

MINUTES OF SCHOOLS FORUM MEETING - TUESDAY, 20 JUNE 2023

In Attendance:

Academy / Free School Representative

Abrar Hussain, Highfield (Star)
Roger Farley, Roseacre (ATC) – In the Chair
Simon Eccles, St Marys (BEBCMAT)
Tracy Harrison, Thames / Roseacre (ATC)
Matt McIver, St George's / Baines Endowed (Cidari)
Edward Vitalis, South Shore / Marton (Bright Futures)
Graham Dow, Anchorsholme (Sea View)
Simon Brennand, Unity (FCAT)

Maintained Special School Representative

Neill Oldham, Highfurlong

Maintained Primary School Headteachers / representative

Claire Taylor, St Nicholas

Maintained Primary School Governor

Michelle Lonican, Our Lady of the Assumption

Pupil Referral Unit

Victoria O'Farrell, Educational Diversity

Non-school members

Amanda Baines, Staff/Teacher associations

Others

Victoria Gent, Director of Children's Services
Darren Maddocks, Strategic Management Accountant.
Paul Turner, Assistant Director of Children's Services
Charlotte Baron, Head of SEND
Hilary Wood, Head of School Finance and Funding
John Greenbank, Senior Democratic Governance Adviser

1 WELCOME, INTRODUCTIONS AND APOLOGIES

Roger Farley welcomed attendees to the meeting.

Apologies were received from:

Councillor Cath Benson (Cabinet Member for Young People and Aspiration), Elaine Allen (St John Vianney), Gill Hughes (Park School), Rachel Dey (Pebbles Day Nursery), Jill Gray (Blackpool Sixth Form) and Neil Adams (Unison).

2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest noted at the meeting.

MINUTES OF SCHOOLS FORUM MEETING - TUESDAY, 20 JUNE 2023

3 MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING HELD ON 7 MARCH 2023

The Forum considered the minutes and actions arising from the 7 March 2023 meeting and noted that some of the actions arising would be covered by items on the agenda.

In respect of the action under Item 7 – Early Years Funding 2023/24, Ms Hilary Wood, Head of School Finance and Funding, advised that the issues surrounding the amended timetabling of Budget Statements had been considered and that it was planned that proposals for future Early Years formula changes would be brought to the January meetings of the Forum rather than to the March meetings.

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday 17 January 2023 were considered and agreed as an accurate record.

4 LOCAL AUTHORITY AND INCLUSION UPDATE

Mr Paul Turner, Assistant Director of Children's Services, presented the Local Authority and Inclusion Update to the Forum. He reported that 2022/23 had been a difficult year in respect of attendance levels but that Blackpool continued to perform better than the national average. It was expected that new funding streams would assist in work being undertaken in Blackpool to improve inclusion and attendance going forward.

Exclusions and suspensions levels in Secondary school settings were shown to have increased during 2022/23. This was in part the result of schools experiencing greater challenges compared with before the Covid-19 Pandemic.

The number of pupils in the Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) were highlighted, with Mr Turner explaining that it was expected that of the 140 pupils on roll, 61 would be leaving at the end of the school year. With respect of Elective Home Educated (EHE) pupils, Mr Turner reported that Children's Services had continued to visit between seventy and eighty children each month, which was significantly higher than in other areas.

Mr Turner also reported that approximately £960k of Priority Education Investment Area (PEIA) funding was expected to be received from the Department of Education (DfE). Of this money £300k would be for literacy initiatives, which would be targeted to improving writing skills. In future £650k had been allocated for attendance and behaviour projects to work with families and improve support for them. Mr Turner also advised that he would be meeting with representatives of the DfE and it was the Council's preference that schools be offered a list of options to allow better targeting based on their individual circumstances.

5 DEDICATED SCHOOLS GRANT YEAR END BUDGET MONITORING 2022/2023

Mr Darren Maddocks, Strategic Management Accounts, presented the Dedicated Schools Grant Budget Monitoring 2022-23 report. The report showed that the High Needs Budget had overspent by £813k in part due to ongoing out of Borough placements, Special Schools, the Resourced Provision, Mainstream Top-Up and Post-16 Education. In addition to this the Early Years Block was over spent by £57k due to higher childcare demand than expected and the Schools Block had also over spent by £18k due to school improvement pressures.

MINUTES OF SCHOOLS FORUM MEETING - TUESDAY, 20 JUNE 2023

These pressures had meant that the overall underspend for 2022-23 was £621k against a target of reducing the in-year deficit by £1.609m. This position however was improved following the receipt of £1.55m in Safety Valve grant funding, resulting in an overall reduction in the in-year deficit of £2.785m.

In addition to this the conversion of two maintained schools to academies had reduced the Maintained School balances to £3.648m. Mr Maddocks added that overall, balances remained healthy and represented 15.5% of the Schools Budget and reported that no schools were in deficit.

The impact of the reducing number of primary aged pupils was discussed with it being noted that the “bulge” in numbers experienced by primary settings in recent years had begun to be passed on to secondary schools. Mr Turner explained that predicting overall pupil numbers remained a challenge, in part due to the increase moving into secondary education, but also as the result of Blackpool’s transitory population. Ms Hilary Wood added that capital funding to support the condition of school buildings would be managed to address priority locations, based on the outcome of condition surveys.

6 DEDICATED SCHOOLS GRANT BUDGET MONITORING 2023/24

Mr Darren Maddocks, Strategic Management Accountant, presented the Dedicated Schools Grant Budget Monitoring 2023-2024 report. He reported that the monitoring report had been amended from that previously seen by the Board in March 2023 to reflect the adjusted Pupil Growth Contingency from £295k to nil. This had been as a result of an error in the local funding formula relating to business rates, and the inadvertent omission of the Highfield Leadership Academy Public Finance Initiative (PFI) factor. The Education and Skills Funding Agency had agreed that these errors could be rectified by the adjustment to the Pupil Growth Contingency, so as not to impact funding level already reported to schools.

The budget monitoring forecast for the end of April 2023 was forecast as an under spend of £690k which was in line with the agreed budget. However it was noted that this excluded any Safety Valve funding.

The major in-year variances to the agreed budget were reported as:

- Special School Top Up related to additional costs at the Lotus School.
- Pupil Referral Unit Top up related to additional income from schools.
- Mainstream School Top Up as the result of increased demand.
- Post-16 Education due to lower placement costs than anticipated.

Going forward it was forecast that the underspend of £690k with the addition of Safety Valve funding of £470k would reduce the deficit brought forward in March 2024 to £1.625m, excluding maintained school reserves.

Mr Paul Turner, Assistant Director Children Services, stated that financial forecasting for the upcoming year had been difficult due to being unable to predict factors such as exclusions and the number of new pupils coming into Blackpool. However it had been recognised that schools had performed well financially and that Blackpool had

MINUTES OF SCHOOLS FORUM MEETING - TUESDAY, 20 JUNE 2023

demonstrated that it was able to plan to meet challenges and that this would assist in securing funding going forward.

It was also reported that it was anticipated that the remaining maintained schools may convert into academies within the next five years. However Mr Turner stressed that this was not guaranteed and no timetable for such a transition existed. Further to this, Mr Turner stated that the Council would not be encouraging or discouraging any change in status as it was regarded as a decision to be made based on each school's individual circumstances.

7 SAFETY VALVE UPDATE

Ms Hilary Wood, Head of School Finance and Funding, presented an update on the Safety Valve Programme. She reported that the first monitoring return had been sent to the Department for Education (DfE) in June 2023 and that a response was being awaited. As part of the return the Council had included Key Performance Indicators and it was believed that these presented an accurate summary of the current situation in Blackpool.

The DfE had allocated £3.876m to write off historic Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) deficits with an additional £6.153m in grant funding towards capital projects at Highfurlong, Park Community Academy, and Educational Diversity aimed at improving local provision. It was planned that these projects would deliver value for money by improving the local education infrastructure and reducing out of borough spend going forward.

Ms Wood also reported that it was expected that Blackpool would experience a similarly high level of additional needs in reception pupils in September 2023 as experienced in the previous year. Therefore work had been undertaken to plan for the start of the new school year by issuing more Education Health and Care Plans to ensure schools were prepared for the expected high demand. The Forum was also informed that schools had been informed that 2023/24 would be the final year in which secondary inclusion funding for the High Need block of £60k per school would be paid. Following this it was planned that inclusion funding would be used in a more targeted way, based on pupil need.

It was noted that the Forum needed a better understanding of the way in which discretionary High Needs funding was used and it was therefore asked that a list be developed for consideration by the High Needs Working Group.

Mr Paul Turner, Assistant Director Children Services, provided an update on national discussions to review Special Educational Need and Disabilities (SEND) funding. A Blackpool representative is involved in these discussions and it was anticipated a timescale for the implementation of the outcomes of the SEND Review would be available within six months.

Action

That Ms Wood and Mr Turner develop a list of where extra High Need funding had been spent for consideration by the High Needs Working Group.

8 NATIONAL FUNDING FORMULA UPDATE

Ms Hilary Wood, Head of School Finance and Funding, presented an update on the

MINUTES OF SCHOOLS FORUM MEETING - TUESDAY, 20 JUNE 2023

National Funding Formula (NFF). She reported that, under the direct NFF, the process for transfers from the Schools block to the High Needs block would be amended to a new process of applications to the Secretary of State for Education, taking into account feedback from local stakeholders. The calculation of notional Special Education Need and Disabilities funding under the NFF would also change to a standardised methodology nationally. The Department for Education had issued guidance to support this approach in the interim.

The funding for schools with growing and falling rolls was discussed, with it being noted that funding could be used to fund falling rolls if a school could predict vacant places would be filled within a three-year period. This would allow schools to retain staff during periods of falling rolls and be prepared for increases in numbers.

The Forum noted that no schools within Blackpool currently qualify for Split Site Factor funding under the local formula. While it was recognised that two schools met the basic criteria for the funding under the revised NFF for 2024/25 neither met the distance criteria to be eligible.

9 SECONDARY PUPIL GROWTH CRITERIA.

Ms Hilary Wood, Head of School Finance and Funding, presented proposed changes to the Pupil Growth Criteria for allocating funding to mainstream school for approval by the Forum. The suggested amendments would, if agreed, be introduced in the 2024/25 formula, in anticipation of an increase in secondary admissions over the coming years. She also reported the changes outlined in the report had been circulated to all Blackpool secondary leaders and their feedback sought.

The Forum discussed the possible impact of a pupil “bulge” in growth. Ms Wood reported that an increase of approximately 1500 was expected, with a margin of error of 5% included. It was planned that this increase would be spread out among Blackpool’s schools and it was noted that there was capacity within the system to ensure pupils were directed to vacant places.

Resolved: That the proposed amendments to the Pupil Growth Criteria be approved.

10 SCHEME FOR FINANCING SCHOOLS

Ms Hilary Wood, Head of School Finance and Funding, presented a report updating the Forum on changes to the Department for Education guidance which will impact on Blackpool’s Scheme for Financing Schools. Following receipt of the guidance Ms Wood reported that Blackpool had reviewed its scheme to ensure that it was compliant and up-to-date. The proposed amendments to the scheme had been circulated to maintained schools for consultation.

In respect of point 5.1 A of the proposed scheme the Forum queried if the Council had guidance on using school premises for letting for community or other purposes. Regarding 7.2 B a question was asked regarding the applicability of the clause regarding the Construction Industry Taxation Scheme to voluntary aided schools.

MINUTES OF SCHOOLS FORUM MEETING - TUESDAY, 20 JUNE 2023

Actions

Ms Wood to determine if the Council has guidance for maintained schools in respect of using premises for lettings for community or other purposes.

Ms Wood to check the wording under the Construction Industry Taxation Scheme section of the proposed scheme in relation to voluntary aided schools.

Resolved: That, subject to clarification under the Construction Industry Taxation Scheme section, the proposed Scheme for Financing Schools be approved.

11 DATES OF SCHOOLS FORUM 2024

The Chair informed the Forum that this would be the final meeting for the current term of members. He thanked all those who had sat on the Forum during the three-year term for their contributions to the Forum during this time.

Going forward it was reported that schools and other bodies would be contacted for nominations for the new term following the meeting.

Resolved:

1. That the date of the next meeting of the Forum was noted at 10 October 2023;
2. That the dates of meeting for 2024 be agreed as;
 - 16 January 2024
 - 5 March 2024
 - 18 June 2024
 - 8 October 2024

Chairman

(The meeting ended 10.39 am)

Any queries regarding these minutes, please contact:
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