

# Slough Schools Forum – Minutes of Meeting held on 13 March 2024

## FINAL MINUTES – approved at meeting on 26 June 2024

- Present:** John Constable, Langley Grammar School (Chair)  
 Ben Bausor, Always Growing Ltd  
 Eddie Neighbour, Upton Court Grammar School  
 Jon Reekie, Phoenix Infants School  
 Jo Rockall, Herschel Grammar School  
 Jamie Rockman, Haybrook College  
 Maggie Waller, Holy Family Primary School  
 Emma Lister, Chalvey Early Years Centre  
 Peter Collins, Slough & Eton Church of England Business and Enterprise College  
 Angela Mellish, St Bernard’s Catholic Grammar School  
 Navroop Mehat, Wexham Court Primary School  
 Neil Sykes, Arbour Vale School
- Officers:** Neil Hoskinson, Director for Education and Inclusion  
 Sarah Hockly, Interim Strategic Finance Manager, People (Children)
- Observer:** Nisha Gill, Cippenham Nursery  
 Cllr. Puja Bedi, Lead Member for Education & Children’s Services
- Apologies:** Sue Butcher, Director of Children’s Services  
 Claire Fletcher, Penwood Primary School  
 Rhodri Bryant, The Langley Academy  
 Gill Denham, Marish Primary School  
 Valerie Harffey, Ryvers School

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and confirmed that there was no clerk available for this meeting. Instead, the meeting would be recorded and transcribed afterward.

1001	<p><b>Apologies</b></p> <p>Received as from Sue Butcher, Claire Fletcher, Rhodri Bryant, Gill Denham and Valerie Harffey.</p>
1002	<p><b>Notification of any other business</b></p> <p>None</p>
1003	<p><b>Declarations of Interest</b></p> <p>None</p>
1004	<p><b>Minutes of Previous Meeting held on 11.01.24</b></p> <p>The minutes of the meeting held on 11.01.24 were agreed as a true record. There were a number of follow-up questions:</p> <p><b>Item 993</b> - JC asked whether there was any update on the timescale for consultation on the plans for specialist resource provision, as LB had advised that he would provide a written answer outside the 11.01.24 meeting. NH agreed he would check with LB.</p> <p><b>Item 993</b> – JC asked whether there was any update on the joint commissioning strategy going to Cabinet by the end of the financial year. NH confirmed that a decision was made that it did not need to go to Cabinet because it wasn't a new strategy, but simply a refresh of the existing strategy. Therefore, it is now a refreshed joint commissioning strategy, in effect the same strategies as before, with some new principles attached.</p> <p><b>Item 995</b> - JC referred to the proposal for AP funding, and the request from Forum for LA officers to put some pressure on the Commissioners in relation to a mechanism for funding AP. NH confirmed that a conversation had taken place with Paul Moffatt, with a follow-up meeting to take place shortly, and that the issue had also been raised with the DfE advisor Liz Flaherty.</p>
1005	<p><b>Schools Forum Membership update</b></p> <p>Nothing to report.</p>
1006	<p><b>Local and national funding updates/announcements</b></p> <p>SH advised that the LA had moved over to a centralised payment process for National Non-Domestic Rates (NNDR) for maintained schools. This will bring maintained schools in line with academies, where the rates will be paid directly to the council by the DfE. MW asked whether this change was reflected in the APT. SH confirmed that APT did show the rates as a separate line. EL asked whether it is the same for maintained nursery schools as it is for maintained primary and secondary schools. SH advised she would find out and revert to the group.</p> <p>SH advised Forum that the LA had received an additional safety valve payment of £1.17million that was not</p>

	<p>expected. It was assumed that this was an early payment from the 2024-25 financial year rather than any increase in the total amount being granted.</p> <p>SH reminded Forum members of the National Tutoring programme grant, which covers up to 50% of tutoring costs, and the funding available for Senior Mental Health Lead training. The deadline for application for the SMHL grant of £1,200, through which schools can access DfE Quality assured training in the spring or summer term, as been extended to 31<sup>st</sup> July.</p> <p>JC thanked SH and asked whether there was any information on the DfE's recommendation to the school teacher pay and review body. SH confirmed that she had not come across anything in any of the updates that she has received.</p>
1007	<p><b>DGS Management Plan/Safety Valve programme update</b></p> <p>The latest update report on the progress made against the Safety Valve Agreement was sent to the DfE on 15<sup>th</sup> December 2023. The report evidences that SBC remains on track to meet the targets set out in the SVA and that are no significant changes since the last report in September 2023. All RAG ratings remain Green other than the risk of legal challenge, which is Amber. The 2023-24 Period 8 (November 2023) position for HN DSG had forecast a spend of £24.9m against a budget of £25.1m. However, the previous report did not include the backlog of 290 EHC plans with additional forecast spending of £2.6m. This has now been included so the final outturn position for 23-24 is largely unchanged at an underspend of £0.155m. The actual predicted DSG deficit position for the end of 2023/24 is a reduction to £11.0m once the Safety Valve contribution of £3.2m is received.</p> <p>At the time of this Forum meeting, no feedback had been received.</p>
1008	<p><b>School Block 2024/2025 Update</b></p> <p>SH asked Forum members to note the two papers relating to this item. The Cabinet report on the DSG is for information and is a public document after having been to Cabinet and the Council. In previous years, the DSG budget was a paragraph or an appendix to the Council's main budget paper; this year, following best practices across other local authorities, a standalone DSG report was created for Cabinet approval.</p> <p>JR commented that there was a lot of detail and transparency in the report around the Central School Services block and the early year's block, but this was not so for the high needs block. SH confirmed that the primary purpose of report was to get political ratification for schools block allocation, which is required for submission of the APT, and hence that was why there was greater detail on this. JC suggested that JR's concern was whether the issues with High Needs are being highlighted to Councillors. NH confirmed he was happy to share the same level of detail on High Needs as with other budgets when it went to the Finance Board and then to Cabinet. NH also noted the DSG paper had been covered quickly at Cabinet, with relatively little direct questioning and an acceptance that this had been provided by Schools Forum. . But they weren't challenging the decision. JC thanked NH and SH, noting that Forum members would welcome the greater level of transparency.</p> <p>SH explained the changes to the APT that had happened since the previous Forum meeting in January. Following the January Forum meeting, the APT was completed with the assumption that the NNDR would be included in the APT in normal way with an allocation to the schools. DfE subsequently requested two adjustments. The first involved an adjustment of £112k to reflect the changes to the NNDR arrangements; the second change of £27k was connected to a change in the inflation allowance within payments on PFI.</p> <p>Therefore, we made those 2 changes as advised by the DfE. We also managed to sign up for the direct payments. So going forward there will not be a difference that has to be allocated to mainstream schools to make up for any changes in the NDDR rates. So we are protected going forward. I think at the moment that saved us something like £60,000 for this year.</p> <p>The reported headroom in January was £623k. Following allocations to the NNDR and to the PFI payments, and the consequent adjustments to the minimum funding guarantee, the final headroom figure was £484k which was allocated through basic funding (AWPU).</p> <p>In January the 0.5% transfer to the High Needs Block was approved, with the caveat that if required, part of this 0.5% could be directed to the CSSB as had happened for the previous 2 years. SH confirmed that this transfer was proved necessary, so that £100k of the 0.5% block transfer was directed to the CSSB, with the remainder to the High Needs block.</p> <p>The Chair thanked SH and again noted that the greater degree of transparency and detail was welcome.</p> <p>MW asked whether the LA had raised the question of the split site criteria with DfE. NH advised that the LA had gone back to the DfE and asked for clarification about what constitutes the educational use of a second site. DfE had confirmed that they have received an application from a local school for an additional site, and approved the application. The LA had also approached the school as well, and had received presumably the same information that had been provided to the DfE. The Chair thanked MW for raising the issues, noting that there were concerns expressed over whether the additional sites for which funding was received met the criteria.</p>
1009	<p><b>Central School Services Block 2024/2025</b></p> <p>SH presented the agenda paper on the Central School Services Block (CSSB). SH asked Forum members to</p>

	<p>note the actual costs being faced and how that relates to the budget proposals for 2024-25. The CSSB forecast outturn for 2023-24 is slightly over budget by around £7k. This masks an overspend on admissions of around £19k compared to budget, compensated for by not utilising the full staffing budget in some other areas. This means the allocated funding is very tight.</p> <p>The CSSB allocation is made up of two elements – an allocation per pupil, and an allocation for historic commitments. Slough receives a per-pupil rate of £27.98 per pupil, compared to the average for England of £40.27; the LA receives a lower level than both the national average and neighbouring local authorities. In addition, the allocation for historic commitments is also low, and is based on some spending figures from 2017. The allocation for historic commitments is also reducing at 20% per year.</p> <p>NH added that there does not seem to be a mechanism for challenging and changing the allocation, but that given Slough's situation and the level of scrutiny over finance, we ought to challenge the fact that a local authority that's struggling so much financially is being so poorly funded in this area. NH also stated that the LA had raised this with the DfE, but with the response that there is no right to request a recalculation, and that nothing will change unless there was a change to how the CSSB is actually calculated.</p> <p>NH asked whether Schools Forum could provide a letter expressing concern about funding level allocated, and the pressure that puts on the budget. The Chair confirmed that he would be happy to write on behalf of Schools Forum. MW endorsed this and commented that we still seeing the impact of an error from 7-8 years ago; as this was an error on the part of the LA it may not have originally attracted much sympathy from DfE. The Chair confirmed that block transfers into CSSB from the schools and High Needs blocks in the past had been necessary because the DfE would not accept any form of re-baselining or recalibration of the block. SH commented that different LAs seemed to report their historic commitments differently, and that the situation doesn't seem equitable. The Chair agreed to look back and see what Forum records showed about the original CSSB allocation. Cllr Bedi advised that she meets with the DfE Commissioner quite regularly and it would always be helpful to have information which would help 'fight our corner'.</p> <p>SH set out the 2024-25 budget which largely followed the same themes as previous years. Uplifts had been applied in some areas and the resulting budget was balanced. However, the same difficulties were anticipated in 2024-25 as were seen in 2023-24.</p> <p>The Chair thanked SH and advised Forum members of their statutory responsibility for approving this budget. There were no further comments or questions, and the Chair confirmed that the proposed CSSB budget was approved.</p>
1010	<p><b>Early Years Block 2024/25 – Centrally retained budgets</b></p> <p>SH advised that the 2024-25 Early Years Block budget had been previously approved by Forum. 95% of the allocated EY funding is on a pass-through basis, based on census figures and agreed rates to be passed back to settings that look after early year's children. This agenda item focused on the 5% retained element of that funding, which is a budget within the council that is used to support early years in other ways. The pass-through budget amounts to £18.383 million, covering three to four-year-olds, two-year-olds, and under 2-year-olds in various settings. An additional growth allowance and the centrally retained element bring the block total to £19.3 million, with additional grants for the MNS supplementary funding, disability access fund, and the early years pupil premium.</p> <p>For early years, key areas in the centrally retained budget relate to strategic financial support, early-years advisory teachers, statutory responsibilities and behaviour support. BB commented that it was particularly helpful that these proposals had been shared transparently, and emphasised the desirability of knowing how value for money and the quality of delivery would be assessed. EL agreed and confirmed that it was good to see it so transparently where the centrally retained funding is going and how it's been broken down.</p> <p>MW asked a question about the reduction in the quality care and learning allocation compared to the previous year. SH confirmed she would refer the question back to the Early Years team.</p> <p>The Chair confirmed responsibilities; the local authority proposes this budget and Schools Forum gives formal approval. There were no further comments or questions and the budget was therefore approved. The Chair also noted that there had been requests in previous years for this and other areas for some assessment of the impact of the spending, and suggested this should be looked at next academic year.</p>
1011	<p><b>2023/24 Forward Agenda Plan</b></p> <p>The remaining meeting for 2024-25 is scheduled for Thursday, 13<sup>th</sup> June. The provisional agenda is in the agenda plan, but would be confirmed by SH and JC outside the meeting.</p>
1012	<p><b>Key Decisions Log</b></p> <p>The key decisions log again is just for your information, and just includes the key. The key points made. That will be updated after this meeting and provide a record of the summary decisions.</p>
1013	<p><b>Any Other Business</b></p> <p>AM asked if the LA could provide a list of Finance Staff because there seems to be new names appearing in the</p>

team. SH agreed to send out an updated list.

AM also commented that the change of the end-of-year date, which only affected maintained schools, was causing some problems within the FMS system. The Chair proposed that SH and AM communicate directly outside the meeting and provide clarification to other schools as required.