



MINUTES OF THE SCHOOLS FORUM

Held as an online virtual meeting on Wednesday 19 June 2024 at 6.00pm

Membership	Representing
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PRESENT (all in remote attendance):

Governors	Mike Heiser (Chair) Martin Beard Michael Odumosu Ernest Toquie
Headteachers	Jayne Jardine Mellisa Loosemoore Gerard McKenna Raphael Moss Andy Prindiville Ranjna Shiyan
Councillors	Councillor Grahl, Cabinet Member for Children, Young People & Schools
Officers	Nigel Chapman, Corporate Director Children and Young People Shirley Parks, Director, Education, Partnerships and Strategy Emma Ferrey, SEND Commissioning Consultant Ravinder Jassar, Deputy Director of Finance Folake Olufeko, Head of Finance Kamaljit Kaur, Senior Finance Analyst Abby Shinhmar & James Kinsella (Governance Team)

1. Apologies for Absence and Membership

Apologies for absence were received from Jo Jhally (Governor), Wioletta Burra (Early Years PVI representative) and Nick Cooper (Headteacher).

2. Declarations of Interest

None.

3. Deputations (if Any)

None.

4. Minutes of the Previous Meeting

It was RESOLVED to approve the minutes of the previous meeting held on Tuesday 20 February 2024 as a correct record.

5. Actions Arising

None.

6. Dedicated Schools Grant Financial Final Outturn 2023-24

Folake Olufeko (Head of Finance, Brent Council) introduced a report presenting the final Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) outturn against the budget set for 2023/24 with detail on the year-end 2023/24 surplus of £0.6m. The Forum noted the following key points as part of the update provided:

- Appendix A set out the DSG outturn in more detail and Appendix B was a reflection of the school's reserve balances following the closure of the school's accounts for the last financial year.
- The DSG reported a surplus of approximately £0.6m against a £370.6m budget. This surplus was a movement from the forecast deficit of £0.8m reported to Forum in February 2024 and was mainly due to a £1m underspend against the Early Years (EY) Block, £0.7m underspend against the Schools Block and £0.3m underspend against the Combined Schools Services Block (CSSB), offset by an overspend of £1.4m against the High Needs (HN) Block budget.
- The cumulative DSG deficit carried forward from 2022/23 was £13.8m. This had reduced to £13.2m at the end of 2023/24.
- The Schools Block underspent by £0.7m from growth funds top sliced from school's funding allocations to cover the cost of the Choice and Fair Access Panel (CAFAI) arrangements for new arrivals to Brent schools, as well as the impact of rising rolls, mainly in secondary schools, for in-year growth in pupil numbers. The actual growth in pupil numbers during the year was less than initial projections the budgets were based on.
- The High Needs (HN) Block saw an overspend of £1.4m against a budget of £74.8m. This was mainly due to the top-up funding for Post-16 provision, which led to an overspend of £1.8m and top-up funding for in-borough non maintained special schools and academies, which saw a £1.4m increase. In addition, a £1.4m pressure had been identified against independent day and residential top-up funding due to increased number of pupils places in these settings along with £1.1m additional cost towards the education of pupils with EHCPs awaiting school placements due to increased numbers. The Forum noted this reflected an increase in the number of children with an agreed Education, Health, and Care Plan (EHCP) which was 3,576 as at March 2024 compared to 3,309 as at March 2023 an increase of 8.1%.
- The pressures in relation to the HN Block had been offset by a £0.8m underspend against the recoupment income expected from other local authorities that have placed children in Brent schools, following finalised confirmation of pupil information from schools and actual charges processed, £1.4m underspend against the SEN Services budgets, following the DfE's mandate to all local authorities to transfer all expenditure relating to SEN

services and Education Psychology being charged to the DSG to the local authority's general fund budget and a £0.3m underspend against the SEN Support budget mainly from the budget allocated for the Graduated Approach programme.

- Brent was a part of the DfE programme called Delivering Better Value (DBV) in SEND to provide dedicated support and funding to help Local Authorities reform their high needs systems. The Council had received £1m grant funding allocated over two financial years 2023/24 and 2024/25 to deliver the actions in the Management Plan as well as cost benefits identified as part of the programme with the four workstreams developed with the DBV funding focussed around Intervention First, SEND Assurance, workforce and inclusive environments and commissioning and a further update on progress due to be provided for the Forum in November 2024.
- The Early Years Block budget was £24.4m for 2023-24 with an underspend of £1m, which was mainly due to the DfE's in year adjustment to Early Years Block funding following completion of the January 2023 census. The EY Block was a self-contained block based on headcount and The Forum therefore noted the risk that the DfE may claw back funding following a final in-year adjustment expected in July 2024 with the surplus will be held in reserves to offset any potential clawbacks.
- The school balances had seen a decrease in reserves of £1.9m from the £15m reported in 2022-23 to £13.1m in 2023/24 (as detailed in Appendix B of the report). Of the 56 maintained schools, 23 had increased their overall reserves balance (increase of £2.0m) and 33 decreased their balance over the 2023/24 financial year (decrease of £3.9m). Of the 47 maintained primary schools, 18 (38%) compared to 16 (34%) in 2022/23 increased their reserve balance by an average of £81k, and 26 (55%) compared to 31 (66%) in 2022/23 decreased their reserve balances by an average of £99k. Four schools had cleared their deficit but four new schools had gone into deficit resulting in seven primary schools being in deficit at the end of 2023/24. Of the 47 maintained primary schools, 18 had closed with balances of 8% or more and 29 had closed with balances of less than 8%. Of the 2 maintained secondary schools, one had seen no significant change in reserves and the other had seen a 233% decrease in reserves, moving from a surplus reserve position in 2022/23 to a deficit in 2023/24. The only maintained special school saw an increase in reserves of 67% with a £1.3m reserve balance. One of the 2 PRUs decreased their reserves by 3% and the other saw a 59% reduction compared to balances in 2022/23. Two of the four Nursery schools had increased reserves and the other two reported decreased reserves with one remaining in deficit since 2022/23.
- In summary, the position regarding school balances presented a mixed picture in terms of how individual schools were managing their financial position with the figures suggesting that in 2023/24 schools in Brent had mostly continued to experience financial difficulty with many facing pressures to manage or improve their financial positions. The decrease in balances was partly due to the impact of falling rolls, where some primary schools have had a reduction in funding, as well as the impact of rising inflation which had led to increased costs of services and increased energy bills for schools.
- It was expected that the funding and expenditure pressures within Brent schools would persist with the requirement for schools to take action to balance their budgets. Licensed deficit agreements to recover the deficit over

a 3-year period would be arranged with the 4 additional schools in deficit who would be closely monitored throughout the year to review performance against their recovery plans and 4 schools will be supported by the DfE as part of the School Resource Management programme to identify ways to make better use of their resources to drive savings.

The Chair thanked the officer for her report and welcomed any questions from the Forum with the following noted:

- As part of the agreement of the Schools funding formula for 2023/24 members were reminded that this had included an additional contribution towards HN Block where it confirmed that £1.4m had been allocated from the Schools Block to support pupils with high needs in mainstream schools which had been designed to support schools in managing the growth in demand being experienced alongside Additionally Resources Provision (ARPs). The ARPs programme was for targeted support for pupils in school and had been designed to relieve pressure in mainstream schools. This funding ensured that every pupil was in the right place for the support that was required.
- The Forum noted that some schools appeared to be managing more significant balances and levels of reserves than others with members advised in response of the actions being taken to monitor the position and ensure schools remained fully inclusive and best practice was shared.
- Councillor Gwen Grahl (as Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Schools) recognised the recent tough times that schools had been facing in balancing budgets and managing demand in relation to SEND and highlighted that there were a lot of other expenses like staffing and infrastructure and promised to continue lobbying for the best possible funding for Brent schools.

As no further questions or comments were raised the Forum **RESOLVED** to note the report.

7. **Scheme for Financing Schools & Schools Financial Regulations 2024-25**

Folake Olufeko, Head of Finance introduced the report, which informed the Schools Forum of the changes to be implemented to the Scheme for Financing Schools and the Schools Financial Regulations for the financial year 2024/25, following the initial update to Schools Forum in February 2024. The Forum noted the following key points as part of the update provided:

- The initial update presented to the Forum in February 2024 was focussed on the introduction of an accounting standard for Local Authorities from April 2024.
- This new standard would end the distinction between the operating and finance leases, where previously Brent maintained schools needed to approach the Local Authority before engaging in any leases. The DfE now had a list of all the items schools could lease without the need for consent. Anything outside of this would still need to be approved by the Local Authority, which would then need to be submitted to the Secretary of State for their consent.
- The Scheme for Financing Schools for 2024-25 had been attached as Appendix A to the report and updated, with the summary of changes itemised

- in Appendix B of the report and changes to become immediately effective following Schools Forum approval.
- The updated Schools Financial Regulations for 2024-25, had been attached as Appendix C to the report, with the summary of changes itemised in Appendix D. These changes would become immediately effective after consultation with Schools Forum.

The Chair thanked Folake Olufeko for her report and asked the Forum if they had any questions in relation to the information provided. In noting that approval of the proposed changes to the Scheme for Financing Schools and consultation on the 2024-25 Schools Financial Regulations would only be open to maintained school members on the Schools Forum it was **RESOLVED**, with no further comments having been raised, that the maintained schools' representatives on the Forum:

- (1) approve the amendments to the Scheme for Financing Schools 2024/25.
- (2) Note (having been invited to formally comment) the Schools Financial Regulations 2024/25.

8. Brent Mainstream School's Banding Matrix Review

Shirley Parks, Director, Education, Partnerships and Strategy, introduced the report, which set out how a SEND Resource Allocation System (RAS) could improve transparency and consistency of decision-making and provide some savings against the High Needs Block (HNB). The Forum noted the following key points as part of the update provided:

- Schools Forum were informed on 20 February 2024 that a banding review was underway. This followed a benchmarking exercise with other Local Authorities as well as research with the High Needs Block Subgroup and Early Years colleagues around developing a new resource allocation system approach. This would be for mainstream settings including ARP school places and in both early years and post-16 settings. This offer had been extended to post-16 settings as part of the Developing Better Value Programme to allow for a more needs led based allocation and for transparency.
- Emma Ferrey (SEN Commissioning Consultant) was then invited to outline the detailed proposals and informed the Forum that Option 3 was being recommended as the preferred option, which would involve the introduction of the proposed RAS for all children and young people with an EHCP from age 0-25 years in mainstream schools and settings, including ARPs.
- Ahead of the banding matrix review and as part of the Delivering Better Value (DBV) Programme, SEND Assurance work had been carried out (as a desktop exercise) to review all EHCPs of children (initially those aged up to 7, but subsequently widened to all ages) allocated 26 hours or more of support. This review, which included visits to schools and meetings with SENCOs and other staff, concluded that up to 80% of these Plans (with 26 hours+) were over-allocated.
- Benchmarking information on funding allocated to children with SEND in early years, mainstream schools and post-16 provisions was provided at both the High Needs Working Group and Early Years' Working Group meetings. This showed that Brent is broadly in line with other neighbouring authorities for

school-age children. For early years, Brent fund significantly more (from the HNB) than all neighbouring authorities.

- Other Local Authorities, such as Greenwich had already implemented the new matrix banding scheme and received positive feedback around ease of use. The Children's Social Care team were also using the same system in the same format. The new system would provide good join up with Social Care teams and allocating funding.
- In terms of the approach recommended the proposed SEND RAS would be used across mainstream and ARP placements in early years' settings, schools and Further Education institutions. The descriptors for the RAS in early years would be slightly adapted to ensure it appropriately reflected both children's needs and how need was met in these settings. Currently in Early Years, there were two bands of funding and with the new banding system, this would increase to four bands of funding available. The recommended Option (3) would involve the introduction of an RAS across all ages which would improve transition at key stages and between settings, promoting similar descriptions of levels of need. The RAS would also support conversations with parents, schools and settings about the right intervention, and creative solutions, for each child building on the Graduated Approach Framework with the key change in approach focussed around an increase of banding levels for Early Years designed to deal with emerging needs and an increase in the maximum funding in the top banding up to £7,000.
- The options identified for implementation of any new approach (as detailed in section 3.5 of the report) with introduction of the RAS to be carried out in conjunction with the SEND Assurance work and the RAS expected to increase top-up costs for many of the school ARPs, balanced out with some savings from mainstream EHCPs (based on annual reviews informed by SEND Assurance work), as well as early years and post-16 settings with the new system designed to provide a needs-led rather than an hours-led approach.
- In terms of development of the option outlined The Forum was advised that both the High Needs and Early Years Working Groups had provided direction and support for the banding matrix review with views of parents and carers sought through Brent Parent Carer Forum. More detailed work on the descriptors and the functionality of the RAS had been undertaken with school and setting leaders and SENCOs with the banding descriptors now being revised based on feedback from early years and school SENCOs, and with parent carer input.
- Once the preferred option had been approved, the accompanying descriptors would need be finalised and a process of formal consultation undertaken with schools in September 2024.
- Modelling was being done with schools to look at their current resource allocations for SEND pupils and to assess impact if matched onto a RAS.

The Chair thanked Shirley Parks and Emma Ferrey for the update and asked the Forum if they had any questions in relation to the information provided with the following noted:

- In highlighting and expressing concern at the potential impact on his school given the ARP attached, Raphael Moss felt that additional information was needed. For example, the SEND assurance work that was described in the report stated that 80% was over funded with further detail on the review

therefore being sought. Concerns were also highlighted in relation to delays in the EHCPs process and financial impact being experienced by schools as a result which had also contributed to the financial pressures being experienced. Additionally, when EHCPs were agreed, the hours and funding agreed were insufficient and only increased following an appeal, therefore it was falling upon schools to pick up the shortfall. The expectation to move to the new system by April 2025 was, he felt overly ambitious and would have cost implications for schools. Shirley Parks stated that some of the SEND assurance work was done as part of the DBV work followed by consultation with schools and as a desktop exercise, which she would be willing to share. Additional resources may be allocated to assist in moving to the new system with schools also to be formally consulted and officers willing to liaise with the Raphael Moss in seeking to address the specific issues raised.

- It was clarified that £1m was received from the DBV programme and was used to provide targeted funding for various projects. The funding was not allocated for schools and was for test and learning projects. **Action Point 95: Forum to be provided with an update on use of funding under the DBV Programme.**
- In terms of the approach to be applied to Special Schools officers advised that the banding matrix had been subject to a separate approach which had been reviewed during 2022-23 with officers advising that they would provide details on this when seeking formal approval of any changes to be introduced to the banding matrix following the formal consultation process. **Action Point 96: Forum to be provided with the established banding arrangements for Special Schools.**
- There was concern about what the impact will be on schools when switching to the new RAS, in relation to the proposed April 2025 timescale and the increase in workload for SENCOs. Shirley Parks stated that whilst the RAS had been designed to improve the existing system it was recognised that the implications for each school would be dependent on funding allocated to each banding rate, which were being finalised and with SENCOs to be given support to ensure that this was embedded in the system.
- As an additional assurance Nigel Chapman (Corporate Director Children & Young People) advised of the supporting internal review process which had been established in relation the DBV programme which would be extended to include any new banding review.
- Once the consultation document was finalised with the updated rates, the Forum would more than welcome to provide further comment with the HN Block Subgroup also being asked to review the final option and members of the Forum also welcomed to engage in that process and additional modelling with schools and SENCOs to ascertain impact.

As no further questions or comments were raised the Forum **RESOLVED:**

- (1) To approve (with 1 member voting against the decision) Option 3 to introduce the proposed Resource Allocation System (RAS) for all children and young people with an EHCP from age 0-25 years in mainstream schools and settings, including ARPs.
- (2) Following on from (1) above (with 1 member abstaining from the decision) to consult on the new approach during the autumn term.

(3) (with 1 member abstaining from the decision) that the LA and schools/settings work in partnership to implement the RAS for all children and young people based on an initial timescale of April 2025, subject to consultation with schools and settings and a further report being provided for the Forum on the outcome of the consultation process and final timescale.

9. **Any Other Urgent Business**

The Forum noted that it was Gerard McKenna's last meeting with the Schools Forum, as he would shortly be retiring. As a result, the Chair took the opportunity to thank Gerard for his many years of service on the Schools Forum and hard work.

The Forum was also advised of the following query that had been submitted by Nick Cooper via email seeking clarity on the 3.4% increase applied to SEN additional funding this year and how this had impacted on previous years funding. Clarification was therefore sought on whether the increase applied to 23/24 and or 24/25, as this it was felt this could be misleading in terms of any ongoing lobbying of the DfE.

In response, Folake Olufeko advised that a detailed response would be provided outside of the meeting but clarified that the 3.4% increase had also been applied for 2024-25.

10. **Dates of Future Meetings**

To note the change in the schedule of dates for 2024 - 25 as follows:

- Thursday 14 November 2024 at 6pm via Zoom (previously October)
- Tuesday 10 December 2024 at 6pm via Zoom - *Additional meeting if required*
- Monday 27 January 2025 at 6pm via Zoom
- Thursday 13 February 2025 at 6pm via Zoom

The meeting closed at 7:15pm.

M Heiser
Chair