

**Minutes of the meeting of the Schools Forum
held at 1.30 pm on Thursday 11 May 2017
at Hawley Hall High School.**

Present:

Members: A. Birchall (Vice-Chair, in the Chair) E. Loftus, E. Ellis (deputising for S. Bruen) D. Hurst (deputising for V. Birchall) G. Hayes, H. Phillips, A. McGlown, P. Rimmer (deputising for R. Halford) K. Pilkington, , A. Isherwood, R. Lewis P. McGhee and A Wells.

Observers: M. Wilkinson and M. Atkins.

LA Officers: A. Lindsay (Assistant Director) C. Pealing (Service Manager) J. McDonald (Strategic Finance Manager) C. Myers (Finance Group Manager) and F. Gore (Clerk)

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from A.P. Hardy, S. Bruen, F. Quinlivan, V. Birchall, R. Halford, J. Holland and T. Warren (members) and from K. Winard and Cllr J. Platt (observers)

2. ITEMS FOR INCLUSION UNDER AOB

- Surface Water Drainage Charges
- Apprenticeship Levy.

3. MINUTES

It was agreed: That the minutes of the meeting held on 9 March 2017 be approved as a correct record.

ii Matters Arising

It was noted that : the Forum had responded to the consultations on the National Funding Formula and High Needs Funding (minutes 4a and 5 refer) .

4 National Funding Formula - Update:

Information was circulated at the meeting, published by Fair Funding For All Schools, a national parent led campaign seeking to protect school funding in real terms. This was seen as a potentially helpful document for schools to share with parents and give them an opportunity to make representation to the government for improved school funding.

It was agreed: That the campaign flyer be made available electronically to school and to the respective Headteacher Groups in the Borough.

5. High Needs Block - Update

Ms Pealing reported that the LA had been unsuccessful in its application to the DfE to fund a new Special School in the Borough. Some funding had been awarded to support SEN provision, however the High Needs Block was under increasing pressure as the demand for special school places continued to grow. Following the general election a report would be presented to the Cabinet seeking capital and revenue funding to support the proposed Engagement Centre model as previously reported; the revised early intervention strategy and provision of additional SEN places in the Borough.

Members were reminded that in 2016-17 the Forum had agreed to use £700,000 from the centrally held reserves to meet the demands on the High Needs Budget. It was likely that there would be a need to “top-slice” a sum again. The additional money required to support High Needs reflected, in part, the movement of pupils from mainstream schools to special educational provision and this would need to be reflected in the funding given to mainstream schools.

Ms Loftus (special school representative) stated that special schools understood the problems faced by the LA due to increased demand for SEN places however they had a number of concerns about the approach taken by the LA, including:

- Special schools being asked to admit additional pupils above the agreed Pupil Admission number, but not receiving any assurances that the agreed level of planned place pupil funding would be provided for those pupils;
- The financial impact on special schools of increasing admissions (e.g. the need to create additional classes for small numbers of additional pupils);
- The expectations on special schools to continue to admit ever more pupils;
- A perceived lack of consultation on the LA’s proposals and lack of detail about the financial implications of the LA’s SEN strategy.

Ms Pealing confirmed that the actual number of SEN places required in 2017-18 had only recently been established and therefore it had not been possible to have a meaningful dialogue on 2017-18 admissions until now. There was a lack of money in the system and the discussions regarding funding for additional pupils was required so that the LA could be clear about the funding actually required and could ensure best use was made of the limited funding available. It was planned to meet Special School Headteachers to discuss the LA’s proposals in detail and also to bring a detailed report to the next meeting of the Forum.

Members then discussed the short-term issues regarding the funding of High Needs. Special schools were concerned about the growing number of in-year admissions and the funding provided. There were also concerns about the planned reduction in the outreach budget allocation and the potential staffing implications for special schools and the impact on the support available to mainstream schools with regard to SEN pupils.

Ms Pealing reported that tenders for outreach services had recently been issued and contracts would be awarded in July.

It was noted that from April 2020 School Forum’s would not be allowed to move money between blocks of funding and it was critical that SEN funding was sustainable by April 2020. It was noted however that the DfE propose to provide a mechanism whereby schools in an area could agree, with their local authority, to pool some funding that could then be directed towards those schools that needed it most for their pupils with SEN and disabilities

(e.g. more inclusive mainstream provision, schools with more specialist support and/or special schools)

It was agreed: That the views of the special schools be noted and reports be presented to the next meeting of the Forum giving the latest position regarding High Needs Funding 2017-18 and the LA's SEN strategy.

6. Schools / DSG Outturn 2016/17 :

It was agreed: That this item be deferred to the next meeting.

7. Licensed Deficit Scheme :

Mr McDonald presented a report (circulated prior to the meeting) reminding members that schools were funded from the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG). This included 3 Blocks – Schools, High Needs and Early Years. It was a ring-fenced grant. However cost pressures, reduction in funding, demand within High Needs and the impact of the National Funding Formula were having a significant adverse impact on school and council budgets

As a consequence for the first time some Wigan schools could be required to set a deficit budget until they could deliver on plans to set a balanced budget over time. The Council had never let a school set a deficit budget in the past and had provided significant financial support to help schools facing financial difficulties. However there was now minimal funding available to support schools. Consequently some schools would face setting a deficit budget as early as next financial year. Many Authorities did allow schools to set a deficit budget (licensed deficit) in line with the DfE scheme for financing schools. It was therefore now proposed to amend Wigan's scheme to allow for this. The scheme was set out in appendix A to the report; also included was the current scheme in relation to capital loans which the LA did not propose to change.

Mr McDonald confirmed that the Scheme applied to maintained schools only.

Representatives welcomed the proposals as a way of allowing schools to manage their budgets over an extended period, provided there was proper scrutiny of those schools to ensure the necessary budget recovery measures were taken.

Representatives suggested the following aspects of the scheme be reviewed:

- the process to be followed when a school's deficit was above 1% of its budget;
- the approach to be taken by the LA when schools managing deficit budgets also faced unexpected events that impacted on their income/expenditure;
- the importance of clarity within the agreed scheme;

It was noted that the draft proposals had been discussed with School Business Managers in March and the scheme had been generally welcomed.

It was agreed: (1) That Schools Forum to agree to the amendment within the Scheme For Financing Schools to allow schools to set a deficit budget in accordance with the finally approved Licensed Deficit Scheme.

(2) That the draft Licensed Deficit Scheme as now submitted be approved as a basis for further discussion with School Business Managers and a revised Scheme be reported to the next meeting.

8. AOB

8.1 Surface Water Drainage Charges

A letter from United Utilities (UU) to Lancashire Country Council was circulated at the meeting confirming that UU had agreed to introduce a concession for schools from 2018-19 that would give a discount on the present charges resulting in an approximate 40% reduction in a school's overall wastewater bill.

Mr Myers reported that this would equate to an approximate total saving of £350,000 for maintained schools in Borough and the savings would be passed directly to the schools.

It was agreed: That the discount be welcomed.

8.2 Apprenticeship Levy.

A representative asked if the LA had yet calculated the potential impact on schools of the planned introduction of the Apprentice Levy on employers?

It was reported that the final calculation had not been made. Whilst the scheme would apply to all maintained schools, it did not apply to VA schools and academies with wage bills below £3M.

It was agreed: That a report be submitted to the next meeting on the projected impact of the Apprentice Levy.

9. Next Meeting: 27th June 2017 at 1.30 p.m. at Bedford High School

Meeting closed at 2.30 p.m.