

Slough Schools Forum – Minutes of Meeting held on 9th November 2023

DRAFT MINUTES – for approval at meeting on 11th January 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
Rhodri Bryant, The Langley Academy
Emma Lister, Chalvey Early Years Centre
Gill Denham, Marish Primary School
Angela Mellish, St Bernard's Catholic Grammar School

Officers: Neil Hoskinson, Associate Director for Education and Inclusion
Sarah Hockley, Strategic Finance Manager, People (Children)
Tony Madden, Development Manager

Observer: Len Brazier – SEND transformation lead, Slough Borough Council

Apologies: Neill Butler, Interim Strategic Finance Manager, People (Children)
Sue Butcher, Director of Children's Services
Peter Collins, Slough & Eton Church of England Business and Enterprise College
Valerie Harffey, Ryvers School
Navroop Mehat, Wexham Court Primary School
Carol Pearce, Penn Wood Primary School
Neil Sykes, Arbour Vale School

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.

971	Apologies Received as noted above.
972	Notification of any other business None
973	Declarations of Interest None
974	Minutes of Previous Meeting held on 28 September 2023, (including matters arising and action log) The minutes of previous meeting held on 28 September 2023 were agreed as an accurate record of the previous meeting. There were no matters arising.
975	Schools Forum Membership update The Chair confirmed an ongoing vacancy for a Primary Academy representative and noted that it would be helpful to have some representation from larger trusts that are not currently included on Forum.

<p>976</p>	<p>Update on National / Local Funding Issues</p> <p>SH gave a brief update on recent work undertaken by the LA. This included the return for high needs places, and early modelling of the APT based on the October 23 census data.</p> <p>The Chair asked if there were relevant DfE announcements that Forum members should be aware of. SH confirmed that she checked the website the previous evening and nothing particular to mention. SH confirmed that the biggest topic at present is the Safety Value and the APT.</p> <p>The Chair noted that the national coverage of the DfE mis-count of pupil numbers and the consequent shortfall in the 2024-25 budget seemed to have gone quiet, and asked SH for comment. SH confirmed that the total DSG allocation for Slough is unaltered; however, amendments to funding rates affects the total headroom in the DSG. This will covered later in the meeting.</p>
<p>977</p>	<p>2023/2024 DSG Budget Monitoring Report – Q2 Report</p> <p>The Chair referred to the Q2 Budget Monitoring report on page 7 of the agenda pack and asked SH to lead the item.</p> <p>SH noted the build-up of the cumulative DSG deficit which is mainly attributed to overspends in the high needs block. Over a number of years, that deficit has risen to £25.5 million; of this about £10.8 million was written off last year by the DfE, leaving the current position of £14.7m deficit. SH noted that a small deficit of £0.1m at the end of the financial year in March 2023 increased the overall deficit slightly to £14.8m, which is the starting point for the 2023-24 year. There is an understanding with the DfE that there will be further payments to help reduce the remaining deficit over the period of the Safety Valve programme. This is dependent on returning to balanced budgets and 'living within our means' within the DSG.</p> <p>The forecast at the end of Q2 is for a surplus for the year of £0.6 million, comprised of a surplus of £0.3 million in schools, £0.2m in high needs and £0.1m on early years. The expectation is that the Central School Services Budget block would be fully allocated. This would reduce the overall deficit to £14.2 million with further payments coming in from the DfE to reduce that. However, although the Schools Block is showing an underspend of £300k, this is linked to the Growth Fund contingency which may be used in supporting bulge classes; in quarter 3 that figure may reduce.</p> <p>The Chair asked whether the likely DfE contribution at the end of this year was know, and what impact this would therefore have on the cumulative deficit? SH confirmed that SBC had received two payments of around £1 million each, with a third payment expected, and that the intention is for the deficit to be cleared by the end of 2026-27. NH noted that there are agreed staged payments agreed up to 2027, which total up to the £27m. The overspend should be reduced to a breakeven point and then to a positive position so that no new debt is added. NH confirmed that he has asked Len Brazier of the SEND team to join the meeting for his item so he can comment further on some of the work being done in this area. The Chair welcome LB to the meeting.</p> <p>There were no further questions or comments on this item.</p>
<p>978</p>	<p>Growth Fund (added as agenda item 7a)</p> <p>TM explained that this was a short paper to set the scene for this year, and reminded Forum members that following previous feedback, changes to the way growth fund allocations were presented had been implemented to align with the school year.</p> <p>The 2023-24 top slice had been agreed in January 2023 with a large contingency built in to allow for any further growth. TM noted the pressure within the primary phase, with 2 bulge classes opened this year already, in Y4 and Y6. The west of Slough has seen a large drop in births, with surplus places in all year groups there even after having closed 4 forms of entry. However, the central and east areas are very different, with little or negative capacity in many year groups.</p> <p>In terms of secondary school places, this is the peak year for year 7, and the previous expansion programme means there is no pressure on year 7 with enough school places for the current demand. This is the last year of support for the expansion at Westgate, with support from September 2023 to March 2024. Their funding for April 2024 to August 2024 would be through their normal funding so doesn't require support from the Growth fund.</p>

	<p>Taking into account bulge classes currently open, and increases in class sizes to 32 in some schools, the current level of contingency is around £180k, which would be enough for at least two further bulge classes if needed</p> <p>The Chair thanked TM for the presentation asked what top slice might be sought for 2024-25? TM confirmed that as there won't be any permanent expansions to support, the only funding need would be for the second year of bulge classes and for contingency. The likely top slice could be of the order of this year's £600,000.</p> <p>MW asked about the trend of the in-year applications, whether this is levelling in general or whether there could be implications for the growth fund going forward. TM noted that it was difficult to forecast and that more analysis of a complex range of factors would be needed. NH noted that the concerns about in-year applications had been flagged for 2-3 years without action by the LA. A place planning working group had been convened to support the development of a more strategic approach.</p> <p>The Chair thanked NH and commented that we all welcome the level of strategic thinking that is developing here.</p>
<p>979.</p>	<p>2023/24 DSG - CSSB Budget 2023/24</p> <p>The Chair noted that consideration of the CSSB budget should have been brought to Forum earlier, but this did not happen because of difficulties around capacity within the LA. The Chair explained that this is an area where Schools Forum has a decision making role; in this case Forum was being asked to note a decision that had been made, and to retrospectively agree the CSSB budget allocations for 2023-24.</p> <p>SH explained that there was a block allocation of £785k in January 2023, together with an agreement by Schools Forum for a further £100k to be transferred from the Schools Block. This gave a total budget of £885k. This paper outlined the expenditures, including some costs which are negotiated centrally for all authorities, such as the copyright licenses we there is very little leeway to opt out.</p> <p>Comparison with the 2022-23 figures showed the high needs block contribution from the CSSB has been removed. The cost for the virtual school had been removed from the statutory regulatory line and was now being funded by the Slough Borough Council general fund. A small portion of the CSSB relates to historic commitments; this figure is about £32k and this will be decreased by 20% per annum over the coming years.</p> <p>JC thanked SH for the update and asked for questions/comments about individual budget lines.</p> <p>MW asked whether the allocation for admissions included the annual request to support by transferring £100k from schools block, first brought to Forum some years ago because of pressures in the admissions team. MW asked if this would be an ongoing annual request and expressed concern about the viability of the service going forward if it were dependent on this transfer. SH confirmed that the commitments were greater than the CSSB allocation, and combined with the year by year reduction in the allocation for historic commitments, and bringing the total budget allocation down to the CSSB funding level could be challenging without impacting services. The Chair confirmed that a transfer has been approved in at least two previous years and that Forum would be considerate of a transfer again; presumably that request would have to be made and then approved at the January Forum.</p> <p>RB commented that there was little flexibility in the funding levels, and questioned whether there was sufficient funding to address the pressures on education welfare given the current attendance challenges. NH noted that the council was looking at how to realign teams to priorities, and how to encourage collaborative working on attendance with early help and with social care.</p>
<p>980.</p>	<p>Safety Valve Programme Update</p> <p>NH gave an update on the Safety Value programme, presenting a report largely written by NB.</p> <p>The 2022-23 overspend was lower than expected and there is a projected underspend in this current financial year. However, this does not take account of backlog SEND cases; including an average cost for these, the projected underspend for 2023-24 is £0.2m as referred to in the item on the DSG Q2 figures.</p>

	<p>Overall, it is a better position than previously; it is not expected that the high needs block will break even year this year, but reductions are on track. NH advised that full monitoring arrangements are now in place.</p> <p>JC thanked NH for the summary, confirmed that everyone has the detailed paper in the agenda pack, and asked for comments and questions.</p> <p>JR referred to page 10 of the report and the funding for alternative provision. JR noted that the top-up funding for alternative provision in Slough was lower than statistical neighbouring local authorities, typically around £6k lower with a consequent impact on Haybrook's finances leading to a deficit budget position of £250k. JR noted that provision mapping referred to panel typically comes back with a lower allocation than requested. For an individual student the difference is relatively small, but compounds to a significant loss of income across multiple students and means that Haybrook cannot provide the quality of education required to meet the needs of the children referred.</p> <p>NH stated that there seemed to be a level of misunderstanding with schools, who had not been specifically told what was in the safety valve programme and what the overall aims were. DfE had made it clear that the local authority should not be paying for non-statutory alternative provision such as preventative places, or any AP to broaden the curriculum. Such provision should be funded from the schools block and a new commissioning framework for schools and for AP should be developed. The LA has statutory duties and it's funded only for those statutory duties – if it is not a statutory duty, the LA is not funded to do it. Due to the profile of Slough schools, the majority of the students requiring AP tend to come from 6 schools. It is unrealistic to expect the AP offered by Haybrook to be funded by those six schools and if the LA was not providing this support it should come from the Schools Block, and not the High Needs block.</p> <p>NH emphasised the need to look urgently at different commissioning/funding models, as there will be another cut to the number of places at Haybrook in the next financial year. The DfE will not accept the LA saying that this is putting pressure on Haybrook's staffing because they are saying the LA should not be paying for it, the schools should. The reality is therefore that Haybrook needs to be supported out of the Schools block and not the High Needs block, and that Schools Forum should look at a more holistic view of AP across the schools block. This would mean the use of headroom or a direct top slice of the schools block.</p> <p>LB commented that the past 6 months have been very difficult for JR and for Haybrook, in terms of both funding and planning staffing. He emphasised the strength of the Haybrook provision, and the importance of funding it at the right level. NH echoed LB's comments and said that his visit to Haybrook was inspiring and that the staff have excellent relationships with the young people.</p> <p>MW endorsed LB's comments about the value of AP and asked whether we could learn from what happens in other authorities that may have selective systems. MW also noted that funding directly from schools block would be more transparent, less painful and less specific to individual schools, and would support the moral drive to do it properly and for all schools to value it and pay for it.</p> <p>JC asked NH whether he would be advocating a further request for a block transfer for the 24/25 budget, which would need to be brought to Forum in January, or whether this was a longer term proposal. NH confirmed that the LA will be very happy to support something more immediate, but that it was important the any proposal should be driven by headteachers.</p> <p>JC thanked NH for his comments and noted that the structure of that piece of work is outside the scope of Forum to organise. Forum's role would be to look at any financial decisions required by any proposals.</p> <p>JR endorsed the suggestion about top slicing and emphasised that any proposal brought to Forum in January should include primary alternative provision as schools block is money for all schools.</p>
<p>981.</p>	<p>2024/2025 DSG – Schools Block transfer</p> <p>SH presented results of the consultation with schools and the principle of allocating headroom within the schools block.</p> <p>JC noted that there were two separate issues; the approval of the principle of the 0.5% block transfer, which is something that Forum has agreed in the previous two years, and then the principle for distribution of any headroom in the schools block. SH confirmed that the 0.5% transfer to the high needs block would essentially come from the headroom and would not decrease the NFF funding allocations for schools. SH</p>

	<p>confirmed that the headroom within the schools' block was approximately £3.5m, which was therefore well able to cover the block transfer which would be around £870k.</p> <p>SH noted the low level of responses from schools to the consultation. The majority view in relation to the block transfer was that the transfer should take place but some schools expressed reservations based on the impact to individual schools' budgets. The second recommendation to use basic entitlement to allocate surplus schools block funding had significant support.</p> <p>The Chair thanked SH and suggested that Forum give provisional approval for the proposal for block transfer, to be confirmed in January when any other pressures on headroom – eg in relation to the alternative provision discussed earlier – were known. He also proposed that Forum provisionally approve any headroom to be allocated via basic entitlement funding.</p> <p>MW agreed that she would endorse this approach. MW also noted that the consultation does not mention that the Safety Valve programme was predicated on a transfer, and suggested that making this clear might have generated responses that were more positive.</p> <p>Forum members agreed with the Chair's proposals and gave provisional approval to the 0.5% block transfer and to the principle of allocating headroom through basic entitlement.</p>
982.	<p>Task Group Update</p> <p>The Chair agreed to convene the 5-16 Task Group to discuss the issues raised in today's meeting. The Early Years has not yet happened.</p>
983.	<p>2023/2024 Forward Agenda Plan</p> <p>Dates for the next three meetings are now fixed as shown on the forward agenda.</p>
984.	<p>Key Decisions Log</p> <p>No comments</p>
985.	<p>Any Other Business</p> <p>The Chair reminded Forum members that in the absence of a school's forum clerk, he and his PA at Langley Grammar School were undertaking clerking and minute taking duties this year. For transparency, he asked members to note that funding for time spent on these functions, although not the time of the meetings themselves, was claimed by Langley Grammar School and funded from the CSSB specific allocation for covering the operational costs of Schools Forum.</p> <p>Meeting closed at 10:44.</p>