

Slough Schools Forum – Minutes of Meeting held on 13 July 2023

DRAFT MINUTES

Present: John Constable, Langley Grammar School (Chair)
Ben Bausor, Always Growing Ltd
Peter Collins, Slough & Eton Church of England Business and Enterprise College
Gill Denham, Marish Primary School
Valerie Harffey, Ryvers School
Angela Mellish, St Bernard's Catholic Grammar School
Navroop Mehat, Wexham Court Primary School
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

Officers: Neill Butler, Strategic Finance Manager, People (Children)
Neil Hoskinson, Associate Director for Education and Inclusion

Observer Peter Rowe, Slough Primary Heads Association

Apologies: Carol Pearce, Penn Wood Primary School
Neil Sykes, Arbour Vale School
Emma Lister, Chalvey Early Years Centre

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

	Notification of any other business JC has one item that he will discuss after we have concluded the agenda items.
946	Declarations of Interest None
947	Minutes of Previous Meeting held on 13 January 2023. (including matters arising and action log) The minutes of the previous meeting on 13 th January 2023 were agreed they were an accurate recollection of the previous meeting. There were no matters arising.
948	Update on National / Local Funding Issues NB updated Forum members on the IRP's recommendation for teachers' pay increases, with 6.5% proposed by the Government; the minimum national starting salary for new teachers would be £30k, representing a 7.1% on the M1 salary. NB confirmed that this still needs agreement nationally from the Unions. There is an increase in funding of £525 million nationally to cover the 7 months from September 2023 to March 2024;, but the methodology for distribution to schools hasn't yet been stated. The full year effect of this is £900 million. This funding has to be distributed as an additional grant because the schools block funding was confirmed in January and we will get the provisional settlement in the next few days – normally this comes in just before the Christmas holidays. JC thanked NB and agreed we won't be able to formally confirm the pay settlement until school teachers pay and conditions document comes out. JC asked whether the additional money is actually genuinely "additional funds" coming in – was this in addition to the "Jeremy Hunt £2 billion". NB confirmed that as far as he was aware, this was additional funding. NB continued by advising that there is a Government web link that you can put in the salary grades and will show the new potential salaries from September. (Link posted in to the chat by NB). JC asked if colleagues had any questions. JoRo ask about the two letters received from Gillian Keegan, with a spreadsheet showing the additional money coming to schools - what period this was for? Was it September to March? JoRo confirmed that all

the Slough schools are listed on this spreadsheet. NB asked if we could share this spreadsheet in the chat and he would look in to it.

MW asked whether DfE will be re-prioritising in order to release this as 'new money' to schools? JC confirmed that this was currently unclear.

NB wanted to ask about the Early year's supplementary grant. Back in the Spring, the Chancellor announced that there would be an increase in rates from September 2023 and also an extension of eligibility for early years providers. This doesn't impact on every school, but the headlines are that the two-year-old funding is going up by 3.2% and 6.3% for 3 and 4 year olds. NB confirmed that the LA was still waiting for the rates for individual local authorities, but these would be shared as soon as possible with early years providers. The increases would be effective from 1st September. NB also confirmed an increase to the maintained nursery Schools lump sum, equivalent of around £10k pounds per for each of the 5 maintained Nursery Schools in additional funding.

There were no further questions and JC thanked NB for the update.

949 DSG Management Plan & DfE "Safety Valve" programme update.
JC referred to the two papers for this item in the agenda pack

NB began by referring to the current financial position. The outcome position is much better than it has been in previous years. A projected overspend in the high needs block is partly offset by an underspend in the schools block because of the growth fund. Budget management reports for this year mean that the high needs spend is being tightly monitored in much more detail than previously. The Q1 position is still to be confirmed but the direction of travel on the spend side appears to be going in the right direction. The LA is required to have to have a balanced overall DSG in order to have the £25.5 million cumulative historic deficit written off by the DfE.

NH noted that there were still likely spending commitments, with a backlog of SEND cases in the system that the LA should be paying for. The LA is currently getting EP advice for a large number of cases which will then translate into EHC plans with funding attached, and possibly with special school placements involved. Once these were confirmed, the level of commitment should be clear and the level of EHC plans known. NH asked Forum members to note that the Safety Valve programme was predicated on built on previous rates of EHC plan increases and what we are now seeing is three times that level year on year. Most LAs on the Safety Valve programme are finding they are struggling to hit targets. Slough is in a relatively good position at the moment.

VH asked what were the potential consequences of not meeting the targets for the Safety Valve programme. What action would the DfE take?

NH responded by explaining that the DfE have confirmed that the detail of the DSG management plan which underpins the Safety Value programme can be re-negotiated, so that's where we are at the moment. However, the bottom line is that the LA still has to break even in 2025-26. NH acknowledged that given the pressures coming through on the High Needs Block, this would appear difficult to achieve; the Safety Valve programme doesn't reflect the very different national position compared to 12 months ago.

JC referring to VH's question about "what happens if you don't meet the targets" and asked for confirmation that the output from the safety valve programme is the writing off of the of the cumulative deficit, through some mechanism which relieves the council of that burden.

NH confirmed this is correct. Targets are set for each year, with 'chunks' of funding received if those targets are met. The largest amount was has already given in year one. What is at risk is the next chunk of the funding. NH also stated his belief that the LA could have pushed harder on some of the other support available, for example in relation to capital funding, and that this would be revisited in the renegotiation.

NH confirmed that previously the safety valve plans were brought to Schools Forum as a final document. Under the renegotiation, changes in one area may need to be offset with changes somewhere else. Schools Forum direction on these principles which should underpin these decisions will therefore be very welcome, rather than the LA coming to Forum with final decisions made on schools' behalf.

JC thanked NH and confirmed that this was helpful clarification and a welcome declaration of commitment to collaborative working, which is something that Forum members have always valued. JC referred back to Forum's repeated requests for impact assessments and linked this to a sense amongst Forum members of this being 'done to' rather than 'working with. NH advised that his assumption was that Forum would have been made aware of the potential impact of participation in the programme before the LA committed to it.

JC requested clarification from NB on how many people remained in Slough who were involved in the negotiation of the original safety valve deal, as it were; NB confirmed it was just him. JC noted that that this gave some perspective in that the DfE appear to be being more flexible about how the program operates and with people now in position who largely weren't involved when it was originally embarked on, the whole situation could be looked at with largely fresh eyes.

NH reflected that this was helpful. However, it did not mean that the safety valve plans were being redrawn. In his view the biggest change was not that somebody different was looking at the safety valve, but rather what was happening nationally in SEND in terms of the pressures coming through.

GD asked about the timescale for any negotiation and whether this would affect next year? NH confirmed that the next meeting with DfE was the following week, but that the detailed scrutiny would happen over the summer with a view to having an idea by September of where we stand.

GD asked NH if he had any sense of the scale of the SEND backlog and whether it would push us back into a major high needs block deficit. NH confirmed that at present they understood how many applications for EHCPs were in the backlog and how many were likely to need a special school place. He reiterated that this was a national issue and anticipated that the DfE would end up putting more funding in to high needs support at a national level – although there were a lot of politics associated with this. n.

PC commented on the complexity of balancing the decisions being made in schools with the DSG priorities. LAs need to make sure the safety valve works out properly, but if schools don't make the right decisions, things could go wrong. It was essential to use the Education Partnership Board as the local mechanism for ensuring that decision making at school and at LA level was mutually beneficial and not disadvantageous to each other. The reality is that schools are not necessarily working in alignment harmony with the Safety Valve objective, because there isn't a shared understanding of how the programme might be changing, and what that will mean for everybody.

NH commented that the way the safety valve programme is set up must reflect the decisions schools are making. The Code of Practice means that certain things have to be done for young people with SEND. If schools have a young person with a need, they are statutorily responsible for delivering with support from the High Needs Block.

MW asked about the Central School Services block and whether the outstanding issue around an apparent underfunding in the CSSB had been addressed. NB responded that he was aware that there was some funding coming out of the CSSB which should be funded from the Council's general fund. This was highlighted as part of the Safety Valve, and in discussions with the DfE. Since then the LA has actually transferred about £250k out of the CSB and in to the general fund. That burden is no longer on the DSG but is part of the Slough deficit. It is mainly related to the virtual school, which will still be funded. There was also some funding of staff costs that weren't actually support costs for the DSG but were costs that should be funded from the general fund. They have been transferred out. At the moment the Central School Services block is in a balanced position.

MW asked if the DfE may provide additional protection because there was an historical error where we have had to transfer money every year from school to the CSSB. NB confirmed that historical spend on the CSSB is being reduced by 20% year on year down to zero; an opportunity for Slough to put in a disapplication about 3 years ago for it to be protected was, unfortunately, missed. However, the burden on the CSSB isn't significant, amounting to around £30k. NB hoped this could be managed within the overall allocation without going back to the DfE; as the error responsibility for missing the opportunity was missed lay with Slough, it probably couldn't be reopened.

950

Primary-secondary funding ratio

JC advised that item 7 concerns the primary-secondary funding ratio, originating from a letter sent to me as Chair of Forum by Pete Rowe on behalf of the Slough Primary Heads Association.

	<p>JC advised that the letter was asking for Forum members to revisit the primary secondary funding ratio, and that he had added some background the paper to inform the discussion. JC noted that Pete Rowe had been invited to the meeting as an observer, and would be asked to contribute to the meeting and explain a little bit more of the background.</p> <p>PR noted the government's push to all local authorities to be moving closer towards the National Funding Formula (NFF) but that Slough remains an outlier. He reiterated the points made in the letter and suggested that as other LAs moved closer to the median primary-secondary ratio, there would have to be a good reason for Slough not to do that.</p> <p>JC asked primary members if there was anything they wanted to contribute, on the basis that they would have been part of the SPHA discussion which led to that letter. GD suggested that there was strong case to put this on the agenda for next year and discuss it again.</p> <p>JC confirmed that the primary secondary ratio is an output, not an input, to the formula. It is a consequence of the decisions that are made around the different factor values. Forum makes recommendations to the LA about the values associated with the different factors, and that these are increasingly close to the National Funding formula rates. NB confirmed that the only factor for which Slough is not yet completely aligned with the NFF is mobility, but we are moving towards it. NB also pointed out that the final ratio is impacted by the relative sizes and distribution of schools. In Slough, a relatively small authority, the smallest school is a primary with 180 pupils but the biggest school in pupil terms, is also a primary school – this is unusual. Where there are lots of small schools, the ration is skewed because each school is attracting the lump sum. PR responded that in his view the lump sum argument did not account for the discrepancy in the ratio. NB agreed it would be helpful to understand exactly why the Slough ratio was not closer to 1:1.29.</p> <p>JC suggested there was a piece of work to do in the autumn term to determine the extent to which the ratio is determined by school structure, or by decisions that are made around factor values. It would be helpful to understand how decisions that are made in the next funding round about factor values influence the ratio and to provide a very clear explanation of where Forum is able to recommend changes where it cannot.</p> <p>MW confirmed as the previous chair of forum and as a primary representative she would endorse the importance of understanding the factors and their complexity, and understanding which ones are driving the ratio is an important piece of work which could be undertaken through the 5 to 16 Task group. MW reminded members of the process; the task group looks at the formula and the implications of any recommendations, and Forum makes recommendations to the LA.</p> <p>NM asked about MW's recommendation to go through the 5-16 task group and if that wasn't the case, how else would this get done? MW confirmed that in some authorities there may not be such a task group, in which case the detailed work would be done in the full Forum. However, the task group approach allowed for a more detailed scrutiny of the proposals. JC confirmed that not every Forum works in that way, but historically, the impact in Slough has been to give the proposals for the formula very close scrutiny, with in-depth discussions about particular schools, and how to manage the move towards the NFF to avoid a funding 'cliff edge'.</p> <p>PR agreed that working through the 5-16 task group was the best approach Forum members agreed that that JC should write back to SPHA confirming the agreed process for discussing the ratio in the autumn term.</p>
<p>951</p>	<p>Local School Improvement Fund</p> <p>JC reminded Forum members that the Slough Local School Improvement is a sum of money set aside over a number of years for school improvement. The fund was originally set up using DSG underspend and additional underspends from LA budget lines associated with school improvement. These were transferred to a ring-fenced fund held on behalf of local schools by the Slough Teaching School Alliance (STSA) and to be directed towards school improvement projects. When the STSA company was finally wound up earlier this year, the final balance of £162k included the remaining balance of the local school improvement funds, and the remaining operating surplus from STSA's activities. In addition a further sum of around £70k originally held within the primary phase has remained unspent for a number of years. This was originally set aside for a recruitment focused marketing project, with a more recent agreement by Forum to put that money back into the LSIF.</p>

	<p>JC advised that the proposed use of the LSIF proposal was the result of discussions between PC, PR and NB, thinking about how to utilise that money to best advantage over the next couple of years. The key issue is, who looks after the money and who authorizes its allocation. The proposal set out in the paper asked Forum to agree to apportion the LSIF funds to the primary and secondary phases, and for the primary and secondary phase associations to decide on how it would be spent. .</p> <p>PC confirmed that this had been discussed at length within SASH meetings and at the Slough Education Partnership Board, and also emphasised the willingness of schools to work cross-phase to make really good use of this money. PR confirmed that this from the primary phase and noted that there were already provisional plans in place for a joint conference day between the phases using some of this funding.</p> <p>NH confirmed that he fully supported the use of the LSIF funds in this way, noting that school improvement should be led by schools. The LA could offer people, knowledge and links to support this.</p> <p>JC thanked NH and proposed that a plan be brought back in September for Forum's approval around the allocation for the next academic year, with a regular report back to Forum on how that money is being used. Forum members endorsed this proposal and agreed with the principles for the administration of the LSIF set out in the paper.</p>
952	<p>School's Forum Membership Update</p> <p>JC notified Forum members that there was a vacancy for secondary academy representation; a volunteer has come forward and this would be progressed through the secondary heads association. JC noted that there is still a vacancy for a primary academies member and asked if PR, as the Chair of SPHA could take this back again to the primary heads.</p> <p>JC asked Forum members to note that a number of colleagues had terms of office that come to an end at the end of August. JC confirmed he would be writing to those colleagues asking, if they wished to extend their membership for a further 2 year term of office.</p> <p>MW noted that Forum currently has minimal Governor representation, and asked if this could be pursued in both phases. MW suggested it might be possible to have directors of a MAT who have come up through a Governor route? JC thanked MW for her valid point.</p>
953	<p>Reappointment of Chair for 2023/2024</p> <p>JC confirmed that he was happy to continue as chair. There were no other offers, and Forum members endorsed JC's extension in the role for the next academic year.</p>
954	<p>2023/2024 Forward Agenda Plan</p> <p>JC drew members' attention to the proposed forward agenda. This included an earlier meeting in September to allow for specific formalities to be completed, eg noting the DSG outturn from the previous year. JC asked for members to notify him if any of the proposed dates clashed with other commitments, eg headteacher meetings. The agenda would be clarified and amended as appropriate in consultation with NB as the year progressed.</p> <p>JC confirmed that the 5-16 Task Group members would be contacted in the autumn term with proposed dates for meetings.</p>
955	<p>Key Decisions Log</p> <p>This was updated after the January meeting and it would be further updated following this meeting.</p>
956	<p>Any other business</p> <p>AM asked about education finance support for maintained schools, requesting an update on staffing with contact details; AM also noted difficulties in contacting anyone on the education finance team through email. NB confirmed that there was an issue with the management of the education finance inbox which was currently being addressed; he has a fairly new team and the difficulty they are facing is finding finance staff that have school experience. NB asked for any school with concerns to contact him directly.</p>