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MINUTES OF SCHOOLS FORUM MEETING - TUESDAY, 14 JUNE 2022

Present:

Special School Maintained Representative

Mr N Oldham, Highfurlong

Academy / Free School Representatives

Mr S Eccles, St Mary's (BEBCMAT)

Mr R Farley, Westminster (FCAT) (Chair)

Ms T Harrison, Thames / Roseacre (AtC)

Mr A Hussain, Highfield / Star

Pupil Referral Unit

Ms V O'Farrell, Education Diversity

Non-Schools Members

Ms A Baines, Staff/Teacher Associations

Post 16

Ms J Gray, Blackpool Sixth Form College

In Attendance:

Ms C Baron, Head of SEND

Mr D Maddocks, Senior Accountant

Mr P Turner, Assistant Director – School Improvement and SEND

Mrs H Wood, Head of Business Support and Resources

Mrs D Bowater, Democratic Governance Adviser (minutes)

1 WELCOME, INTRODUCTIONS AND APOLOGIES

Roger Farley welcomed attendees to the meeting.

Apologies for absence were received from Helen Moreton (Holy Family); Elaine Allen (St John Vianney); Michelle Lonican (Our Lady); Gill Hughes (Park / Sea View); Matt McIver (St George's/Baines Endowed / Cidari); Edward Vitalis (South Shore / Marton /Bright Futures); Rachel Dey (Pebbles Day Nursery); Neil Adams (UNISON); Graeme Dow (Anchorsolme/Sea View) and Simon Brennand (Unity / FCAT).

2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest noted.

3 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday 15 March 2022 were considered and agreed as an accurate record.

MINUTES OF SCHOOLS FORUM MEETING - TUESDAY, 14 JUNE 2022

Matters arising from the minutes:

An update from the High Needs Working Group meeting would be presented to the June 2022 Schools Forum meeting to update on Early Help budget plans – the update would be presented at item 7.

A report on college attendance would be included in the local authority update at the next Schools Forum meeting including the impact on numbers of young people not in education, employment or training – the update was not included at item 4, the update would be requested for the October 2022 Schools Forum meeting (Paul Turner).

An update would be presented at a future meeting giving further details of Education Investment Areas once the announcements had been received – there were no updates on the Education Investment Areas at the time of the meeting, an update would be sought at the next meeting.

It was agreed that an update on proposals for early help interventions to support schools be presented to the June 2022 Schools Forum following discussions at the High Needs Funding Working Group on 21 March 2022 - the update would be presented at item 7.

The High Needs Funding Working Group to be given delegated powers to respond to the local authority on the additional EHE posts on behalf of the Schools Forum – an update following the discussions would be presented at item 7.

Information on increasing running costs for schools be collated and circulated to headteachers and business managers – the information was circulated to headteachers and business managers by Hilary Wood.

Actions:

- ***A report on college attendance would be included in the local authority update at the next Schools Forum meeting including the impact on numbers of young people not in education, employment or training – the update was not included at the June 2022 Schools Forum meeting therefore the update would be requested for the October 2022 Schools Forum meeting (Paul Turner).***
- ***An update would be presented at a future meeting giving further details of Education Investment Areas once the announcements had been received – as there were no updates at the June 2022 Schools Forum on the Education Investment Areas, an update would be sought at the next meeting (Paul Turner).***

MINUTES OF SCHOOLS FORUM MEETING - TUESDAY, 14 JUNE 2022

4 LOCAL AUTHORITY AND INCLUSION UPDATE

Paul Turner provided an update on recent developments from the local authority since the previous meeting.

In relation to attendance it was noted that over the academic year, overall attendance had been over 90% with the primary sector higher than secondary. However, attendance figures had been lower than 90% in all secondary years aside from year 7. It was anticipated that attendance would resume to normal pre-covid patterns next year. A notable increase in elective home education was reported however some pupils were returning to school. It was reported that there were eight school attendance orders pending, which required significant work from the Pupil Welfare Team.

It was reported that numbers of pupils in the Pupil Referral Unit were lower than in the previous year with 80 pupils expected to be on roll in September 2022.

The report highlighted the outcomes of Ofsted inspections undertaken at Montgomery (requires improvement), Langdale (good) and Hawes Side (good) schools. A further inspection outcome had been published for Devonshire School which received a 'requires improvement' rating. It was commented that although the rating was 'requires improvement' at Montgomery, there had been improvements acknowledged by inspectors but not enough to change the rating.

In relation to SEND, the SEND Area Inspection report was provided as were the four points of action that the partnership was required to address in the Written Statement of Action.

Questions and comments were welcomed.

It was commented that the number in EHE in Blackpool was double the national average but lower level data was unavailable to compare. In context, it was commented that the resilience of families had been impacted by the pandemic resulting in some children not wanting to attend school and parents supporting this. It was also evident that there were resources in the form of letter templates available online for parents to use to inform the local authority of their decision to home educate. It was suggested that the resilience of families could be addressed through the High Needs budget.

It was queried whether taking families to court was effective to improve the attendance situation and confirmed that the process only worked for some family cases.

It was commented that there were a number of referrals to the Pupil Referral Unit to access short stay inclusion options and respite referral options for Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4. It was acknowledged that the Inclusion Strategy reflected the PRU services being used more.

Paul Turner commented that the improving picture, where the young person remained on the roll of the school but accessed services from the PRU, was in line with the findings of the Timpson Review, and schools were seeing the benefit of the widening local alternative provision market.

MINUTES OF SCHOOLS FORUM MEETING - TUESDAY, 14 JUNE 2022

5 DEDICATED SCHOOLS GRANT YEAR END BUDGET MONITORING 2021/22

Darren Maddocks reported on the year end budget position of the 2021-22 Dedicated Schools Grant and the amount of Dedicated Schools Grant Reserves Forecast as at 31 March 2022 for information.

It was reported that there were significant pressures on the High Needs Block. To manage the costs pressures a High Needs Block Medium Term Financial Plan incorporating an inclusion strategy and a social, emotional and mental health Free School were being developed. However, expenditure continued to be in excess of Department for Education funding in the short term.

The High Needs Budget over spent by £616k in 2021-22 due to pressures in Special Schools, Pupil Referral Units, Exceptional Circumstances Funding and Post 16 Education. The Early Years Block under spent by £137k due to a lower demand for childcare places than budgeted and the Schools Block over spent by £10k which was as a result of an historic equal pay cost offset by staff savings within School Admissions.

As Schools Forum had set a deficit budget of £327k for the 2021-22 financial year, the addition of the over spend of £561k resulted in a total in-year deficit of £888k. Therefore the position as at 31 March 2022, after incorporating the brought forward balance of £5.762m and offsetting the previously reported release of the New and Growing Schools provision (£1,694k) was a deficit of £4.956m.

It was reported that Maintained School balances increased from £3.58m to £4.13m over the year to 31 March 2022, no schools were in deficit with an average balance as a percentage of School Budget Share at 16.7%, up from 15.2%.

There were no questions following the report.

6 DEDICATED SCHOOLS GRANT BUDGET MONITORING 2022/23

Darren Maddocks reported on the budget position of the 2022-23 Dedicated Schools Grant and the amount of Dedicated Schools Grant Reserves Forecast as at 30 April 2022 for information.

It was reported that the budget monitoring to the end of April 2022 was forecasting a £579k under spend against a budgeted under spend of £1,608k, an adverse variance of £1,029k to plan. The major in-year variances included:

- Out of Borough placements demand higher than budgeted of £607k.
- Special School placements pressure of £258k.
- Resource provision £112k pressure relating to an additional class at Marton Primary Academy.

In relation to forecast reserves it was reported that budget monitoring for the 2022/23

MINUTES OF SCHOOLS FORUM MEETING - TUESDAY, 14 JUNE 2022

Financial Year forecasted a £579k surplus which would reduce the brought forward deficit of £4.956m to £4.377m by 31 March 2023. This excluded the maintained schools reserves of £4.129m.

Following the report there was a question relating to the additional class at Marton Primary Academy. It was noted that the school had provided 24 places for primary aged children with Autism Spectrum Disorder and due to increased demand, it would be increased by eight places from September 2022.

Further to this, Paul Turner indicated that there should be transparency relating to the planned pressures on budgets including the cost of living increases to forecast realistic budgets. It was also acknowledged that some of the maintained schools would become academies affecting the maintained school reserves.

Members also acknowledged that there needed to be place planning conversations including the capacity for mainstream secondary places. It was reported that there was planned increased capacity in the special school estate over the next couple of years.

7 HIGH NEEDS UPDATE

Hilary Wood provided an update on the latest developments in relation to the High Needs budget.

Medium Term Financial Plan

As reported in previous meetings, Blackpool was experiencing financial pressures on its High Needs Budget. In order to better understand Blackpool's financial position, a medium-term financial plan had been developed to monitor forecast expenditure against the High Needs Budget, and factor in predictions of where savings may be achieved.

Despite additional government funding in recent years, pupil numbers in high cost placements continued their upward trend. Costs in 2021/22 exceeded the High Needs funding allocation by £2.374 million. However, transfers from other funding blocks, together with the release of the new and growing schools provision, combined to offset pressures, with the cumulative deficit against Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) reducing by £805k to £4.957 million at the end of March 2022.

The medium-term financial plan had been updated. It was reported that assumptions had been made about inflationary uplifts on relevant expenditure lines in 2022/23, but no assumptions had yet been made about increases to income or costs beyond 2022/23. The plan had also been extended to 2026/27 so that the local authority continued to have a five-year forward view of financial forecasts.

As indicated at previous meetings given the scale of the deficit and the ongoing pressures on costs, it had been assumed that a 0.5% transfer from Schools Block would continue to be required in future years, subject to approval by Schools Forum each year. This had been shown on the Medium-Term Financial Plan for illustration purposes in each year until

MINUTES OF SCHOOLS FORUM MEETING - TUESDAY, 14 JUNE 2022

2026/27, when it is anticipated that the direct National Funding Formula may be implemented.

Despite a substantial uplift in High Needs funding for 2022/23 an estimated overspend of £400k for the year was anticipated. Only transfers from other DSG blocks looked set to bring about a net repayment of £579k, reducing the cumulative deficit to an estimated £4.378 million by March 2023.

There were no questions or comments on the medium term financial plan.

Safety Valve Programme

At the March 2022 meeting the Schools Forum had received an update on Blackpool's inclusion in the Department for Education's (DfE) Safety Valve programme for those local authorities with the highest percentage DSG deficits. The programme required those local authorities to develop plans for reform to their high needs systems and associated spending, with support and challenge from the DfE, to rapidly place them on a sustainable footing. The authorities would be held to account for their reform and savings via regular reporting to the DfE. The DfE in turn would help the local authorities with additional funding over time to contribute to their historic deficits, contingent on delivery of the reforms. Capital funding could also be made available to support the creation of local provision if projected revenue savings could be demonstrated.

An introductory meeting with DfE and ESFA officials was held in May 2022 to discuss the Safety Valve agreement with them, including the plan to deliver sustainable provision, demonstration of a balanced High Needs budget and, where possible, a contribution to the writing off of the deficit with future High Needs allocations. Prior to this, preparation work was required and outlined along with timescales in the report.

It was noted that the DSG management plan allowed local authorities to plot the financial impact of no action being taken, then add actions – or 'mitigations' – to the plan to demonstrate how savings could be achieved to arrive at an in-year balanced budget.

Local authority officers would prioritise the development of the tool, taking into account courses of action already planned to address the deficit position. It was hoped that the Safety Valve programme would afford opportunities to accelerate existing plans, particularly around the creation and rationalisation of local provision in order to reduce costs.

It was recognised that the work on the DSG management plan needed to link with the actions being taken in response to the Written Statement of Action issued following the recent Joint Area SEND Inspection, and the DfE had appointed the same SEND Advisor to support both of these workstreams.

Questions and comments were welcomed.

It was asked whether the DfE would write off the deficit and confirmed that they may do so if the plan balanced the budget.

MINUTES OF SCHOOLS FORUM MEETING - TUESDAY, 14 JUNE 2022

It was asked whether the process would also consider the Education Investment Area. It was noted that the Safety Valve process would aim to improve provision and write off debt.

Early Help in Schools

Following discussions at the Schools Forum meeting in March 2022, a meeting of the High Needs Funding Working Group took place on 21 March 2022 to consider priorities for early help in schools. It was noted that £400k per year had been allowed for within the Medium-Term Financial Plan for future early help initiatives. The Working Group considered a number of existing projects whose temporary funding was due to end in the short-term, and made recommendations for the most effective targeting of this funding. The report outlined six initiatives considered.

With powers delegated to it by Schools Forum in March 2022, the High Needs working group agreed that £100k of funding should be allocated to the creation of additional EHE officer roles, given the increasing number of EHE pupils. The High Needs working group recommended that the remaining £300k set aside for Early Help should be used to develop a Family Support Workers in schools model that was fully integrated with the Council's Early Help team. They recommended that the model should be co-produced with schools, and jointly commissioned with and funded by social care and Health.

Questions and comments were welcomed.

One member asked whether health colleagues would contribute financially to the model as it also benefited health services. Paul Turner confirmed that the model would be developed from Christmas 2022 and involved health colleagues and discussions were being held.

A further question asked about accessing counselling services. It was noted that there should be a discussion as to how schools access counsellor support and whether a group of school counsellors could work together to provide a more coordinated service.

It was agreed that the High Needs Working Group should reconvene to discuss the model and funding routes with primary and secondary sector colleagues.

A further question asked whether secondary sector colleagues had been consulted about one of the projects that was not recommended for ongoing funding. It was recognised that the secondary sector was aware of the need to make a balanced decision according to budgets. Paul Turner confirmed that all areas which received funding from the Opportunity Area or the High Needs block were discussed as there was limited resources. It was also noted that each team or provider of services being discussed had been invited to submit a two page summary so the group were informed when they discussed the options.

Action:

- **It was agreed that the High Needs Working Group should meet to discuss the Family Support Worker in Schools model and funding routes with primary and secondary sector colleagues.**

MINUTES OF SCHOOLS FORUM MEETING - TUESDAY, 14 JUNE 2022

Review of Special School Funding

Following an update at the last meeting, special schools had asked the local authority to revisit funding allocations for 2022/23 in light of significant cost pressures, and in consideration of the Schools Supplementary Grant received by the authority for High Needs provision, but which mainstream schools had received directly.

It was noted that a proposal had been put to special schools for their consideration regarding an uplift to top-up rates that would equate to additional funding of between 3 and 4% per school, plus changes to the lump sum arrangements. Pending feedback from schools and trusts, assumptions of increased costs had been built into the latest forecasts of expenditure.

There were no questions on the review of Special School Funding.

SEND Place Planning

It was noted that only around 41% of children and young people with EHC plans attended a mainstream school or setting, compared to a national picture of around 50%. With the exception of Lotus School, which was growing to full capacity, all special schools were full. A meeting was held in April 2022 with various school and academy leaders to share thoughts and seek feedback on SEND place planning.

The group agreed that seven principles that would underpin future planning for places and a vision for SEND provision in 2025 was outlined. It was recognised that the vision would need to align with the local area's response to the Written Statement of Action following the recent inspection, and with the DSG management plan being developed under the Safety Valve programme. With this achieved, the High Needs costs would start to stabilise and allow a more planned approach to the use of available resources. It was reported that capital works had been completed or were in the pipeline, including adapting the Oracle to accommodate Park's post-16 pupils, providing additional temporary accommodation at Park's main site, and planning for an expansion at Highfurlong.

Following the update, it was commented that there was a shortage of qualified teaching assistants to provide inclusive provision in mainstream schools. It was acknowledged that work was underway to develop an offer of training and information available that could be accessed from September 2022 to address the issue and upskill staff in mainstream settings.

Early Years Inclusion Fund

It was reported that Local authorities were required to have inclusion funds for all three and four year olds with SEND who are taking up the free early years entitlements, regardless of the number of hours taken. As a result of a forecast overspend on the £30k inclusion fund budget in 2021/22, the budget for 2022/23 was doubled to £60k through efficiencies realised in the early years central expenditure. The actual expenditure by the end of the 2021/22 financial year was £71k, and forecasts for 2022/23 were even higher. Until now,

MINUTES OF SCHOOLS FORUM MEETING - TUESDAY, 14 JUNE 2022

all costs had fallen to the Early Years block, but it was proposed that the High Needs block contributes to costs, and an estimate of an additional £30k had been included in forecasts for the current and future years.

There were no questions following the update.

SEND Equipment

Changes had been proposed in 2021 to the funding of equipment for pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities, whereby the first £500 of the costs would be met by schools. However due to the process being too bureaucratic, the process would revert back to the local authority ordering and paying for any equipment costing over £300, and the school ordering and paying for any small items costing less than £300.

Schools could also be allocated any larger items of recycled equipment from stores at no cost to them. Should any schools incur a significant volume of costs under the £300 limit that they feel cannot be met from their budget, they would be able to apply to the local authority for financial support under the Exceptional Circumstances process.

The revised arrangements came into effect on 1st June 2022.

In response to a question, it was confirmed that schools had been informed of the changes. It was agreed to send out information on the system and process for the recycling of equipment not in use.

Action:

- **It was agreed to send out information on the system and policy for recycling SEND equipment not in use. (Hilary Wood)**

Following the High Needs Update, Members in attendance agreed to note the decision of the High Needs Working Group to agree to the funding of two additional Elective Home Education Officers at a cost of c.£100k, using powers delegated to it at the Schools Forum in March 2022.

Members in attendance also agreed to support the recommendation of the High Needs Working Group that the remaining £300k set aside for Early Help should be used to develop a Family Support Workers in schools model that is fully integrated with the Council's Early Help team.

Finally, Members in attendance agreed to support a contribution from the High Needs budget to costs of the Early Years Inclusion Fund of £30k.

Resolved:

- **Members in attendance agreed to note the decision of the High Needs Working Group to agree to the funding of two additional Elective Home Education Officers at a cost of c.£100k, using powers delegated to it at the Schools Forum in March 2022.**

MINUTES OF SCHOOLS FORUM MEETING - TUESDAY, 14 JUNE 2022

- **Members in attendance also agreed to support the recommendation of the High Needs Working Group that the remaining £300k set aside for Early Help should be used to develop a Family Support Workers in schools model that is fully integrated with the Council's Early Help team.**
- **Members in attendance agreed to support a contribution from the High Needs budget to costs of the Early Years Inclusion Fund of £30k.**

Any other Business

Hilary Wood informed the Members that a consultation on the National Funding Formula had been issued by the Department for Education on 7 June 2022 and would require a response prior to the next Schools Forum meeting. This was the second stage consultation on the move to a direct funding formula, whereby schools would receive their allocations based on the national formula, rather than through local re-distribution.

Hilary Wood outlined some highlights from the consultation including: local flexibility on the transfer of funding from the Schools Block to the High Needs Block; growth funding options, including an option for popular growth to be extended to maintained settings; split site funding; standardisation of school exceptional premises funding; technical changes relating to the minimum funding guarantee; and an annual funding cycle. Hilary Wood indicated that she would circulate the link to the consultation.

Action:

- **Hilary Wood to circulate the link to the ESFA National Funding Formula consultation.**

8 SCHOOLS FORUM MEETING DATES FOR 2023

The dates for the 2023 Schools Forum meetings were considered and agreed as:

Tuesday 17 January 2023

Tuesday 7 March 2023

Tuesday 20 June 2023

Tuesday 10 October 2023

9 DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING

The date of the next meeting was noted as Tuesday 11 October 2022.

10 GLOSSARY OF TERMS

The glossary of terms was provided for information.

MINUTES OF SCHOOLS FORUM MEETING - TUESDAY, 14 JUNE 2022

Chairman

(The meeting ended 10.48am)

Any queries regarding these minutes, please contact:

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