

DARLINGTON SCHOOLS FORUM

**MINUTES OF MEETING
12 MARCH 2024
HELD ON TEAMS**

MEMBERS PRESENT: D Judson (Swift Academies Trust (Chair); P Ayto (Reid Street Primary (Vice Chair); H Dummett (Federation of Darlington Nurseries); D Lythgoe (St Aidan's Academy); J Skirving (St George's CofE Academy); S Welsh (Whinfield Primary); J Blackham (Mount Pleasant Primary); L Marron (QE College); M Ramsay (St Johns Academy); P King (Federation of Mowden Schools); K Reid (Polam Free School); K Reid (Polam Hall School); M Ramsay (St John's CofE Academy); M Roe (EVAT); D Leane (Bishop Hogarth Catholic Education Trust)

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: M Butler (Education Village Academy Trust); M Kane (Carmel College); S Hudson (Rise Carr College); T Abbott (Bishop Hogarth Catholic Education Trust); M Fryer (Hummersknott Academy)

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

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and updated the meeting on apologies and noted substitutes representing the following:

- D Baker substituted E Baker.
- L Marron substituted T Fisher. It was noted that T Fisher has now been appointed as the Darlington 16-19 Education representative of the Schools Forum.
- M Roe substituted M Butler.
- D Leane substituted T Abbott.

There were no declarations of business interests.

There were no items raised under Any Other Business.

2. Minutes of Meeting 16th January 2024 and Matters Arising

The minutes were accepted as an accurate record.

Matters Arising

- **High Needs Block: 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.**
JL confirmed that the high needs subgroup will consider further at its next and subsequent meetings to inform future budget discussions.
- **IDACI rates: It was clarified that IDACI rates A-F from 2023/24 to 2024/25 have increased as per the NFF rates.** EC confirmed that the 2024/25 data is based on the latest 2019 update and that there is no indication of a review date soon for the deprivation factors. EC would confirm if there were any changes to this position.

3. Schools Forum Membership

The membership updates were:

- one Primary vacancy with substitute, (The Primary Forum voted Shirley Welsh to take this position at the point of Whinfield's conversion to an Academy);
- one PVI vacancy (an expression of interest was sent out at the end of February with a closing date of Friday 22nd March. There has been one expression of interest to date).

It was noted that the last two meetings we have had non-attendance from Pete Norman of St Bede's RC Primary and the LA were asked to identify if Pete was still interested in this membership.

Action: The Schools Forum noted the membership position. The LA would clarify the position relating to St Bede's membership.

4. Budget Update 2023/24

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

There has been a slight increase to the overall DSG funding of £30,000 into the High Needs block due to Darlington being a net importer of pupils. This has increased the gross budget to £109,685,172 with a net budget after recoupment of £29,728,410. The in-year schools block is estimated to be underspent by £50,000 at the end of the financial year, due to unused growth funding and the in-year central schools block is estimated to be underspent by £44,979.

The High Needs block is also currently projecting an underspend of £777,808. The Finance Manager outlined main points to note:

- The Post 16 provision is projected to be underspent by approx. £457,000.
- Independent provision is facing pressures from anticipated inflationary uplifts in the financial year 2024/25 as well as a number of children and young people who are looked after by the Local Authority who are being placed into independent residential settings with educational provision.
- The Vulnerable Pupil Panel is expected to overspend in year by £70,391. To date we have seen spend of £135,103, approx. two thirds of which relates to permanent exclusions. It was noted that this is a focus for the high needs subgroup to consider.

This document was classified as: OFFICIAL

- Mainstream school top ups continue to be overspent which has increased to £286,432 based on Spring term payments.
- The PFI is expected to overspend by £125,754 this is due the increase in the affordability gap due to inflationary pressures.

The early years block is projected to be overspent by £350,486. The 3 & 4-year-old Schools nursery budget is projected to overspend by £163,322 and the 2-year-old nursery budget is projected to overspend by £36,564. This is due to an increase in the actual nursery hours provided and will be subject to DSG allocation adjustments in June/July 2024. It was noted that there are significant pressures within the SEN Inclusion funding and although it is in line with the previous report the overspend is expected to be £168,000.

Overall, the DSG in-year budget for 2023/24 is currently projected to be underspent by £522,301. This is worse position of £165,225 from the January report mainly due to the increase in provided nursery hours. The high needs block is broadly in line with budget however there are ongoing challenges of inflationary pressures and EHCP growth, which 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 £5,025,190 (an increase from £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 relating to % spend according to places in mainstream, post 16, resource bases, special, alternative and independent provision. It was noted that special schools represent 27.4% of the High Needs block spending with independent providers at 25.8%, this will be further interrogated by the high needs subgroup.

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 for 2024/25
- the ongoing pressures within the SEN Inclusion service.

5. Budget Setting High Needs Block 2024-25

The Finance Manager outlined that the proposed budget was reviewed at the High Needs Block Sub-group meeting on the 15th of March and is in line with the Debt Recovery plan as per the previously circulated report. The following key points were noted:

- The recoupment figure has been increased to £4,877,834 due to additional place change requests in special schools and resource bases, however this is estimated and will be adjusted once the updated DSG recoupment figures are published in due course.
- A transfer of £150,000 is required from the schools block reserve to the high needs block.
- The hold position for the Travellers Service and Low Incidence Needs service are included in the budget in line with the previously agreed School Forum position. All the Outreach services and SCOS service have been built in based on the current models.

This document was classified as: OFFICIAL

- Growth has been built into the plan to take account of the additional EHCP's levels particularly in mainstream and MNSS provision at 8% which is in line with the Safety Valve monitoring position. Additional top ups have been included for the increased place numbers in Beaumont Hill Academy and the Resource Bases.

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 Subgroup will be interrogating the budgets, and this work will support the overall programme objectives.

The Assistant Director explained that the increase in demand in Early Years in the context of the new Early Years offer has led to a rapid increase in SEND needs over a relatively short period of time. The LA teams are working with the sector to develop a funding model for Early Years SEND funding and there will likely be an update in May 2024.

ACTION: The Schools Forum will be updated on the Early Years SEND funding model as soon as possible.

Recommendations

Schools Forum:

- agreed the high needs budget for 2024/25
- noted the ongoing and increasing pressures due to demand within the high needs budget and that the budget proposal is linked to the Safety Valve plan and written statement of action.
- noted a transfer of £150,000 from the reserve to the High Needs Block.

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

The Finance Manager introduced the report which outlined adjustments to the Schools Budget Share following the ESFA proforma checks for 2024/25.

The Local Authority received the school budget share tool on 19th December using the October 2023 census information. School Forum were presented with the indicative school budget shares and agreed to inflate the PFI premises factor by 4.2%, (the current RPIX rate published at the time of the January forum), and to transfer the remainder of the funding to the School reserve of £7,427.

The Finance Manager introduced Appendix 3 and explained that the ESFA have completed their checks and have requested the following adjustments, these do not have an effect on school net funding.

- a) The Non-Domestic rate revaluations had been allowed for in the indicative school budget shares, but the ESFA have advised that they will be deal with these outside of the school block and adjust directly at source. Therefore, these have been removed from the proforma, but will not adversely affect the school net position.
- b) The PFI premises factor has not been inflated in Darlington before and Forum took the decision to inflate the allowance due to increasing pressures in the affordability gap and set it at 4.2%. The ESFA have advised that a mandatory level must be applied if we are inflating this factor. We have therefore adjusted the proforma to increase this to 10.4%, as advised. The affected schools will have an increase to the school budget share but will be recharged for the full amount by the Local Authority to pay for the PFI contract.
- c) The adjustments for the Non-Domestic Rates and the PFI premises factor mean that there is a small increase to the amount to move to the School Block reserve for future years, which has increased to £25,046.

The Finance Manager clarified that Sixth Form academisation does not have any impact on the rates.

Recommendations:

Schools Forum:

- Noted the funding formula adjustments for 2024/25.

7. High Needs Subgroup Meeting Report

The High Needs Subgroup met on Thursday 14th March 2024. The main item was consideration of the high needs budget.

Chair of the High Needs (HN) Subgroup, Paula Ayto (Schools Forum Vice-Chair) provided some background information relating to discussions held by the group about the high needs budget.

The group noted the report presented by the Finance Manager at this meeting and agreed to recommend to the Schools Forum, that no changes to the budget were appropriate at this point due to the lack of options within the funding envelope. The Finance Manager confirmed the budget would therefore be presented to School Forum on this basis (as set out in item 5).

The group were reminded that the ringfence to the HN budget deficit will be removed in 2026 and will no longer be a separate reserve in the Local Authority accounts. Additionally, it was noted that the funding to pay the deficit off as part of the Safety Valve programme is subject to maintaining an in-year balance.

The group noted that the strategy to reduce high-cost placements has had an impact, however the system as a whole needs to look at wider solutions which include early intervention. A specific case was discussed, and it was agreed that a placement review/case study would help to see what the overall costs to the system have been.

ACTION: The Schools Forum requested that minutes of the HN Subgroup meeting be circulated and available on the website.

8. Any Other Business

There was no other business.

9. Time/Location of next meeting:

It was noted that meetings are held alternatively on TEAMS and at the Town Hall.

Tuesday, 14th May 2024 – 2pm at the Town Hall.

The Schools Forum noted that 2024/25 Academic Year dates are:

Tuesday, 8 th October 2024 - 2pm	TEAMS
Tuesday, 14 th January 2025 - 2pm	Town Hall
Tuesday, 11 th March 2025 – 2pm	TEAMS
Tuesday, 3 rd June 2025 – 2pm	Town Hall