



MINUTES OF THE SCHOOLS FORUM

Held as an online virtual meeting on Tuesday 20 February 2024 at 6.00pm

Membership

Representing

PRESENT (all in remote attendance):

Governors

Mike Heiser (Chair)
Jo Jhally
Michael Odumosu

Headteachers

Nick Cooper
Michelle Ginty
Nisha Lingam
Ranjna Shiyani
Andy Prindiville
Jayne Jardine
Gerard McKenna

Councillors

Councillor Grahl, Cabinet Member for
Children, Young People & Schools

Officers

Shirley Parks, Director, Education,
Partnerships and Strategy
Olufunke Adediran, Head of Finance
Folake Olufeko, Senior Finance Analyst
Abby Shinhmar & James Kinsella
(Governance Team)

1. **Apologies for Absence and Membership Election of Vice-Chair**

Apologies for absence were received from Martin Beard.

2. **Election of Vice-Chair**

The Chair sought nominations for a Vice Chair of the Forum following the vacancy created as a result of Geraldine Chadwick term as a Governor and member of the Forum coming to an end. In seeking nomination, Andy Prindiville (Secondary Head) advised that he would be willing to put himself forward to take on the role. Following his nomination being confirmed, the Forum **RESOLVED** that Andy Prindiville be appointed as Vice Chair.

In terms of other existing vacancies, it was noted that no further nominations had been received with a further recruitment process to be undertaken during the summer term which would include those members whose term of office were shortly due to expire also being contacted to ascertain if they still wish to continue in their role. It was

NOTED that further updates would continue to be provided for future meetings of the Forum.

3. **Declarations of Interest**

None.

4. **Deputations (if Any)**

None.

5. **Minutes of the previous meeting**

It was **RESOLVED** to approve the minutes of the previous meeting held on Thursday 25 January 2024 as a correct record.

6. **Actions arising**

The Forum was advised that –

- **Action Point 90 (Update on delivery of DVB Programme)** – was due to be covered under Agenda Item 7.
- **Action Point 94 (High Needs Block Deficit Management Plan)** – was due to be covered under Agenda Item 8.

7. **Update on the DSG High Needs Block Deficit Management Plan and the Delivering Better Value (DVB) in SEND Programme**

Olufunke Adediran (Head of Finance, Brent Council) introduced the report providing an update on progress to date against the DSG Management Plan and an update on Brent's participation in the Department for Education's (DfE) Delivering Better Value (DBV) in Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) programme, aimed at supporting a reduction in expenditure against the High Needs Block of the Dedicated Schools' Grant (DSG). The Forum noted the following key points as part of the update provided:

- In Brent, the DSG had carried a deficit balance since 2019-20 with the cumulative balance carried forward from 2022/23 being £13.8m. With the current in year forecast deficit of £0.8m, it was estimated that this would increase the overall deficit to £14.6m. It was anticipated that the in-year position was likely to worsen and the deficit against the High Needs Block could be in the region of £1.5m.
- This pressure had arisen within the High Needs Block (HNB) and the main cost driver of this deficit was the rising number of children with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) with a 5% increase noted in December 2023. Assessments were ongoing and it was likely that there would be a further increase by the end of the financial year.
- The main pressures in the forecast related to a £1m pressure against in-borough special schools' (including Academies) top up funding due to an increased number of pupils with special educational needs being placed within the borough. The forecast reflected the cost of 30 additional children.

- The existing DSG Deficit Management Plan, which included longer-term actions to mitigate the deficit, had been divided into 3 parts: managing demand, improving sufficiency of local places and financial management adjustments, which as of Q3 equated to a cost avoidance of around £2m. In addition, to mitigating the pressures against the HNB, a 0.5% transfer from the Schools Block of £1.3m had been agreed by Schools Forum and transferred to the HNB. An update on the three themes was as follows:
 - In regards to managing demand, a cost was avoided of £0.56m. This involved ceasing EHC Plans following appropriate assessment, with 33 plans ceased this far. Separately, cost avoidance had been realised as a result of the introduction of the Graduated Approach to SEND across schools and settings, aimed at the early identification of children's needs and delivery of appropriate support with training provided to improve the capacity of schools to meet pupils needs at an earlier stage.
 - In regards to improving sufficiency of local places, this theme was focused on cost avoidance by reducing the number of children and young people who were placed out of borough or in independent special schools at a higher cost than local provision. This year 34 in-borough places had been created that would otherwise have resulted in an out of borough placement, enabling the avoidance of c£1m.
 - The final theme of financial management workstream involved addressing staffing efficiencies, including administrative charges to other local authorities for out of borough pupils in Brent and a review of commissioning arrangements that had avoided projected costs of £0.482m.
- Documents submitted as part of the DfE's DBV programme included the breakdown of planned savings to mitigate the cost pressures on the DSG High Needs Block, as shown in Appendix 1. This showed Brent's existing management plan and DVB opportunities.
- In the Autumn 2023, the DfE communicated to all DBV authorities a requirement to produce revised DSG deficit management plans, as shown in Appendix 2. The required template for submission and accompanying guidance for local authorities was intended to help local authorities develop further evidence-based and strategic plans covering the provision available for children and young people with SEND. The DfE's expectation is that local authorities' management plans will focus on how they will bring in-year spending in line with in-year resources.
- In terms of the submission, the summary showed the trend of EHCP's by age group, by primary need and by provision type, providing the local authority with intelligence needed to understand pressures and reduce in those areas moving forward. The financial section demonstrated what the pressures would be if the costs were to continue as they were and without mitigation being put in place. To support the DVD Programme four main workstreams have been developed and quarterly submissions are made to the DfE with regards to progress. The expectation was that by 2026/27 the actions from the workstreams as a result of the investment from the DfE should lead to cost avoidance of c£2.1m as detailed in Appendix 1 of the report.
- The assumptions included in the Management Plan included - HNB funding for the next few years seeing growth of 3% from 2024/25 onwards; the rate of growth for demand for EHCPs assuming an increase of 7% in 2024/25 with the inflationary amount applied being the CPI rate as at November 2023 of 3.9% and cost avoidance as a result of the mitigating factors totalling £9.4m by 2026-27.

The Forum also received an update (in relation to Action Point 90 from the previous meetings) from Shirley Parks, Director, Education, Partnerships and Strategy (Brent Council) on the DBV in SEND Programme. The following key points were highlighted:

- As part of the programme for Brent, four main workstreams - Intervention First, Send Assurance, Workforce and Inclusive Environment and Commissioning had been developed and quarterly submissions were made to the DfE. The following update on each workstream were provided:
 - Intervention First: The DBV funding had enabled a new early intervention model to be piloted working with the Harlesden cluster of schools. A team based at Newfield Primary School, was being created to focus on identifying CYP aged 4-7 for a targeted intervention first programme over 12 weeks with the aim of supporting 96 children over the academic year. It would be assessed whether early intervention addressed the needs of the children without the need of a EHCP or whether it identified the need for one more swiftly. As of December 2023, schools had been using these to make referrals and 8 referrals had been received from schools since December. Triage and direct work had now begun with children, families and schools. Intervention First provision had been progressing and was planned to be fully open in early March.
 - A new team had been put together to address the SEND Assurance and this workstream focussed on the audit of EHCPs and accompanying records of plans for children aged under 7 that include support 26 hours and above and post-16 plans that include support of 19.5 hours and above to assess if this level of support was needed. So far, 300 cases had been audited for under 7s across Brent and all post-16 plans for young people in mainstream schools (106 in total). The team had identified pupils for whom allocated support funding could be reduced.
 - The Workforce and inclusive environments workstream focused on ensuring schools had the relevant training and workforce experience to support the wide range of needs of children and young people at SEN Support. To enable this, capital funding had been set aside to support environmental adaptations that would make more school environments inclusive.
 - The last workstream around Commissioning was reviewing the High Needs Block contribution to the Early Years Inclusion fund to ensure that the funding was used in an effective manner. A banding review was underway as well as an assessment on the support provided at different levels and how commissioning was carried out, particularly in speech and language and communication needs. Collaborative work between Public Health, health professionals and parents was also due to be evaluated.
- All workstreams were progressing well with a Project Board created to monitor and oversee progress, which included head teacher representation.
- The DfE had asked local authorities to identify areas where efficiencies could be achieved. An area identified was the commissioning of post-16 places and further options were being considered. The other area was the cost around the PRU provisions.
- Further work was also in the process of being undertaken to review the capital and commissioning needs to develop any possible capital changes, use of additional sites or use of capacity in primary provision to deliver more locally.

The Chair thanked officers for their clear and detailed report and asked the Forum if they had any questions in relation to the information provided and the following was raised:

- Olufunke Adediran highlighted that the statutory override in place to carry forward a deficit balance against the DSG was due to end by 2025/26, which could possibly put a significant risk against the Council's General Fund reserves.
- The Chair stated that SEND deficits were an issue faced by most local authorities. The statutory override currently ran up to March 2026. Local authorities were pressing for the deficit to be written off and for more clarity around the matter.
- The Forum noted that the review of commissioning post-16 places was anticipated to be completed within the next six months and the review of commissioning of PRU provision was set to be completed by around September with the Forum to be kept updated on progress.

As no further questions or comments were raised the Forum **RESOLVED** to note the updated Management Plan and update on the DBV in SEND programme.

8. **High Needs Block Budget 2024 - 25**

Folake Olufeko, Senior Finance Analyst introduced the report, which informed the Schools Forum of the detailed High Needs Block (HNB) budget for adoption in 2024/25. The Forum noted the following key points as part of the update provided:

- The DfE's HNB funding had been confirmed at £85.0m for 2024/25. This was £2.7m more than received in 2023/24 and represented a 3% increase.
- In addition, Schools Forum had approved a Schools Block transfer of 0.5% totalling £1.4m. This meant that the total funding for the HNB in 2024/25 was £86.4m.
- The DfE would be recouping £9.0m of the total HNB funding to be paid directly to Academies for their base funding.
- The budget assumed that the top up banding rates would remain the same for the mainstream schools, Pupil Referral Units (PRUs), Additionally Resourced Provisions (ARPs) and special schools. These rates had been detailed in Appendix 2 of the report.
- A review of Brent's banding matrix, focussed on top-up costs for pupils with an EHCP in both mainstream and ARP placements was underway and this would be presented at a later Schools Forum, with proposals to move from the current hours led system to a more needs-led provision-based approach in funding.
- The budget included a £0.659m allocation for the teachers' pay and pensions grant for special schools and PRUs.
- In line with the DfE's requirement to pass on 3.4% of the additional High Needs Block funding to special schools and PRUs, £1.2m had been set aside to account for this cost.
- Although rates remained the same as in 2023/24, there were increases in overall top-up funding for special schools and mainstream schools both in and out of the borough and this was in line with the rise in demand and the spending patterns of previous years. A total £2.1m of the increased HNB funding had been allocated in response to the demand against these lines.

- The council was investing in new ARP provisions i.e., Preston Park which would commence in September and Elsley Primary due to commence in April, however the start date may be delayed subject to completion of the building.
- The recoupment budget was an income budget which offset expenditure on pupils from other boroughs. This budget line had been increased by £1.1m to a total of £3.5m, in line with the expected increase in demand.
- Due to the nature of the charging process for post-16 provisions, there was a challenge to provide accurate forecasts for this service. The budget had been set in line with the best estimate of the current financial year's forecast at £5m.
- A zero-based budget setting approach had been applied to the budgets for SEN services. This area had seen a budget reduction mainly due to aligning staffing costs to current agreed establishments, removing vacant posts as well as accounting for recharges to other areas of the DSG as well as the council's general fund account. The surpluses arising from that had been used to off-set the expected increased cost against the top up costs.
- The budget aimed to achieve an in-year balance between expenditure and income and did not reduce the forecast deficit that would be brought forward from 2023/24, which equated to c£14.6m.

The Chair thanked Folake Olufeko for her report and asked the Forum if they had any questions in relation to the information provided. As no further questions or comments were raised the Forum **RESOLVED** to note the Dedicated Schools Grant High Needs Block Budget for adoption in 2024 – 25.

9. **Updated Scheme for Financing Schools and Schools Financial Regulations 2024-25**

Olufunke Adediran (Head of Finance, Brent Council) introduced the report providing details of the changes to be implemented to the Scheme for Financing Schools and the Schools Financial Regulations for the financial year 2024/25. The Forum noted the following key points as part of the update provided:

- The Scheme for Financing Schools for 2024-25 attached in Appendix A had been updated, with the summary of changes itemised in Appendix B.
- On the Scheme for Financing schools, minor updates had been proposed to the financial control section of the document where the procurement requirement was to increase the threshold value for low value contracts. Another change was regarding the sale of land assets, where the retention of funds would now be subject to consent of the Secretary of State with additional changes to the pension section.
- The Schools Financial Regulations for 2024-25, attached as Appendix C, had been updated, with the summary of changes itemised in Appendix D. This supplemented the scheme and provided school governors and head teachers a framework to ensure public accountability and ensure that financial integrity was exercised.

The Chair thanked Olufunke Adediran for her report and asked the Forum if they had any questions in relation to the information provided. As no further questions or comments were raised the Forum **RESOLVED**:

- (1) To approve the amendments to the Scheme for Financing Schools 2024/25.

(2) To note the Schools Financial Regulations 2024/25.

10. **Any Other Urgent Business**

No items of urgent business were raised at the meeting.

11. **Dates of Future Meetings**

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

- Wednesday 19 June 2024 at 6pm – to be offered as a hybrid meeting
- 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 6:48pm

M Heiser
Chair