

Slough Schools Forum – Minutes of Meeting held on 17 October 2024

DRAFT minutes for approved at meeting on 28 November 2024

Present: John Constable, Langley Grammar School (Chair)
Angela Mellish, St Bernard's Catholic Grammar School
Ben Bausor, Always Growing Ltd
Claire Fletcher, Penn Wood Primary School
Emma Lister, Chalvey Early Years Centre
Gill Denham, Marish Primary School
Jamie Rockman, Haybrook College
Jo Rockall, Herschel Grammar School
Navroop Mehat, Wexham Court Primary School
Neil Sykes, Arbour Vale School
Rhodri Bryant, The Langley Academy

Officers: Dave McNamara, Director Financial Management
Luisa Hansen, Strategic Finance Manager, Children's Services
Neil Hoskinson, Director for Education and Inclusion

Observer: Cllr. Puja Bedi, Lead Member for Education & Children's Services

Apologies: Annabel Scholes, Interim Executive Director, Finance & Commercial (S151 Officer)
Eddie Neighbour, Upton Court Grammar School
Jon Reekie, Phoenix Infants School
Peter Collins, Slough & Eton Church of England Business and Enterprise College
Sue Butcher, Director of Children's Services
Tony Madden, Development Manager
Valerie Harffey, Ryvers School

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.

1026	Welcome and Introductions
1027	Apologies Apologies were noted as listed above.
1028	Notification of any other business AM requested clarification on changes within Education Finance as communication had been unclear.
1029	Declarations of Interest None
1030	Minutes of the Previous Meeting held on 26 June 2024 JC requested any points of accuracy or matters arising from the minutes of the previous meeting. No issues were raised.
1031	Schools Forum Membership Update. JC drew Forum members attention to the current membership list. There was still a vacancy for a primary academies member; JC has asked for this to be publicised through the Slough Primary Heads' Association. NM confirmed her wish to step down, but was happy to stay on until someone else steps forward as a maintained schools representative.

	<p>JC noted that there should be representation from the Windsor Forest Colleges Group, and would contact Gillian May to seek a nomination.</p> <p>JC also advised he would be leaving his post at the end of this term, creating a vacancy for a secondary academies member and for the chair position. JC noted that members representing schools must be either headteachers, governors, or senior leaders within schools, and that the chair must be elected from within the membership. It is not permitted, under current regulations, to appoint an independent chair.</p> <p>JC also noted that the local authority has the responsibility of ensuring Forum meetings are properly clerked. NH confirmed that this had been discussed within the LA, and that it was likely that a position could be created which includes the role of School Forum clerking.</p>
<p>1032</p>	<p>Local and National Funding and Other Updates</p> <p>DM confirmed that there were no significant national updates. The DfE focus seems to be on how the Government is planning to raise funds for its spending programmes and priorities.</p> <p>JC asked about the funding methodology to support the 5.5% pay rise for teachers. DM confirmed this had been published and he would work through the implications with LH. DM noted that the methodology doesn't always reflect actual costs as it is based on pupil numbers, but that overall funding level is generally appropriate.</p>
<p>1033</p>	<p>DSG 2024/2025 - Q1 Monitoring Report and Update</p> <p>DM presented the DSG Q1 monitoring report, reflecting the position at the end of June 2024 as reported to the Council in September. At the point of the production of the Q1 report, many of the pressures being currently seen had not been fully identified.</p> <p>DM noted that signs of pressure were already seen at the end of Q1, particularly around high needs, due to increased numbers, complexity, and rising costs. These pressures were known but at the time, the LA couldn't put precise figures on them. More work had been done since then leading to a revised position for Q2 with greater clarity.</p> <p>JC thanked for the detailed paper and opened the meeting up for questions.</p> <p>JR asked for further elaboration on section 5.3, which stated that cost allocations to the high needs block from other areas are subject to review to ensure compliance. It seems to suggest that some of the deficit in the high needs block may have been caused by allocations that shouldn't have been attributed to that block - was this correct, and is it just a matter of accounting? DM responded that there is an accounting difference of opinion regarding whether some of the costs included are actually allowable under the conditions of the DSG. The issue only affects the 2023-24 period and essentially relates to how some of the educational psychologist costs have been classified. The LA believes these costs might be permissible under the safety valve agreement, but are seeking clarification from the DfE.</p> <p>NS noted that pressure on high needs is a national issue and that representatives from the DfE have indicated they would welcome further information regarding any additional funds that might be necessary to address this challenge. Special education and EHCPs have increased significantly, not just in Slough but across the country, and funding this is a major concern. Had there been any approach to the DfE regarding the safety valve, specifically for the high needs block, and were there any plans to seek additional funding going forward.</p> <p>DM commented that the leader of SBC, along with leaders of other Berkshire councils, have made representations to DfE. These efforts have been supported by the Society of County Networks, the Society of London Treasurers, and London Councils. It is extremely challenging to develop a solution that is fair to everyone and recognizes that boroughs are in their current situations partly due to their history, but mainly because of the needs of the populations they are currently supporting and which must be addressed. When national funding changes were introduced in 2013-14, high needs were separated out, and at the same time, investment in high needs was halted. This occurred alongside changes that increased the identification and processing of the needs of children and young people. Addressing this must be paramount in developing a funding solution.</p> <p>DM stated that he would welcome any contributions that continue to keep this issue in the public eye to ensure that the Government invests sufficient sums in high needs and wider education on a national level. This is essential to achieving a solution that is fair and reflects the needs and aspirations of children, families, and the Government.</p>

	<p>NS thanked DM and noted that SBC has made SEND a very high priority, but that any change to funding funding is heavily dependent on changes in central government policy. NS asked for further transparency regarding how the budget is being allocated within the safety valve and whether there is a strong case for seeking additional funding.</p> <p>DM noted his general concern that the Central School Services Block (CSSB) isn't sufficient to fund the needs. JC commented on discussions at previous forums about whether any pressure could be applied to the DfE to revise this. DM responded that it was possible that the Government could further reduce the scope of responsibilities for local educational authorities and he would be pessimistic about the chances of successfully lobbying for more funding for the role of the local authority, as opposed to direct funding for education.</p>
1034	<p>DSG 2025/26 – Schools Block Work Plan</p> <p>DM introduced the timeline for the confirmation of the 2025-26 DSG Schools Block, outlining proposed key dates for decisions and consultations.</p> <p>For context, JC commented on the role in previous years of the 5-16 Task Group, which had focused on modelling various options within the local funding formula and carefully considering the potential impact on individual schools. The process aimed to avoid 'cliff edges' in funding, particularly for schools with a high number of children with special educational needs. As the local formula moved closer to the National Funding Formula, the group's work decreased; in recent years, the consultation process has primarily focused on whether schools are happy to remain aligned with the National Funding Formula figures, and whether to approve the local authority requests to transfer of 0.5% from the schools' block to the high needs block.</p> <p>CF noted that it was encouraging to see an indicative budget expected in February, but noticed that it was marked 'to be confirmed.' She also noted that some early years settings have yet to receive confirmation of current EY funding. DM confirmed this was most likely a consequence of the management changes within the local authority, and he would seek confirmation regarding the early years distribution.</p> <p>JC outlined the usual process for setting the schools block formula. Modelling is done on the indicative settlement with the 5-16 Task Group reviewing and making a recommendation regarding the formula. This is usually confirmed at the November meeting, along with a provisional decision on the block transfer. These provisional decisions are revisited and confirmed in January, just before the APT submission, using the updated DSG settlement based on the new census figures.</p> <p>JC agreed to discuss the process and the involvement of the Task Group with DM outside the meeting.</p>
1035	<p>SEND Update – Verbal Update</p> <p>NH presented an update on the SEND sufficiency plan and the safety valve agreement, speaking to a slide presentation as follows....</p> <p>The safety valve agreement enable the LA to receive £27 million over a 5-year period to cover the cumulative high needs deficit, with the largest portion—£10.8 million—given in the first year. Since September 2023, quarterly reports have shown this process to be on track, with the first two payments received.</p> <p>The summary being shared outlined the actions taken, the impact they've had, and progression toward meeting the safety valve agreement targets. Two concerns have been raised. The first is the increase in demand; the number of requests for EHCPs is much higher than before, combined with a shortage of special school places and a rising level of complexity in the cases being seen. For example, some of the young children in early years and Key Stage 1 are showing higher levels of need, on average, than those in Key Stage 4 and above. This will clearly affect both top-up funding and place funding in the future.</p> <p>Some historical issues have also been identified, for example, where funds that should have been allocated to Arbour Vale weren't. These issues pre-date the start of the safety valve agreement, so the £27 million deficit figure wasn't entirely accurate because of money owed but hadn't been included. The modelling forecasts and estimates are therefore now under review, to assess if the LA can still meet targets, given the rising demand, while acknowledging the inaccuracies in the original safety valve agreement. Whether it is possible to renegotiate that agreement is uncertain; other authorities have renegotiated their agreements with the previous government, but it is unclear whether this could be done with the new government. There is some indication from the new government of changes in approach, so there will likely be a new process for addressing safety valve agreements moving forward.</p> <p>Regarding the five agreement conditions, and using the September 2023 report as a reference, initially, the RAG rating for all areas was green. However, by the most recent report in August, we saw demand for EHCPs</p>

(Education, Health, and Care Plans) move from green to amber, indicating growing concern. Since the safety valve agreement began, we've seen a 14% increase in requests for EHC needs assessments in just one year. Meanwhile, there's been no corresponding 14% increase in the high needs block, which is a significant challenge. Over the last three years, there's been a cumulative 40% increase in the high needs block, which continues to create pressure.

In relation to independent special school placements, we had to place one child by tribunal order. Despite our efforts to find a more cost-effective option, the decision was ultimately the right one given the child's needs. For post-16 provision, we're still working on additional resource provision, but young people are doing well in the existing resource provision. We've also hit our targets on Alternative Provision (AP) and have a new understanding of how we will fund AP moving forward.

In terms of risks, escalating costs remain a concern. Although we haven't yet seen the complexity of cases significantly impact average funding levels through EHCPs, it is starting to rise (approximately £9k per average EHCP plan). So far, we've managed to avoid uplifts above 3.4%, in line with council policy, and while some requests for higher funding have been justified due to increased support needs, others have been denied. Regarding tribunals, most are related to 'no to assess' cases, where tribunals typically rule in favour of assessments, even if the school believes a plan isn't necessary. However, we've been managing this risk well through mediation and good legal advice.

While there has been turnover in our team, we've managed to keep the area of workforce delivery rated 'green' because we've successfully replaced the case officers. The issue has been communication, which schools have found frustrating. However, this isn't about the case officers changing—it's about ensuring we continue to recruit strong staff. From the council's perspective, the workforce situation is under control.

One area that turned 'amber' in the August report was our reputation, specifically regarding complaints and tribunals. With an increasing number of overdue complaints and concerns from schools, we have introduced a new complex escalation policy, and we're working with schools to address the gap between service improvement and how things feel for headteachers and SENCOs.

On demographic and inflationary pressures, we're seeing more complex cases, particularly among young children moving into the area from Central London and abroad. While this has an impact on schools, it's not enough to significantly affect the average funding per EHCP, which is the basis of the safety valve agreement. So while we acknowledge this as a challenge for schools, it hasn't yet affected our ability to meet the safety valve targets.

Our mitigation and resilience plans are in place and seem to be working effectively in the areas they're intended to impact. In terms of our priorities, we're moving from a reactive service that addressed systemic weaknesses to one that tackles inconsistencies in practice. We're building on what we've achieved so far while starting to address broader issues, such as the shortage of special school places and access to therapeutic support. We're trying to clearly communicate where we were, where we are now, and where we're heading. We know we're delivering a better service—we have faster reporting, good panel processes, focused case officer teams, and case tracking, all of which have been rigorously scrutinized by the DfE and the Commissioner.

However, schools aren't yet feeling the improvements, and in some cases, the improved service has increased their workload, especially with provision maps and consultations. We're committed to addressing this and finding ways to reduce the burden on schools and SENCOs.

NH also highlighted the progress made with the SEND Sufficiency Working Party.; the first meeting had taken place to discuss a five-year plan for place sufficiency and capital investment.

JC thanked NH for the comprehensive update and advised that there were comments in the chat from members. CF asked how much of the rise in requests can be attributed to catching up on previously unprocessed needs assessments - is there an actual increase in demand, or is this just catching up with the backlog? NH confirmed that the 14% increase refers to the rise in requests for plans, not the actual plans themselves, and the backlog cases are in addition to that 14% increase.

GD commented that children with EHCPs in primary often receive minimal funding, even if they're in a base or a unit. However, when they transition to Year 7, there's a massive funding uplift. This creates issues with placements because many of these children, unfortunately, are likely to move to special schools. The secondary funding, particularly for places at schools like Arbour Vale, increases significantly, but the primary level funding is just not acceptable. GD noted that underfunding puts enormous pressure on primary schools. NS confirmed there is a significant issue at the end of Year 6, when students transfer from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3, as their needs are not always met in mainstream secondary schools.

	<p>NS commented that the increase in EHCPs over the past three years is quite significant, and highlights the need for serious funding considerations in our five-year sufficiency planning. This is not unique to Slough. There has been a significant increase in EHCPs nationwide, driven by a variety of factors, including parents applying for assessments earlier to ensure appropriate provision for their children in primary school.</p> <p>NS pointed out the need to be mindful of the considerable workload on SENCOs and advocated the way forward is through provision mapping which would help determine whether a child's needs could be met, and to establish a fair funding arrangement using a standardised tariff for costs incurred in meeting the needs of young people with EHCPs.</p> <p>Regarding the RAG rating, this is something we initiated at Arbour Vale School, and the authority has embraced it. For instance, we would rate 'red' for annual review meetings where a SEND officer's attendance is essential—such as during key stage transitions, or when the parents are particularly challenging and advocating strongly for their child's needs. This red, amber, green method helps prioritize when a SEND officer needs to attend, without overburdening them. It's a limited resource, and having them at every meeting would be unnecessary. I support the authority in this approach, but I think it's important to present this effectively to schools. NS confirmed he is very encouraged to hear that NH is looking for a compromise, and I appreciate your understanding of the workload on SENCOs and schools. Anything you can do to help in this regard will be greatly appreciated by schools.</p> <p>NH confirmed that from the LA's perspective, nothing in the agreement is rated as 'red'—everything is being monitored as 'watch.' This means the LA acknowledges areas of concern, and is monitoring the pressures, both historical and ongoing. CF commented that it is important not to create the expectation that there shouldn't be any 'reds' - in fact, the 'reds' can provide valuable insights into the story and the associated risks. NH responded that red means officially off track, and that based on what is currently known, that is not the case.</p> <p>NS emphasised the importance of remaining transparent, honest, and upfront within Forum discussions on this issue, and particularly getting the data right. It is essential we know where the provision is, how it's being met, what the costs are, and whether those costs are equitable across all key stages. NS asked for confirmation of a timescale on having more accurate data. NH confirmed that the goal is to have an options paper ready in about eight weeks and aiming to report before Christmas.</p>
1036	<p>Key Decisions Log</p> <p>JC suggested that the key decisions log be maintained as a rolling record over a three year period instead of the normal two. This would provide a reference document which would be more helpful to the LA to understand when decisions had been made.</p>
1037	<p>Forward Agenda Plan</p> <p>JC asked Forum members to note the forward agenda plan and the likely date of the next meeting on 28th November, subject to confirmation.</p>
1038	<p>Any Other Business</p> <p>AM raised concerns about the quality of communication from the LA to the bursars and SBMS in schools.</p> <p>DM responded that he was keen to establish a direct relationship between the finance team and the bursars/SBMs of the maintained schools. The intension was to try and arrange an online or face to face meeting, and he would reach out to the LA-maintained schools within the next week.</p> <p>JR asked for confirmation of the mechanism for electing a new Forum chair. JC confirmed the formal process is that a nomination has to be made, followed by a simple vote at the meeting to elect the chair. This should be done annually, typically in June for the coming academic year starting in September. JR confirmed he would like to nominate NS as Chair. JC noted the nomination and agreed to have a discussion with NS outside the meeting.</p>