

Slough Schools Forum – Minutes of Meeting held on 26 June 2024

DRAFT MINUTES – for approval at meeting on 17 October 2024

Present: John Constable, Langley Grammar School (Chair)
Ben Bausor, Always Growing Ltd
Eddie Neighbour, Upton Court Grammar School
Jo Rockall, Herschel Grammar School
Maggie Waller, Holy Family Primary School
Emma Lister, Chalvey Early Years Centre
Gill Denham, Marish Primary School
Valerie Harffey, Ryvers School
Angela Mellish, St Bernard's Catholic Grammar School
Navroop Mehat, Wexham Court Primary School
Neil Sykes, Arbour Vale School
Tony Madden
Len Brazier

Officers: Neil Hoskinson, Director for Education and Inclusion
Sarah Hockly, Interim Strategic Finance Manager, People (Children)

Apologies: Sue Butcher, Director of Children's Services
Claire Fletcher, Penwood Primary School
Peter Collins, Slough & Eton Church of England Business and Enterprise College
Rhodri Bryant, The Langley Academy
Jon Reekie, Phoenix Infants School
Jamie Rockman, Haybrook College
Cllr. Puja Bedi, Lead Member for Education & Children's Services

JC 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.

1014	Apologies Received from Sue Butcher, Claire Fletcher, Peter Collins, Rhodri Bryant, Jon Reekie, Jamie Rockman and Cllr. Puja Bedi <i>Explanatory note:</i> JC apologised for the change of date of this meeting from that originally proposed. The change followed discussion with LA officers and was due to significant issues producing end-of-year information in time for the original date. However, postponement of the meeting meant that some members were unable to join due to pre-existing appointments.
1015	Notification of any other business None
1016	Declarations of Interest None
1017	Minutes of Previous Meeting held on 13 March 2024 The minutes of the meeting held on 13 March 2024 were agreed as a true record. MW asked if there had been any further development in relation to potential AP funding, following the at the last Forum, where JR presented proposals which we were unable to move forward. NH confirmed that the LA was still seeking a way of funding some preventative places at Haybrook for the next academic year.

<p>1018</p>	<p>Schools Forum Membership Update – Paper</p> <p>Forum members were asked to refer to the current forum membership summary and to note that there was still a vacancy for a primary academies member and nominations were also sought from the maintained primary school group to enable NM to step down. JC thanked NM for her continued willingness to contribute to Forum discussions until replacement was found.</p> <p>JC notified Forum members that MW was standing down from Forum membership after 21 years of service and paid tribute to her extensive national and local knowledge which had been hugely valuable. JC reiterated members' sincere thanks for MW's contribution over this time. MW commented that it has been a privilege. JC noted that this created a further vacancy for the maintained primary group.</p> <p>JC informed Forum members that he would be leaving Langley Grammar School in December 2024 and would therefore be standing down from Forum at the end of the autumn term. This would create a secondary Academy vacancy and a vacancy for Chair. JC noted that the Chair is normally elected on an annual basis; he confirmed that he was happy to continue as Chair until December 2024 but a new Chair would need to be appointed to serve from January 2025. JC also confirmed that the regulations clearly state that the chair of the Schools Forum must be one of the members of the Forum rather than a local authority officer, and that the appointment of an independent chair is not allowed.</p> <p>Forum members agreed that JC should continue as Chair until December 2024. JC confirmed that all schools would be contacted in the autumn term to seek nominations for the various vacancies.</p> <p>MW asked that members of the Forum should consider standing as Chair as it is a worthwhile and fulfilling role. MW thanked JC for all that he has done over the past 15 years in the Schools Forum.</p>
<p>1019</p>	<p>Local and national funding update/announcements</p> <p>SH confirmed an update since the last meeting to the early years funding allocation, which had been included in the High Needs paper as an overall review of the block funding.</p> <p>An expected amendment to the high-needs block allocations due to import-export adjustments would probably be received in July. SH confirmed there was little in terms of updates from the ESFA.</p>
<p>1020</p>	<p>DSG 2023/2024 – Monitoring Report and update – Paper</p> <p>NH advised Forum that the overall management of the Safety Valve programme and the DSG had been positive, and in line with predictions. Some other local authorities are struggling and have requested to have their SVs renegotiated because of missed targets; this has not been the case in Slough. However, some issues with previous years, where funds which should have been received had not been. The DfE had been informed that the previously reported position and brought forward values for 2022-23 were being validated and may result in a realignment of the brought forward value. The DfE are satisfied that the LA remains on track and has released the next payment of £3.1m.</p> <p>The most serious funding pressure remains EHC Plans due to a backlog of cases and the uncertainty of the financial implications. This area been have upgraded to an amber risk in the DSG report when previously it was green. All other areas in the Safety Valve programme remain green for now so it's a positive position. In in terms of the DSG as a whole, the net outturn position is an overspend £228k, against an original forecast surplus of £155k - a small overspend rather than a small surplus.</p> <p>NH commented that the most important issue that will need to be addressed through Schools Forum is place planning for SEND over the next five years. NH noted that some headteachers would be aware of conversations with the LA about where those places could be, and hoped a longer-term plan to balance sufficiency and demand could be produced in the Autumn term.</p> <p>SH added that the report presented to Forum was looking at the high needs block only. An underspend in the schools block would will be covered by the Growth Fund report. SH noted that any underspend in the Growth Fund, would go to reserves and would be used in 2024-25 and beyond to support growth and decrease further pressure on the schools block in future years.</p> <p>SH reported the CSSB had a small underspend of about £20k, which was due to some costs being recharged across to a different block. The Early Years block was slightly overspent by around £90k, and the LA was attempting to reconcile the different systems together to identify why this was the case.</p> <p>NH reiterated how hard SH and her team had worked to resolve issues, particularly where headteachers were telling the LA that their schools were owed money and hadn't been paid. With one exception, these has all been rectified and adjustments have been made for Arbourvale, Littledown and Haybrook.</p>

	<p>JC noted that at the end of the financial year, Forum would normally receive a written summary of the DSG outcome. SH confirmed that allocations, spend and carry forward figures for 2023-24 would be distributed.</p> <p>JC advised that he had received queries from JaR along with his apologies for not attending. The first question was <i>"is our growth in EHCPs in line with national? Or is there something different happening in Slough?"</i> NH confirmed that we know anecdotally that it is probably in line with what is being seen nationally and if anything, Slough is managing the demand better than many other local authorities.</p> <p>JC advised that the second question from JaR is <i>"Will additional EHCPs result in any greater income from the ESFA and has that been factored in to the DSG Management plan?"</i>. NH confirmed there is a link but not a direct correlation. An increase of 10% in EHCPs does not necessarily lead to 10% more funding. There is uncertainty every year as to how the budget would be balanced with additional plans being approved, but the final high needs block settlement usually show an increase. NH commented that it was hoped that after the election there would be a more rational approach to special needs funding that properly allows for future planning. SH confirmed that any funding received will be based on reported figures, and therefore there will be time lags before the funding is received particularly when there is a very sharp increase in demand.</p> <p>NS noted that the accuracy of the number of approved EHCPs within Slough had been checked and confirmed with LB and reconciled with schools' records and claims for funding. However, there had been a substantial increase in recent years, and the projection in the paper indicates there is further expansion, but that those places are not feasible unless they're being funded appropriately. Families across the borough with young children are worried about whether these places are going to be funded by the local authority, whether they will have placements in the borough either in special schools or mainstream provision, or whether they'll be moved outside of the borough? NH asked that the LA's concerns about the level of funding be noted, so that elected members were informed and may bring pressure to bear on central government.</p> <p>In response to Forum members' concerns, NH confirmed that the budget is not a limiting factor in terms of funding for an individual EHCP. Tribunal processes have established that overspending in the high needs block is not grounds to withhold funding from a school or a young person. The difficulty faced nationally is a shortage of actual special school places rather than necessarily funding for them. This is why it is necessary to work on the sufficiency planning to make sure there are sufficient special school places moving forward.</p>
1021	<p>Growth Fund 2023/24 outturn – paper</p> <p>TM talked through the Growth Fund report and associated appendices.</p> <p>Appendix A showed the Growth Fund outturn for 2023-24, with an underspend of approx. £253k. Secondary expansions at Wexham and Westgate were coming to an end. Bulge classes had been opened at Godolphin Junior and Marish Primary, while Ryvers Primary had taken an extra 2 pupils per class in most year groups.</p> <p>TM noted the underlying factors which impacted the assumptions for 2024-25. The rate of new arrivals to Slough over the last two years has been unprecedented, resulting in very high in-year admissions, which continues to put pressure on available places. There is significant pressure on places in the central and east planning areas. This pressure is ongoing in primary schools. However, it is important to note that secondary schools have already reached their peak and although another peak is anticipated in a few years, the existing school places should be sufficient. Secondary schools are not expected to be a concern again.</p> <p>There are sufficient places in the west of Slough, so no classes are needed there. In response to the continued pressure in the central and east areas, expressions of interest to open bulge classes or offer additional places have been invited from primary schools, including entire forms of entry for junior classes. 5 or 6 responses from schools were received, and 3 of those offers have been accepted.</p> <p>Appendix B showed the proposed position for 2024-25, with a £500k top slice agreed by Forum and an assumption that we would use £155k of the 2023-24 underspend. If all 90 contingency places were used, this would still leave a carry-forward of £35k, indicating there sufficient resources to get through the year.</p> <p>Appendix C looked ahead to potential pressures. TM explained the assumption of a top slice of £700k in 2025-26, with no carry forward or use of previous years' underspend, the likely level of bulge classes and additional pupils, and the prudent level of contingency built in. TM noted that a few bulge classes had been opened and it was likely that more would be needed unless a more long-term solution could be found. TM indicated his preference for a school to open a permanent additional junior form of entry as the preferred option. This might create an imbalance for a school, eg with two forms of entry in KS1 and three forms of entry at KS2, but this would be appropriate for Slough due to a declining birth rate. Infant classes are not under pressure, whereas junior classes are always under pressure due to the impact of inward migration.</p>

	<p>SH noted that Schools Forum had agreed a £500k top-slice allocation to the Growth Fund for the 2024-25 period. However, when the accounts were reconciled, it was noted that the final school's block allocation did not align as expected with the total of individual schools' budget shares, and that the discrepancy might be related to the growth figure provided by the DfE. SH commented that she suspected a mistake was made when the 2023-24 APT was compiled, and this was partially responsible for the £253k underspend in the 2023-24 Growth Fund. As a result, there is the previous year's underspend in addition to the agreed £500k allocation for 2024-25, which rolls into the DSG reserves. This underspend acts as a buffer for the increased demand this year. Ongoing work on finalising and validating the figures for 2022-23 should lead to a clearer understanding of the reserve movements related to the growth fund over the past two or three years. At the point of preparation of the APT for 2025-26, it would then be possible to evaluate the level of DSG reserve related to growth and hence determine the required top slice for 2025-26. Therefore, the proposed top slice figure of £700k in Appendix C may partially be covered by the reserves and therefore reduced.</p> <p>NH commented that the usual systems for determining growth do not work well in Slough due to the high levels of inward migration and consequent mobility in junior and secondary phases. There is a need for a different system which involves greater collective discussion and agreement about the need for places and the planning of where those places should be provided.</p> <p>NM commented on the potential issue under current arrangements of schools wanting to open extra places unnecessarily, which could put a strain on others, and emphasised that the idea of schools collaborating on place planning is excellent and potentially highly beneficial. NH noted that academies can increase their student numbers independently outside any place planning strategy, and the local authority can't stop them. He noted that most Slough schools are good at supporting each other, and the local authority was very fortunate in the way that academies support their neighbouring schools; it was important to maintain this collaborative approach.</p> <p>TM confirmed that there was currently a place planning sub group and a main place planning board with school representation from the chairs of the primary and secondary headteacher groups. The board met regularly approximately every two months and there was a desire to widen the membership.</p> <p>TM asked Forum to note that Grove Academy has consulted to reduce its PAN which would change the place-planning picture for the central area going forward. The initial reduction is in Reception, which is where there is least pressure at the moment, but this could lead to problems in a few years.</p> <p>JC noted that the predicted outturn for the Growth Fund for 2023-2024 is £253k but that only £155k of this figure was proposed for use in 2024-25. What is happening to the other £100k? SH explained that there is actually no carry-forward mechanism of funds for growth purposes. At the end of each financial year, each block of funding within the DSG may either have an overall surplus or underspend, which can vary annually. In the financial year 2023-2024, there was an overall underspend, but there was also an unexpected additional allocation from the DSG. Normally, allocations are based on agreements with the Schools Forum, but when reconciling the DSG allocations against expenditures, it became apparent that they had used a figure closer to the growth number specified by the DfE rather than the position agreed with Schools Forum. The underspend from 2023-2024 does not carry forward but instead moves into reserves at year-end. These reserves are ring-fenced for the DSG and cannot be spent on other purposes. For the financial year 2024-2025, there was a planned top slice for growth fund expenditure of £500k through the APT out of 2024-2025 allocations. However, it is anticipated that actual spending will exceed this amount, resulting in an overspend on the school block for the year which will utilise some of the reserve from previous years.</p> <p>JC confirmed that this clarification was helpful. Forum had previously taken the simplified view that underspend in the growth fund carried over into the following year, but this was a misleading representation of the actual mechanism and suggested that future wording in relation to Growth Fund reflected this.</p> <p>JC thanked TM for the detailed paper and appendices, and acknowledged the inherent uncertainty associated with the management of the growth fund, particularly in predicting how the numbers will unfold.</p>
1022	<p>DSG 2024/25 – High Needs Block Centrally Retained</p> <p>SH noted that this item was intended as a verbal update due to uncertainty over the availability of figures at the time of agenda planning, but that a written report had been completed and circulated to Forum members as a supplementary agenda paper immediately prior to the meeting. This report set out the allocation of centrally retained high needs funding for information only, and did not require any decision from Forum.</p> <p>SH noted that the LA receives an initial high needs funding allocation which may change with updates such as the census, commissioning place reports, import/export figures, and other factors. These changes can represent significant movements.</p>

	<p>SH explained that a framework had been established to set out how the current allocation as published by the DfE was expected to be spent, however, these plans are subject to change as circumstances evolve throughout the year. Additionally, the Safety Valve programme requires the LA to deliver a budget that is close to balanced as possible; this does not allow for overspend on the high needs block. The picture presented in this report represented the budget currently being reported on internally within the Council, although it may be updated in due course.</p> <p>JC asked whether the level of detail in the report was sufficient for Forum members to understand where the spending occurs. MW commented that there was a case for reinstating the high-needs task group which could review expenditure line by line; this would be helpful scrutiny since the Forum meetings do not generally allow for detailed analysis due to time constraints. MW commented further that while the summary provided, it would be beneficial to have a mechanism for the Forum to understand the trends in spending.</p> <p>JC noted that reviving the High Needs Task Group would be worth considering for the autumn, and there could be further discussions to determine its remit. Although Forum doesn't have a statutory decision-making role in the High Needs Block, it should be able to scrutinise and ask questions.</p> <p>JC noted a question submitted by JaR relating to whether "independent special schools and alternative provisions" referred to in the report table were in or out of borough. SH responded that she thought that independent special schools could be either, and that alternative provisions referred to Haybrook. JC suggested that it might be helpful in future to break down the Special Academies line between primary and secondary settings, such as Haybrook and Littledown, to provide greater transparency in how the funding is allocated across the phases.</p> <p>JC thanked SH for her report and responses.</p>
1023	<p>Scheme for Financing Schools</p> <p>SH noted that the scheme for financing schools hasn't been updated for a couple of years, and that a review was needed. In particular, there was a need to look at the cash sheets and settlement dates, and create a proper timetable and schedule for these tasks. Internal work on cash sheets had resulted in improved standardisation and the implementation of robust checks and data protection measures. These updates now needed to be reflected in the scheme for financing schools. There was also a need to agree on payment dates since the LA had been making payments on different dates, sometimes earlier than stated in the scheme. It would be beneficial to have a conversation with schools about when payments should be made and establish a yearly timetable so everyone knows what to expect. This update is likely to be addressed in the autumn term.</p> <p>SH stated that there would be consultation with schools to consider opinions and views. JC asked whether this consultation would include the views of academies since the issues under consideration affected more than just maintained schools. SH confirmed this would be the case and that the consultation would take place during the autumn term.</p>
1023	<p>2024-25 Forward agenda plan</p> <p>JC noted that the forward agenda plan for 2024-25 is currently a proposal, setting out five meetings on a similar schedule to this year, with suggestions for items to be considered at each stage. This plan will need to be finalised with the local authority. The first meeting was proposed for 25th of September, with a following meeting in early November, subject to confirmation from the LA these would link to the APT submission process.</p>
1024	<p>Key Decisions Log</p> <p>This was tabled as an updated record of previous Forum decisions. There were no comments or questions.</p>
1025	<p>Any Other Business</p> <p>JC thanked everyone for attending and for their contributions throughout the year, and wished everyone well for the remainder of the term and the upcoming summer break. He reiterated the need for someone to step forward to chair future meetings from January 2025, and would welcome the opportunity for a conversation with anyone interested.</p>