

DARLINGTON SCHOOLS FORUM

**MINUTES OF MEETING
16 JANUARY 2024
HELD AT THE TOWN HALL, FEETHAMS, DARLINGTON**

MEMBERS PRESENT: D Judson (Swift Academies Trust (Chair); P Ayto (Reid Street Primary (Vice Chair); M Butler (Education Village Academy Trust); J Blackham (Mount Pleasant Primary); S Hudson (Rise Carr College); P King (Federation of Mowden Schools); S Welsh (Whinfield Primary); H Dummett (Federation of Darlington Nurseries); D Evers (Darlington College Childcare Centre); K Reid (Polam Hall School); M Ramsay (St John's CofE Academy); E Baker (Little Acorns Nursery, Hurworth); D Lythgoe (St Aidan's Academy); M Kane (Carmel College); M Fryer (Hummersknott Academy); P Richardson (Darlington 16-19 Education).

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE: Cllr. N Wallis; T Murphy (Assistant Director of Education & Inclusion) J Littler (Interim Head of SEND Service for SEND & Inclusion); E Clennell (Finance Manager); J Aconley-Foster (Finance Officer); E Marshall (Education Partnerships Officer - Clerk)

APOLOGIES: J Skirving (St George's CofE Academy); P Norman (St. Bede's RC Primary); T Abbott (Bishop Hogarth Catholic Education Trust); E Long (Play Hut)

1. Welcome, Introduction & Register/Declaration of business interests.

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and updated the meeting on apologies. There were no declarations of business interests.

There were no items raised under Any Other Business:

2. Minutes of Meeting 15th October 2023 and Matters Arising

The minutes were accepted as an accurate record.

Matters Arising

The updated Schools Forum terms of reference were agreed subject to the clarification in the terms of reference relating to substitutes. It is the members responsibility to arrange for the substitute, as named specifically on the register.

ACTION: The Clerk to update Terms of Reference relating to substitutes.

3. Membership and Election Procedures

The Chair welcomed Elizabeth Baker from Little Acorns Nursery who was previously substitute, has agreed to take on the role as PVI representative following the resignation of Dionne Evers, from Darlington College Childcare.

The paper was noted, and election procedures were agreed.

4. Budget Update 2023/24

The Finance Manager updated Forum regarding the 2023/24 budget position as per the previously circulated report.

It was noted that the Dedicated Schools Grant budget (DSG) allocation of £109,699,424 and a budget was agreed at the January 2023 meeting however several adjustments have been made to the DSG allocation and this budget has altered.

The Finance Manager outlined the key changes in schools block, central block, high needs block and early years block funding in the current year budget. In reference to Appendix 1, specific mention was made to

- para 8 where it is explained that the growth fund has not been needed in year;
- the central schools block is estimated to be underspent by £44,979 mainly due to the underspend in Early Careers Teachers budget;

The High Needs block is currently projecting an underspend of £782,196 which is a significant favourable movement of £631,208 compared with expected outturn presented at the October Forum. Main movements explained related to:

- Beaumont Hill overspend due to increased demand,
- underspend in place funding for the PRU due to fluctuations in pupil numbers; remove this line
- underspend in resource base and SEN units which is not expected to vary significantly;
- Post 16 underspend due to natural end of placements;
- VPP overspend of £50,391;
- The PFI is expected to have a variance at year end but at this stage it is not known and is therefore shown to budget, but there is likely to be a pressure due to the affordability gap;
- The two invest to save models for 14-16 AP & Inclusion support have not been progressed this year and there will be full slippage for both projects.

Other areas of significant pressure mentioned relate to the SEND inclusion Early Years budget which is reflective of the growth of SEND assessment with no indication this will slow down. This is an area of specific work currently.

Overall, the DSG in year position is an underspend of £687,526 a significant overall improvement from the October Forum report and is a positive position for the first year of the Safety Valve programme. However, there are ongoing challenges that are likely to have a negative impact on next year's budget and the savings plans. The estimated year end reserve position for 2023/24 is a deficit of £4,815,826, with the brought forward deficit from 2022/23 included, excluding the Safety Valve payments.

The Finance Manager outlined the areas of spend as percentages of the overall budget, in Appendix 1 which will be further interrogated by the high needs subgroup.

In response to questions, relating to page 2 para 10(i) relating to EHCP assessment requests, the Interim Head of SEND explained that the SEND team are currently assessing 100 requests for assessment. The Assistant Director explained that there are unprecedented levels of request to assess which is also reflective of areas of growth in social care/children in need for example, and Darlington is not an outlier compared to national and regional data. This reflects the challenging landscape and demand. It was requested that the high needs subgroup review the data against regional and national position and bring findings back to the Schools Forum.

ACTION: The Interim Head of SEND to provide data on requests for assessment for discussion at a future high needs subgroup meeting and report to the Schools Forum.

The Post 19 provision and outcomes plan was requested and Post 16 temporary solutions to the challenges on places was discussed. It was noted that place planning discussions should include these areas. The Assistant Director confirmed that there are current discussions on localised solutions of commissioning in development.

Mike Butler specifically thanked the Finance Manager for the additional information in Appendix 1 relating to % spend according to places in mainstream, post 16, resource bases, special, alternative and independent provision.

The Schools Forum thanked the Finance Manager for the clarity of the report.

Recommendations

Schools Forum noted

- the current budget position;
- the current high needs block position and the fluidity of this area;
- the ongoing pressures within the SEN Inclusion service;
- the split of funding across the Education Sector within the high needs block.

5. School Funding Formula 2024/25 and Growth Fund 2024/25

The Chair asked the Forum to note the error on the agenda, the item should read for 2024/25 not 2023/24.

The Finance Manager introduced the report. Appendix 2 would be updated due to the transposition of figures between Polam and Firthmoor schools. This error made no change to the bottom line, but information will be updated and re-circulated and corrected on the website.

The Finance Manager explained that after the allowance for the MAG the average increase in funding is 2%, although this will differ between schools due to changes in pupil numbers and the application of the minimum funding guarantee.

The cost of the Darlington school budget share for 2024/25 is £85,616,812 which leaves £25,582 unallocated, this is prior to setting a budget for Growth. The growth budget was set at £50,000 in 2023/24, although it is not anticipated that any growth payments will need to be made due to reducing pupil numbers.

Two options for the unallocated funds were presented. **Option 2 was agreed**, i.e not to set a growth fund for 2024/25 due to the current reducing pupil numbers and unlikely event that any growth payments will need to be made either this year or next year. To inflate the PFI factor in the budget share to allow for the inflationary increases within the contract and support the funding gap. The remaining £7,427 to be held in reserve for future years.

Although a growth fund will not be set in 2024/25, it was confirmed that any future growth fund would operate in the same manner as to that agreed by Forum for 2022/23. The criteria for accessing the fund were discussed but it was noted that the fund was very limited and likely in the future to be non-existent and along with birth rate declines, schools would not anticipate a call for funding.

It was clarified that IDACI rates A-F from 2023/24 to 2024/25 have increased as per the NFF rates. The DFE reviews these rates from time to time and Paul Richardson, representative from Darlington 16-19 Education settings, confirmed it was last updated in 2019. However, the Finance Manager agreed to check the next review date.

ACTION: EC to check review dates for IDACI rates.

Recommendations

Schools Forum noted the funding formula budgets for 2024/25.

As above, Schools Forum agreed Option 2 i.e not to set a growth fund for 2024/25, but to inflate the PFI factor and transfer the remaining £7,427 to the School Reserve for future years.

6. Expansion of the Childcare Offer

The Assistant Director introduced the phased changes planned following the announcement of expansion of the national childcare offer in the Spring 2023 budget. These reforms aim to remove barriers to work for parents with a child under 3. It was explained that the current Darlington childcare assessment shows that provision broadly has the sufficiency to meet these needs.

The proposed hourly rates have been set as close to the national hourly rate however it was noted that any increase to the hourly rate does impact the SEND inclusion funding.

Helen Dummett, Executive Head of the Federation of Darlington Nurseries explained from the Early Years sector point of view there are increasing numbers of children with profound and additional needs so the impact on SEND inclusion funding is a concern however the position on hourly rates was noted. The Assistant Director explained that there is an opportunity to review the SEND inclusion process prior to April.

Paul Richardson, Head of Learning and Skills who has responsibility for place planning and schools' capital funding explained that an expression of interest for capital funding which can cover both early years expansion and wrap-around provision will be sent out with the information on hourly rates.

Recommendation

The Schools Forum noted the report.

7. Budget Setting 2024/25

The Finance Manager summarised the report with explanation of the DSG allocation, as per the paper.

The new Early Years entitlements include the deprivation and SEND inclusion funding as explained in paragraph 9 of the report, but this is subject to change dependent on the January census data. It was confirmed that by monitoring the current early years budget the proposed rates for 3- and 4-year-old children are £5.18 but as noted in item 4, this budget is under unprecedented pressure. The proposed SEN inclusion budget has seen increased levels of demand and has been set at the current budget level of £220,000, this will be monitored closely in year. The 2-year-old entitlements and working parent entitlement are proposed to be set at £7.60 and the under 2's set at £10.00, deprivation payments and a SEND Inclusion Fund will operate in line with 3 & 4 years olds arrangements. Centrally held funds have increased by £20,000 to accommodate these change but is subject to review as the demand as a consequence of the new early years proposals, is not yet known.

The proposed Central Schools budget was presented to members for agreement, it was confirmed that there is sufficient funding in reserves for the next 4 years to cover the 20% reduction in historic commitments. It was noted that historic commitments such as music service, union cover, safeguarding board, ECT and virtual Headteacher will need to be reviewed in time.

Under the High Needs Block, the allocation is based on 2023/34 pupil numbers, therefore the allocation will be updated during the year for 2024/25 numbers. The pressures on the block were noted and a budget setting paper will be presented at the next Schools Forum following consideration by the High Needs Block Working Group.

Recommendations

The School Forum:

- noted the budget allocations for 2024/25 from ESFA;
- noted and agreed the proposed Early Years funding rates for 2024/25 and agreed the central allocation;
- agreed to the proposed usage of the Central School's block in 2024/25

8. Safety Valve Programme

The Assistant Director confirmed that under the 5-year safety valve programme an in-year balance has been achieved so far. This progress needs to be continued with a degree of caution relating to the increasing in EHCP demand. The High Needs Sub Group will be interrogating the budgets and this work will support the overall programme objectives.

Recommendations

The Schools Forum noted the position

9. High Needs Sub Group

The Chair of the High Needs Sub Group, Paula Ayto (Schools Forum Vice-Chair) explained that there is a good representative range across age and sector on the sub-group. There is a position for a secondary representative and Mel Kane, Principal at Carmel RC College, expressed an interest.

1. Paper 10 Low Incidence Needs Service – The service provides a statutory function on behalf of the Local Authority. The High Needs sub-group noted that the Local Authority had agreed an interim service stabilisation payment from the High Needs Block budget to the LINS service valued at £38,733 subject to further service review being undertaken to explore service remodelling opportunities.
2. Paper 11 Traveller Education Service – There is a current funding deficit for the service, and it was requested that the funding be increased by £7,220 per annum. Following the meeting of the high needs group, this request had been made to the Schools Forum as per paper 11.

It was explained that all high needs services are being considered for review by commissioners. A discussion ensued relating to current needs and other factors for consideration by commissioners, such as staffing liabilities.

This document was classified as: OFFICIAL

The position relating to the designation of resource bases was explained and the Interim Head of SEND confirmed that the change models are under consultation with parent carers and Lingfield Education Trust. The relevant DFE processes for redesignation will then be followed. A discussion relating to outreach as part of existing contracts was also noted.

The papers on the Schools Forum agenda (10 Low Incidence Needs Service and 11 Traveller Education Service) were both explained, and recommendations were approved.

10. Low Incidence Needs Service

Following the Schools Forum discussions above the Schools Forum noted that:

- The High Needs Forum monitoring sub-group noted an interim service stabilisation payment from the High Needs Block budget to the LINS service valued at £38,733 subject to further service review being undertaken to explore service remodelling opportunities.

10.Traveller Education Service

Following the Schools Forum discussions noted above, the Schools Forum

- Noted the activities as outlined in this report;
- Agreed a funding increase for the Traveller Education & Achievement Service to £100,000 per annum.

11.Any Other Business

There was no other business.

12.Time/Location of next meeting:

Tuesday, 12th March 2024 – 2pm on TEAMS