

Minutes of the Meeting of the Schools Forum

**Thursday 22nd March 2018 at 1.30 p.m.
at Bedford High School**

Present:

Members: A.P. Hardy (Chair) E. Loftus, E. Ellis, F. Quinlivan, V. Birchall, G. Hayes, H. Phillips, A. Birchall, A. McGlown, R. Halford, A. Isherwood, T. Cunningham, P. McGhee, R. Lewis and A. Wells.

Observers: M. Atkins.

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

1A. Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from N. Amber and T. Warren and from Cllr J. Bullen, M. Wilkinson and K. Winnard.

1B. Welcome to Ms. T. Cunningham

The Chair extended a warm welcome to Ms. Tracy Cunningham following her appointment to the Forum as the Primary Sector Governor representative.

It was agreed: That Ms. Cunningham be welcomed as a member of the Forum and that Mr John Holland be thanked for his services to the Forum as the former Primary Sector Governor representative.

2. Item for inclusion under AOB: Academy Representation:

3. Minutes of the meeting of the Forum held on 11 January 2018

It was agreed: That the minutes of the meeting held on 11 January 2018 be approved as a true and correct record.

Matters Arising: None.

4. School Budgets 2018-19:

Mr. Myers (Group Finance Manager) circulated at the meeting a spreadsheet showing the individual School Budgets for 2018-19. The information included comparative budgets for 2017-18 (post minimum funding guarantee) and changes to the budgets as reported at the last meeting of the Forum. He reminded members that the indicative budget information presented at the last meeting had been based on the October 2016 numbers on roll data and was based on completion of a complex spreadsheet supplied by the DfE which all Local Authorities were required to populate.

At the February half term the DfE had asked Wigan to clarify the information used to populate the spreadsheet and had subsequently required the LA to use a different calculation in respect of one entry, which had impacted on the final budget figures.

The LA had received representations for a number of schools that had seen their actual 2018-19 budgets reduced from the indicative budget figures previously reported. The LA had acknowledged that the confusion caused by a lack of clarity regarding the elements to be included in the data used by the LA had caused schools problems. Wigan had asked the DfE to visit Wigan to explain how they wished the calculation to be made in future years in order to avoid a repeat to the problems experienced this year.

The LA also acknowledged that whilst the overall impact of the changes had been small in terms of the primary:secondary funding ratio (a total of £47,000 less to the primary sector) some schools had seen significant reductions in their actual budgets compared to the indicative figures reported at the Forum. The major factor in schools losing funding remained a fall in pupil numbers.

The primary sector representatives accepted that the budget information presented at the January meeting had been submitted in good faith, with no intention to deceive members. However the data as then presented had been flawed and consequently the decision making process had been flawed. If the correct calculations had been carried out the Forum could have decided not to move to the National Funding Formula in 2018-19 because of the serious impact on a number of schools. Some schools now faced significant budget reductions that would have to be dealt with as a matter of urgency and could lead to higher class sizes and/or reduced staffing. As a consequence of this there was a fear that the credibility of the Forum and of individual representatives had been placed into question.

Q. had other Local Authorities has similar experiences to Wigan in terms of the data used to complete the DfE spreadsheet?

A. there was a Regional meeting of LAs today at which this would be raised.

Q. was the LA confident about the pupil numbers used in calculating the budgets?

A. the data was based on the information provided by the DfE who had populated the spreadsheet.

Q. can changes be made to the budget to reflect the situation now facing schools?

A. no; the Regulations did not allow for an in-year change to the Formula.

Q. how will the LA ensure there is no repeat of this in future years?

A. the DfE had been invited to explain in detail what should be included in the data used by LA's to populate the funding spreadsheet.

Q. when will the MFG changes be introduced?

A. from 2020-21; however it should be noted that this year only one school would have triggered the application of the per pupil minimum funding criteria.

Q. why did the LA not contact schools individually as soon as the possible detrimental impact on their budget was known?

A. the LA was having to work against an extremely tight timescale to make the changes

needed by the late intervention by the DfE; and to prepare and issue budgets to all schools against that timetable

It was agreed: That the concerns of members be noted and the LA be asked to learn from their experiences and to seek absolute clarity from the DfE on the data to be used in completing the funding spreadsheets.

5. Alternative Provision:

5A. Introduction of Charges for Alternative Provision

Further to minute 5a of the last meeting Ms Pealing referred to subsequent discussions held with a number of schools on an estimate of costs should the decision be taken to impose a retrospective charge from 1st September to 31 December 2017 for the placement of pupils at alternative provision. The total amount that could be reclaimed if the charges were retrospectively applied was £66,000, which would have supported the High Needs Budget, which was projected to be significantly overspent in 2017-18.

Ms Isherwood reported on the numbers of pupils attending Three Towers Pupil Referral Unit and the significant number of pupils who had special educational needs. The Unit faced significant pressures to meet the increasingly complex needs of those pupils being referred there by mainstream schools. Ms Pealing confirmed that this was a matter she would be happy to discuss outside this forum.

Primary school representatives referred to the increasing problems that many primary schools faced in having to meet the needs of pupils with significant special needs, in particular those who displayed aggressive and abusive behaviour to other pupils and to staff. It was also important to recognise that the earlier SEN pupils displaying such behaviours had access to specialist support the better for those pupils and ultimately for both primary and secondary school staff

Ms Pealing acknowledged that this was a growing problem for mainstream schools, special schools and alternative provision providers but that the LA did not currently have the capacity to meet the ever growing demand for specialist provision. It was very costly to place children out-of-borough. Whilst there would be financial remodelling to make more effective use of the limited funding available it had to be recognised that the demands for specialist provision could not be met from current High Needs Budget and therefore any additional income that could be levied to support that budget was sorely needed.

Secondary representatives noted that the large majority of the retrospective funding levied by the LA would be met from the secondary sector and was contrary to the decision taken at the last meeting of the Forum, where it had been agreed the charges for alternative placements would be introduced from 1st January 2018. WASCL had discussed this and had agreed to await further discussions at this meeting. It was unfortunate if the LA had acted on the basis of comments from a smaller group of secondary schools. With regard to the alleged notification of indicative costs as referred to earlier, the schools contacted had taken the communication to be a clear charge they were obliged to pay.

It was agreed: That on the Chair's casting vote approval be given to the levying of a charge on schools for pupils placed in alternative provision for the period 1st September to 31st December 2017 at a cost of £2,000 per pupil placement.

5B. Three Towers (Wigan's PRU) - Impact of Planned Funding Changes:

Mr Halford referred to the decision taken by the LA, as reported at the last meeting of the Forum, to request the ESFA to agree to remove funding for 30 places from Three Towers. He expressed his grave concerns at the impact of that decision on the quality of educational provision for vulnerable children. The total financial impact would be a loss of £450,000 to Three Towers and a significant reduction in the current level of provision.

Mr Halford asked:

- what assurances could the LA give regarding the quality of future provision for those who would no longer have access to Three Towers?
- would pupils be required to attend unregistered alternative provision?
- would the planned Engagement Centers would be Ofsted Registered?

Ms. Pealing reported decision had not yet been taken on the alternative placements for those who would previously have been referred to Three Towers; the Engagement Centers would not be Ofsted Registered but the LA would work closely with HMI on ensuring good quality provision. Mr Lindsay reported that the Inclusion Steering Group were well aware of the importance of good quality provision and were supportive of a broader base of provision. The LA was aware that there was currently one unregistered private provider and the LA ensured schools were fully aware of that if asked to comment on any planned placement there.

Q. how would the LA monitor the quality of provision?

A. systems would be put in place and would follow the principles of the Inclusion Strand.

Q. what would be the cost of the planned changes ?

A. there would need to be changes made to the LA's current offer and it could take 2-3 years before there was a major impact on the number of pupils seeking specialist provision or alternative placements. Three Towers would remain part of the LA's offer but there would be an increased focus on outreach and early intervention.

Ms Isherwood made a request that the LA move funding upwards in the system to help to remove the present blockages at The Three Towers by creating more specialist school places within the Borough's good and outstanding special schools.

Q. did Three Towers presently admit pupils from out of borough?

A. yes, any admissions above the present 193 admission number were agreed through individual pupil agreements; the 193 places were filled with pupils from Wigan LA. The additional income from out-of-borough pupils was being used to enhance provision for all pupils and there was no subsidy applied for out-of-borough pupils.

Ms. Pealing noted that an appeal had been submitted to the ESFA against the request to reduce places and funding from September 2018. The LA would continue to review the need for placements at Three Towers and at alternative providers and therefore it was possible that more than the 163 places might be needed in the future.

It was agreed: That the views now expressed be noted and further updates be given on High Needs Provision and funding.

6. SEND Review – Outcome of Review and Proposals:

Members were reminded that the outcome of the SEND Review had been reported at the recent Systems Briefing and to school colleagues at a variety of meetings. It was now proposed to carry out some detailed financial modelling on the alternative approached identified, with the intention of having some firm proposals in place by the summer.

It was agreed: That this item be discussed at the June meeting of the Forum.

7. Impact of Changes to FSM on Current and Projected Pupil Premium Funding:

Members discussed the potential impact on future Pupil Premium Funding arising from the introduction of universal free school meals for KS1 children and changes in the FSM eligibility criteria.

Mr Lindsay reported that the LA had recently written to school asking that they urge parents to continue to apply for FSM and to do so before the deadline of 31st March 2018. This would help protect future PP funding and would have a long-term impact on pupil funding for both primary and secondary schools.

Representatives expressed concern that a loss of funding directly targeted at helping disadvantaged pupils would seriously affect the ability of schools to provide the support and interventions required in order to “narrow the gap” in educational performance of the disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged.

Representatives confirmed that schools were responding to the request by the LA.

It was agreed: That the information be noted.

8. AOB

Academy Representation:

The Chair reported that this would be the last meeting of the Forum that Mr Roy Halford would attend in his capacity as the academy school representative. He thanked Mr Halford for his valued contribution to the work of the Forum and to his long-standing commitment to education in the Borough over many years. On behalf of the Forum he wished Mr Halford a long and happy retirement.

The Clerk reported that all academies would be contacted in order to identify a new academy representative and in the event of an election being held it was proposed to allocate one vote per Academy or Multi-Academy Trust.

It was agreed: That the proposal for the appointment of an academy representative on the Forum be approved.

9. Future Meetings: (meetings to commence at 1.30 p.m.)

10th May 2018 – at Hawkley Hall High School
21st June 2018 - at Bedford High School

Meeting closed at 2.55 p.m.