard, Andrea Swift, Caroline Thomas and Simon White.

Officers: Andy Bryson, Katie Gallagher and Graham Waller (Stockton on Tees Borough Council).

Also in attendance:

Apologies: Susan Richardson (Chair), Julia Armstrong, Lesley Graham, Colin Wilkinson, Eddie Huntington and Joanne Mills.

SCH/1/23 Declarations of Interest

Members were invited to declare any personal or business interests they may have in any item included on the agenda.

No interests were declared.

SCH/2/23 Minutes

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 17th January 2023 be approved.

SCH/3/23 Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

SCH/4/23 Final Dedicated School Grant and Schools Outturn 2022/23

A copy of the Schools Budget and Balances Outturn 2022/23 Report and supporting appendix had been circulated prior to the meeting to review. The paper informs the forum of the outturn position of the Schools Budget and provides an overview of the Maintained School Balances for the 2022-23 financial year.

It had been reported that overall, at the end of March 2023, there was a cumulative £3.87m deficit which was a reduction against the brought forward deficit of £5.48m from 2021/22. This represented a reduction of £1.61m across the financial year and £0.79m reduction in the final quarter compared with the projected £4.66m deficit presented to the Schools Forum 17th January 2023. The reasons for the significant variances between planned and actual spending were outlined within the report.

Mr A Bryson reported that it was previously clarified at Schools Forum that should there be an underspend on any of the de-delegated services then it would be a Schools Forum decision on how the outstanding funds would be spent. Therefore, it was recommended that these savings were utilised against the DSG deficit.

In addition, for the 2022/23 financial year there were a variance relating to de-delegated items as outlined below.

a. Contingencies – (£9.7k) remaining contingency for the correction of errors in the funding formula funding was not required.

b. Staff costs – supply cover. Re-imburement costs for Trade Union Facility time were lower than expected (£7.4k).

The following recommendations had been made from the report.

1.The Schools Forum was asked to note the unused balance on the de-delegated items and to decide on how they wish to utilise these funds.

2.The Schools Forum was asked to note the final position for 2022/23 and that the underspend (subject to any decision on the de-delegated items within recommendation 1) will be used against the significant cumulative deficit in the Dedicated Schools Grant.

Mrs Swift suggested that the decision regarding the unspent de-delegated funds would need to be taken back to all maintain schools and the decision therefore could not be made on their behalf. Mr Bryson made a counter proposal, that the de-delegated funds remain within the de-delegated fund and not be used to offset the DSG deficit, due to the value, this would not make a substantial impact. Following discussion, it was.

RESOLVED that the de-delegated surplus would remain within the budget.

Mrs C Thomas, reporting from feedback from other special schools out of the borough challenged why the LA had only increased their budget by 2.5%, when this had been elevated in other authorities. Mr Bryson explained that this had been detailed within his January 2023 report and the increase was in line with maintained schools. It had been noted that there had been no obligation from the LA to provide the increase; however, it was believed that this should be in line with maintained schools. Mrs C Thomas highlighted further inconsistencies, Mr Bryson explained the LA followed government guidance where possible and the introduction of the national funding formula would further align funding.

SCH/5/23 High Needs Update Report

The High Needs Update Report had been presented for forum members information. Mr A Bryson provided a precis of the report with the following salient items being addressed.

Members of the Forum's attention had been drawn to the previous budget outturn report which outlined the net saving on the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) of £1.61m during the 2022/23 financial year. The in-year net saving was made up of a £1.7m planned High Needs saving offset by a £0.3m in-year High Needs overspend plus further savings of £0.21m on other DSG areas.

The planned projects had been outlined for Forum members, which included a progress report on the Delivering Better Value programme. This aims to support local

authorities to improve delivery of SEND services for children and young people while ensuring services are sustainable.

Following the last meeting Stockton Council has completed the diagnostic element of the Delivering Better Value (DBV) programme and has applied for and been awarded an allocation of £1m over the next three years for investment in various projects to aid the delivery. The main focus of the programme will be on the delivery of three main projects.

- Project 1 – Data visibility and Improvement Cycles
- Project 2 – Post 16 Transition
- Project 3 – ASD, SEMH & Mental health Absence prevention (EBSA)

Mr A Bryson reported that the Local Authority has a corporate and strategic duty to address the deficit position and pressures on the High Needs budget. Based on the current estimated expenditure plans this seems to address the significant pressures the service has faced over the last few years although there are still risks across the medium term from increased service requirements. A further update would be provided at a later meeting to outline the progress and impact.

Mr S White challenged the accuracy of the SEND budget, as this again was overbudget. The strategic discussion with other providers was acknowledged, however, the growing need for SEND with increasing numbers and complexities would need to be addressed. Mr A Bryson drew members attention to the table within the report which outlined the growth in expenditure over a four-year period. The numbers were continuing to rise, and the LA were looking at making efficiency decisions relating to placements, whilst providing the same/better level of service. This will be an area of focus for the delivering better value team. A request was made that Mrs J Mills attend the next meeting to provide a greater outline of the situation including the year-on-year profiles in order to accurately provide projections. Mrs Thomas added that the LA developed a number of initiatives which included extending current services within special schools within the borough rather than external providers.

RESOLVED that.

- a) The report be received and noted.
- b) Mrs J Mills attend the next meeting to discuss high needs funding.

SCH/6/23 DfE Updates and Consultations

The Implementing the direct National Funding Formula – Consultation Response Summary had been presented for consideration.

It had been reported that the Department for Education (DfE) held a consultation between 7 June 2022 and 9 September 2022, with the consultation response published 26 April 2023.

The consultation was around several elements of the move to a direct NFF:-

- Continuing to have some flexibility within the funding system to move funding to the high needs block (HNB)
- The determination of indicative notional special educational needs and disability (SEND) budgets for mainstream schools.

- How the DfE should fund schools experiencing significant growth or falling rolls under the NFF
- Allocation of split site and exceptional circumstances funding, to move away from historic data and allocate funding on school led elements through the NFF.
- How minimum funding guarantee (MFG) will operate in the direct NFF.
- The timescales for the collection of data to calculate allocations and confirm these allocations with schools and trusts to support their budget planning.

Mrs C Thomas questioned how split sites for special schools would be reviewed to ensure fairness. Mr G Waller explained that the guidance had been for maintained schools, with no further information as yet for special schools. It was suggested that this potentially would be considered as part of the SEND review. Mr Bryson also added that Special School funding had been previously raised with Mr M Gray and was being reviewed.

RESOLVED that the Report be received and noted.

SCH/7/23 Scheme for Financing Funds

The updated Scheme for Financing Schools 2023 had been circulated with the meeting papers to review.

Mr A Bryson reported that the document outlined the key financial relationship between the LA, maintained schools and Schools Forum. The following amendments had been shared for consideration.

5.4 Income from the sale of assets

Schools may retain the proceeds of sale of assets except in cases where the asset was purchased with non-delegated funds (in which case it will be for the LA to decide whether the school should retain the proceeds), or the asset concerned is land or buildings forming part of the school premises and is owned by the LA.

The text from the paragraph above will be updated as follows:

Schools may retain the proceeds of sale of assets except in cases where the asset was purchased with non-delegated funds (in which case it will be for the LA to decide whether the school should retain the proceeds), or the asset concerned is land or buildings forming part of the school premises and is owned by the LA.

Any retention of funds from the sale of land assets is subject to the consent of the Secretary of State, and any conditions the Secretary of State may attach to that consent relating to use of proceeds.

The retention of proceeds of sale for premises not owned by the local authority will not be a matter for the scheme.

RESOLVED that Scheme for Financing Schools be approved.

SCH/8/23 Childcare Announcements and Implications

A copy of the Spring Budget 2023 DfE commitment to Early Years had been issued for information. The report had been prepared by Mr G Waller, who explained that this summarised the Government commitment to the Early Years Sector as outlined in the Spring Budget 2023.

It had been reported that the Government pledged, that by 2028, they would double spending on childcare, aiming to spend more than £8 billion every year. This will fund the 30 hours of childcare per week for eligible working parents of children from nine months old to their commencement in primary education.

RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

SCH/9/23 Meeting Dates and Programme of Work for the Year Ahead

School Forum members were informed that a calendar of meeting dates would be circulated in due course.

A Forum member requested reports earlier than provided. Mr A Bryson explained that reports were circulated at the earliest opportunity.

SCH/10/23 Any Other Business

There were no further items of business.

SCH/11/23 Date & Time of Next Meeting, TBC

RESOLVED that a calendar of meeting dates would be circulated.