



## MINUTES OF THE SCHOOLS FORUM

Held as an online virtual meeting on Tuesday 21 February 2023 at 6.00 pm

### Membership

### Representing

#### PRESENT (all in remote attendance):

Governors	Mike Heiser (Chair) Geraldine Chadwick (Vice Chair) Martin Beard Jo Jhally Michael Odumosu Ernest Toquie
Headteachers	Jude Enright Michelle Ginty Jayne Jardine Melissa Loosemoore Gerard McKenna Raphael Moss Andy Prindiville
Pupil Referral Unit	Ranjna Shiyani
Non School Members	
Trade Union	John Roche
Officers	Shirley Parks (Director, Safeguarding, Partnerships and Strategy) Sharon Buckby (Head of Inclusion & Virtual School) Olufunke Adediran (Head of Finance) Folake Olufeko (Senior Finance Analyst) Natalie Connor & James Kinsella (Governance Team)
Councillors	Councillor Grahl, Cabinet Member for Children, Young People & Schools.

#### 1. Apologies for Absence and Membership

Apologies for absence were received from Cassie Lloyd Perrin, Angela Turner and Paul Russell.

The Forum was advised that information inviting Headteacher's and Governors to apply to fill the vacant positions in the Schools Forum would be advertised via the Headteacher's and Governor's Bulletins at their next publication at the end of February 2023.

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 19 January 2023 as a correct record.

5. **Actions arising**

**Action Point 82:** The Forum was advised that an update in relation to the Council seeking further information from the DfE regarding the disparity in funding received from the DfE to support the inner London salary that Brent teaching staff were paid on was addressed in Item 6 - Dedicated Schools Grant Schools Budget 2023/24 report.

**Action Point 83:** The Forum was advised that an update in relation to the application criteria for schools to access the Schools Facing Financial Difficulties Fund (SFFD) was addressed in Item 6 - Dedicated Schools Grant Schools Budget 2023/24 report.

**Action Point 84:** The Forum was advised that an update would be provided at a future meeting on the action to provide a report to illustrate the tracking of the redundancy costs in relation to the savings schools had made.

**Action Point 85** The Forum was advised that an update would be provided at a future meeting in relation to the Committee request to receive further data on the distribution of additional funding awarded by the Early Years Panel.

6. **Dedicated Schools Grant Budget Monitoring Report 2022/23**

Olufunke Adediran, Head of Finance at Brent Council, introduced the report that set out an update on the forecast financial position for 2022/23. The position was reported against the budget set in consultation with the Schools Forum and submitted to the Department for Education on the Section 251 budget return.

The Forum noted the following key points as part of the update provided:

- The forecast Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) deficit was estimated at £2.1m to the year end 2022/23. The illustrated a £0.1m reduction compared to the position reported to Schools Forum in November 2022.
- Table 1 in Section 4 of the report summarised the position of each of the DSG Blocks. The Schools Block reflected a pressure of £0.5m due to pressures against the growth funds that provided funding to schools when there were increased pupil numbers and an increased demand from schools to fund redundancy costs as a result of re-structures necessary due to falling rolls.
- The High Needs Block carried a forecast overspend of £2.8m due to the continued rise in demand for Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP's) with an increasing complexity of need and rising costs of out of borough placements, the

Forum noted this reflected a national trend as detailed in Table 2, section 6.3 of the report.

- A deficit management plan was in place to recover the deficit in the long term, this would also be supported by the Delivering Better Value (DBV) in SEND programme, although the funding received via the DBV programme would not be used to directly add funds to mitigate the deficit, it was noted that efficiencies identified during the programme coupled with the longer term recovery actions and anticipated funding increases would aid a reduction in the deficit. The Forum would receive an update on the DBV programme at a future meeting.
- The Early Years Block was forecast to underspend by £1.0m, this was mainly due to an in year adjustment from the DfE to the EY Block funding in July 2022 which saw an increase of £1.2m due to an increase in take up hours seen in the January 2022 census. The Forum noted that the DfE was expected to make a further adjustment to the 2022/23 funding allocation based on the January 2023 census data, therefore it was proposed that this forecast underspend would be retained in reserves to mitigate the impact of any clawback due from the DfE following confirmation of the final funding position in July 2023.
- The Central Block forecasted an underspend of £0.2m due to in year vacancies.
- The Forum's attention was drawn to Section 9.1 of the report that responded to Action Point 82 and confirmed that Brent was funded at an inner London scale to provide inner London salaries to teaching staff in Brent using an area cost adjustment in the National Funding Formula (NFF).
- The Forum's attention was drawn to Section 9.2 of the report that responded to Action Point 83 to advise the Forum of the criteria that schools were required to meet to be eligible for support from the Schools Facing Financial Difficulties Fund (SFFD).

In concluding the discussion, the Chair asked the Forum if they had any questions or comments on the report presented, the following points were discussed:

- The Forum were grateful for the response to Action Point 83 as detailed in Section 9.2 of the report in relation to transparency of the eligibility criteria for schools to receive support from the SFFD, however it was felt that the response related more to schools facing effectiveness difficulties, as it was noted that schools would only be considered if they were in a Rapid Improvement Group (RIG) and only in exceptional circumstances would a non RIG school application for support be considered. The Forum requested to know how many schools that were not in a RIG had submitted a request for support and how many were granted.
- Concerns were raised that despite the response provided from the DfE in relation to Action Point 82 it was felt that there was still a discrepancy in the level of funding schools received that left schools with a significant shortfall in funding to make up from their budgets to afford to pay teachers' salaries at an inner London PayScale. It was queried how much the calculation from the DfE had been impacted by the historical data that was used, additionally the Forum queried if the DfE undertook revised calculations using up to date data, if it was found that there should have been increased funding, would schools be able to claim that back from central government. In response the Forum were advised that the funding formula used in the area cost adjustment was complex, the DfE were aware that their data was out of date and steps were being taken to use more recent data. The Forum was advised that it was highly unlikely that any funding would be backdated if it was found that a revised calculation with up to date data

supported increased funding and there was always the possibility that revised calculations could result in decreased funding in the future.

- Following a query raised by the Forum in relation to the pressures incurred from maternity and paternity payments, it was confirmed that these payments represented a small cost pressure of only £7k against the Schools Block.

Councillor Grahl, Cabinet Member for Children, Young People & Schools updated the Forum that some of the budgetary pressures highlighted in relation to the High Needs Block were being responded to with through proposals within the Council Budget that were due for approval at Full Council on 23 February 2023. These included significant capital investment in SEND provision placements for over 400 children in the Borough including the new SEND school proposed in Wembley.

The Chair thanked members for their contributions to the discussion on the report and the Forum **RESOLVED** to note the contents of the report and the following Action Points to be taken forward:

**Action point 86 –**

The Forum would receive an update on the DBV programme at a future meeting.

**Action Point 87 –**

The Forum to receive further information in relation to how many schools that were not in Rapid Improvement Groups (RIG's) had submitted requests for support and how many had been granted.

**7. Dedicated Schools Grant High Needs Block Management Plan 2022/23**

Olufunke Adediran, Head of Finance introduced the report which updated the Forum on the DSG High Needs Block Deficit Management Plan. In presenting the report key points highlighted included:

- The DSG carried forward a cumulative deficit of £15.1m from 2021/22 as a result of pressures against the High Needs Block (HNB). The 2022/23 forecast position at the end of January carried an in year deficit of £2.8m bringing the cumulative forecast deficit position against the DSG to £18.3m.
- The Forum was advised that if no action was taken to mitigate the deficit, the deficit could reach £54m by 2026/7, however the 0.5% transfer from the Schools Block coupled with the increased funding from the DfE of 10% in 2023/24, then assuming an 8% increase in 2024/25 and 3% thereafter would support mitigating the deficit and reduce it to £52m.
- Sharon Buckby, Head of Inclusion, advised the Forum that pressures on the HNB were directly related to the increased demand for Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP) that had increased significantly over the last 6 years with fluctuations as a result of the pandemic, as illustrated in Section 3.2, Table 1 of the accompanying report.
- Increased need had been demonstrated across the Early Years, it was felt this could be attributed to the lost opportunities for social and educational exposure for children during the pandemic that had impacted upon specific areas of development, such as speech and language and social communication. In response to this the DBV programme in Brent would be specifically looking at the

0-7 year old cohort preventing the need for EHCP's or moving to time limited EHCP's for a third of the cohort.

- It remained a priority to work closely with SENCO's and Headteacher's to gain a greater understanding of how to provide efficient effective early intervention to support improved outcomes for children and young people in Brent.
- In the challenging financial climate, it was recognised that improvements should be made in progressively using joint resources more effectively with health services and neighbouring boroughs to maximise service delivery for children and young people in Brent.
- The Forum was advised that the Management Plan would not recover the deficit by 2026/27 and could increase further particularly when considering the impact of possible additional financial pressures if HNB funding did not increase in line with the trend in demand for EHCP's.
- The regulations that were in place to carry forward a deficit balance against the DSG had been due to expire in 2022/23, however the statutory override had been extended for a further three years until 2025/26.

The Chair thanked officers for their report and asked Forum members if they had any questions in relation to the information provided. The following key points were discussed:

- The Forum expressed gratitude for the recent meeting between Headteacher's and senior leaders at the Council where information on training offers was shared, however the Forum felt it was paramount that the Council did not lose sight of how strongly school leaders at the meeting expressed their sense of the high level of pressures felt in schools in relation to finances and resources being stretched to unsustainable levels.
- Forum members advised of the additional financial pressures on schools when they had to fund resources for children awaiting the outcome of an EHCP, often having to use costly agency staff to ensure pupils awaiting additional funding were supported adequately. It was noted that if an EHCP was subsequently awarded the school were not able to receive backdated funding to recover their costs. In response to the concerns raised the Forum were advised that the Council recognised the difficulties schools faced during the 20 week assessment process for EHCP's, however the Council were duty bound by the SEN Code of Practice to follow this timeline to allow time for expert assessments to support the accurate identification of children and young people's needs. It was hoped that through the support of the enhanced cohesive working on the DBV programme further discussion could take place between the Local Authority and schools to explore different ways of working to improve outcomes whilst being mindful of the budgetary pressures.
- The Forum highlighted the necessity to protect the budget for central services, key to the EHCP process noting that there had been issues around recruitment and retention for speech and language therapists and Educational Psychologists.
- Officers advised that with the statutory override, central government allowed local authorities to hold the DSG deficit, as opposed to the deficit being exclusively the Council's deficit.
- Officers re-iterated their understanding of the difficulties faced by schools in the current challenging financial climate in relation to the costs that schools were having to cover throughout the EHCP assessment period, however explained that as it was a multi-agency approach the Council were reliant on the efficiency of

other agencies to support the improvement of the process of EHCP's. The Council were committed to continue to look for ways to provide a more efficient and timely service whilst improving outcomes for children and young people.

The Chair thanked officers and the Forum for their contributions to the discussion and the Forum **RESOLVED** to note the actions in place to manage the High Needs Block Deficit.

#### 8. **Dedicated Schools Grant High Needs Block Budget 2023/24**

Folake Olufeko, Senior Finance Analyst, introduced the report that informed Schools Forum of the detailed High Needs Block (HNB) budget for adoption in 2023/24, with the following key points highlighted:

- The HNB budget for 2023/24 included the £1.2m Schools Block transfer and a HNB top up of £3.5m allocated to Brent following the Autumn statement 2022 bringing the total budget to £83.5m, however there would be a claw back of £8.6m from the DfE to be paid directly to Academies, leaving a balance of £74.9m.
- Due to the increased need for specialist provision placements, there had been several changes to the funding and top up funding budgets as illustrated in Appendix 1 of the report.
- The HNB budget included a funding allocation of £0.3m for two new ARP's, Newfield Primary, due to open in April 2023 and Elsley Primary, due to open in September 2023, plus an allocation of £0.2m for the Sunshine Inclusion Base at Willow Family Wellbeing Centre
- The SEN services budget was notable due to the SEN transport costs that would be covered by the General Fund in 23/24 not the DSG budget.
- The budget was threatened by the risk of rising inflation prices for SEND provision in out of borough placements and independent settings where provisions were also seeking over inflationary prices to deal with pressures. It was felt this could be partly mitigated by effective commissioning arrangements.
- Officers advised that the budget had been discussed with the High Needs Sub Group ahead of the budget being presented to the Schools Forum,

The Chair invited The Forum to ask questions in relation to the information reported on the High Needs Block budget, as the Forum had no further questions the Chair thanked officers for their report and the Forum **RESOLVED** to note the content of the report detailing the High Needs Block budget for adoption in 2023/24.

#### 9. **Scheme for Financing Schools and Financial Regulations 2023/24**

Olufunke Adediran, Head of Finance, introduced the report that detailed the changes to be implemented to the Scheme for Financing Schools and the Schools Financial Regulations for the financial year 2023/24. In sharing the report, the Forum were advised that all changes applied in the revision were in line with the March 2022 Department for Education's Scheme for Financing Local Authority Maintained Schools – Statutory Guidance issued to Local Authorities, changes to the Local Authority's own regulations, the EU Public Procurement Regulations and all the relevant regulations. The Forum's attention was drawn to Appendix B of the report that reflected the changes to The Scheme for Financing Schools for 2023-24 and Appendix C, which reflected The Schools Financial Regulations for 2022-23

The Chair thanked officers for their report and invited Forum members to ask any questions they had on the information heard, as there were no queries raised the Chair invited the Maintained School members represented on the Forum to consider the schemes presented and as a result they **RESOLVED** to

- (1) To approve the amendments to the Scheme for Financing Schools 2023/24.
- (2) To note the amendments made to the Schools Financial Regulations 2023/24.

#### 10. **Any Other Urgent Business**

The Chair had been notified prior to the meeting of an item of urgent business raised in relation to the recent announcement from the Mayor of London to provide free school meals for all primary school children for one academic year from September 2023. The Forum recognised this as a positive initiative however had concerns about how this could work in practice, in the ensuing discussion the following points were raised for consideration–

- Infrastructure would need to be significantly increased to successfully provide meals for all primary school children and as such would require significant increased capital investment to fund these changes.
- Increased staff capacity would need to be considered.
- There would be implications on the timings of the school day to enable staff to serve the additional lunches.
- There could be an impact on pupil premium funding as parents/carers were less likely to make the formal application for free school meals if their children would automatically receive them.
- The Forum required further clarity as to whether additional funding would be provided to support the delivery of the programme including the staffing and infrastructure related costs discussed and not just the meals.
- It was queried how special schools who were not entitled to free school meal funding would be impacted.

Councillor Grahl, Cabinet Member for Children, Young People & Schools advised the Forum that the initiative had been announced to support families in response to the growing issues around food poverty and the cost-of-living crisis. The Forum was assured that their concerns raised in relation to the successful implementation of the programme were issues that local Councillors had raised with the Mayor for London. As the plans had only been recently announced local authorities were expecting a more detailed finance and delivery plan shortly, once this was received the information would be shared at a future Schools Forum.

#### **Action Point 88 –**

Schools Forum to be updated on the finances and implementation plan of the universal free school meals for pupils in London.

#### 11. **Dates of Future Meetings**

The Committee agreed to note the schedule of dates for future meetings during 2023/24 as follows:

- Tuesday 20 June 2023
- Thursday 12 October 2023
- Tuesday 5 December 2023 (additional date if needed)
- Thursday 25 January 2024
- Tuesday 20 February 2024

The meeting closed at 7:11 pm

M Heiser  
Chair