

## **Minutes of the meeting of Herefordshire Schools Forum held at virtual meeting platform on Friday 18 October 2024 at 9.30 am**

**Present:** Councillor Ms A Banner (LA maintained secondary schools) (Chairperson)

Ms B Blower	PRU - Management Committee
Mr D Brearey	LA Maintained Primary School
Mr P Deneen	Trade Unions
Ms N Gilbert	LA Special Schools
Mrs L Johnson	Secondary Governors
Mr T Knapp	Academies
Mr C Lewandowski	Trade Unions
Ms Lines	Diocese of Hereford

### **In attendance:**

**Officers:** Senior Finance Business Partner, Service Director, Education, Skills and Learning, Virtual headteacher, Head of Additional Needs, Head of Learning and Achievement, Director of Finance and Admissions and 14 to 19 curriculum manager

**Cabinet Member Children and Young People**

### **1. ELECTION OF CHAIRPERSON**

Alison Banner was proposed and unanimously supported by members of the forum.

**Resolved: that Alison Banner be elected chairperson of the Forum for the ensuing year.**

### **2. ELECTION OF VICE-CHAIRPERSON**

Paul Jennings was proposed and unanimously supported by members of the forum.

**Resolved: that Paul Jennings be elected vice-chairperson of the Forum for the ensuing year.**

### **3. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies were received from Nicki Emmett, Richard Foster, Andy Gosling, Edward Gwilliam, Paul Jennings, Hayley Manns, Gemma Martin, Rose Lloyd and Sheila Taylor.

### **4. NAMED SUBSTITUTES (IF ANY)**

The following substitutes were noted:

Sian Lines for Gemma Martin.

Lynn Johnson for Andy Gosling.

## 5. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declaration of interests.

## 6. MINUTES

A correction was made to the presentation of forum member Beverley Blower.

**Resolved: the minutes of the meeting held on 12 July 2024 be approved as a correct record.**

## 7. NATIONAL SCHOOLS FUNDING FORMULA 2025/26 UPDATE

The Senior Finance Business Partner (SFBP) introduced the item the purpose of which was to provide an update to the forum on national school funding issues, including the recommendations of the budget working group (BWG) on the Herefordshire schools' budget 2025/26.

- The national funding formula (NFF) was yet to be received and communication from the [Education & Skills Funding Agency](#) (ESFA) received on 3 October suggested this would come after the Budget announcement on 30 October 2024, with the dedicated schools grant (DSG) allocations to be published in December 2024.
- As this information was not available it posed potential risk in the budgeting process.
- The forum was asked to consider whether Herefordshire should use the approach to school funding for 2025/26 broadly using the approach used for 2024/25 (as detailed below) and how they thought the best approach was for dealing with consultations with schools.
  - Seek to fund schools at the National Funding Formula values.
  - To fund schools at the maximum permitted Minimum Funding Guarantee (0.5% given in 2024/25)
  - To use the school block transfer process (max 0.5%) towards the SEN Protection Scheme (in line with 2024/25)
  - De-delegations in place as at 2024/25 to remain for 2025/26.
  - To avoid the DSG deficit escalating further – the high needs block strategy is under review in line with DSG Management Plan

In response to forum questions and comments, it was noted;

1. The SFBP would provide clarity with regards to de-delegations with special schools as they are not subject to the national funding formula.
2. It was essential that schools are consulted as part of the democratic process and an online form such as Microsoft teams or survey monkey be used to support response rates were recommended and would be actioned by officers.

**Resolved that: a) the Schools Forum reviewed the budget approach for setting the schools 2025/26 budget and agreed that it be in line with the approach taken in 2024/25, as outlined in paragraph 4;**

**b) the Schools Forum unanimously agreed that consultations with schools as outlined in paragraph 5 should still take place.**

**Action(s)**

**The SFBP to provide a response with regards to de-delegations with special schools as they are not subject to the national funding formula.**

**The SFBP in collaboration with the school effectiveness team to produce web forms for future consultations to aid in improving response rates.**

## **8. HIGH NEEDS FUNDING AND DEDICATED SCHOOLS GRANT (DSG) DEFICIT MANAGEMENT PLAN**

The Senior Finance Business Partner (SFBP) introduced the item the purpose of which was to report on the pressures facing the High Needs budget and progress delivering the Deficit Management Plan (ESFA tool). The principal points were noted:

- The forum was informed of the deficit position in 2021/22 and although the deficit was initially modest, it has risen considerably since.
- The High Needs DSG block overspent by £5.1 million 2023/24. This increased the Council's cumulative DSG deficit to £6.1 million at 31 March 2024.
- The main areas that attributed to this were.
  - Out-county schools (overspend of £2.3m)
  - Special school top-ups (overspend of £0.7m)
  - School top-ups (overspend of £0.8m)
- The latest forecast end of year position indicates an overspend of £7.6million which means a cumulative deficit of £13.7 million at 31 March 2025.
- Currently the DSG Deficit is an un-useable reserve on the Council's Balance sheet and enables all local authorities to ring fence DSG Deficits from the overall financial position in the statutory accounts until March 2026. Once the override periods ends, the deficit will have an impact on the council's overall financial position a point that is resonating around all local authorities across the country.
- It was highlighted in the External Auditors annual report 2023/24 the DSG deficit had been a risk to the Council's financial sustainability and recommended close working with schools to manage this expenditure.
- Mitigating plans currently in place such as nurture hubs, Widemarsh explorers and autism hubs would continue.
- Future plans for repurposing buildings and the successful bid to build a new 80 place special free school would aid in the reduction of independent provider provision which has been driving up costs.

The forum was asked to consider further strategies to manage spend and mitigate the growing deficit, how the council can encourage cost saving actions in schools and if schools would find an Internal Audit review/self-assessment helpful.

In response to forum questions and comments, it was noted;

1. The Service Director, Education, Skills and Learning (SDESL) assured the forum that she meets with the department regularly and constantly raises the issues around finance. She noted the lack of transparency and forward planning from the department makes it difficult for the local authority strategically, not knowing when there will be rounds of rebuilding or free school programmes. Strategic partners are sighted on the issues that schools are facing and there has been strong support from Councillor Powell the cabinet member for children and young people. It was highlighted that she would be meeting with the Local MP to ensure they were well informed of the issues.
2. The cabinet member for children and young people informed the forum that both the County Council's network and the Local Government Association have

recently written to the new chancellor (cc:d to local MPs) raising a range of matters to do with pressures on council budgets, but specifically raising the need for sensible levels of financing for special educational needs.

3. A written response would be provided with regards to the number of pupils that are included within the out of county schools' placements overspend of £2.3 million.
4. A written response would be provided with regards to the number of pupils that are anticipated to have their needs met by the new free special school being introduced in 2026.
5. The SDESL would expect to see over time a reduction in Independent School places as our own provisions grow.
6. No further cost saving strategies were identified by the forum.
7. The Director of Finance highlighted that an audit review / self-assessment could provide some assurance and be a useful way to identify good practise. it could take the form of whatever would be most helpful, and it is not meant to be a further administrative burden in terms of increasing the requirement to respond to audit.

### **Resolved**

#### **That:**

- a) The forum reviewed the High Needs 2023/24 final outturn budget position;
- b) reviewed the High Needs 2024/25 forecast outturn and agreed that regular budget monitoring reports are presented to future school's forums and
- c) reviewed the mitigating actions used in preparing the deficit management plan and managing the DSG deficit.

### **Action**

**The SDESL to provide a written response with regards to pupil figures currently included within the out of county school's placements and the anticipated number that are likely to have their needs met by the new free special school.**

## **9. WORK PROGRAMME 2024/25**

The Service Director, Education, Skills and Learning (SDESL) informed the committee that there had been no new announcements with regards to the future of the Schools Forum.

## **10. DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

Friday 24 January 2025, 9:30am

The meeting ended at 10:22

**Chairperson**