

South Gloucestershire Schools Forum
Minutes of Meeting held on
Thursday 21 January 2021
Microsoft Teams

PRESENT:

Sarah Lovell (Chair)	Finance Director, Cabot Learning Federation
Dave Baker (Vice Chair)	CEO, Olympus Academy Trust
Richard Aquilina	Governor, Bailey's Court Primary School
Susan Brobyn	Director of Finance & Operation, CSET
Nicky Edwards	Natural Choice Nurseries
Stuart Evans	South Gloucestershire and Stroud College
Mark Freeman	Headteacher, St Michael's Primary School
Kim Garland	Headteacher, Brimsham Green
Clare Haughton	Page Park Pre-School
David Jenkins	Governor, Crossways Schools
Nicola Jones	Representative Special Academies
Carl Lander	Hanham Primary Federation (HPF)
Louise Leader	Headteacher, Pathways Learning Centre
Kirby Littlewood	Headteacher, Stanbridge Primary School
Steve Moir	Headteacher, Bradley Stoke School
Pippa Osborne	Headteacher Christ Church Junior School
Diane Owen	Chair, King's Oak Academy
Lisa Parker	Headteacher, Warmley Park School
Linda Porter	Governor, Watermore School
Will Roberts	CEO, Castle School Education Trust (CSET)
Fr. Malcolm Strange	Diocese Representative
Bernice Webber	Headteacher, Old Sodbury CE Primary
David Williams	Diocese of Gloucester

Officers:

Mustafa Salih, Head of Financial Management and Business Support
Hilary Smith, Head of Education, Learning and Skills
Caroline Warren, Finance Business Partner
Alison Davies, Business Support Manager
Nina Philippidis, Head of Financial Services
Rachel Webb, Senior Education Adviser (Early Years Manager) – Item 10
Michelle Palmer, Senior Finance Officer (Observer)
Maxine Winter, Governor Development Consultant (Observer)

1. WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

Attendees were welcomed by the Chair.

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Trevor Jones, Chris Sivers, Louisa Wilson, Susie Weaver

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST - None

3. ANY OTHER ITEMS THE CHAIR DECIDES ARE URGENT

None

4. SCHOOLS FORUM MEMBERSHIP

Ali Davies gave an update on the Schools Forum Membership.

One revised error from the November 2019 membership still showing Keith Lawrence as the representative for the Enable Trust and who has now been succeeded by Nicki Jones.

Two members coming to the end of their term.

Renewal terms of office shows that Sarah Lovell ended her term on 1st December 2020, with 3 months to renew or hold elections, and as Sarah wished to renew her term as Academy representative, her new term will run until 1st December 2024.

Lisa Parker, representative for Special Schools, ended her term on 3rd December 2020 and, with no other nominations, Lisa was happy to proceed for another term and continue until 3rd December 2024.

Self-nomination process for primary Headteachers was held. Two self-nominations were received and the Primary Headteachers' Executive confirmed Kirby Littlewood and Louisa Wilson as the new representatives. Their terms of office will run for 4 years from the date of this meeting.

Following the resignation of a previous representative from Special academies, Nicki Jones self-nominated and her term of office will run for 4 years from the date of this meeting.

David Williams of Gloucester Diocese self-nominated and his term of office will run for 4 years from the date of this meeting.

Agreed: Schools Forum members agreed with each proposal.

5. MINUTES FROM LAST MEETING – 19 NOVEMBER 2020

One correction: David Jenkins was present at the meeting although recorded as absent.

Schools Budget Consultation – Options

Action: HS to take forward the request for a regular update at the end of each term regarding SEND Clusters. To follow up in term 4.

Action: MS – To draft something and the Chair agreed to sign the letter.

Waiting on the outcome of the transfer request from the Secretary of State and then to send a draft letter. This was agreed. A response should be received before the end of February.

DO - I believe we also agreed that the letter would also explain that the Forum **does** challenge the financial decisions and takes note of schools views as some schools had commented that they felt their comments were not being followed up. Can we ensure this is included in the letter?

MS – Happy to include that.

Action: Carried over as an action to the next meeting.

6. LOCAL RESPONSE TO THE PANDEMIC

Hilary Smith highlighted the financial implications of the pandemic. Continuing to have regular meetings with the Regional Schools Commissioner (RSC). Head of Service for Education, Learning and Skills (ELS) and Schools meet weekly with Hannah Woodhouse and then have individual meetings with the RSC team at least once or twice a week. At these meetings we raise financial issues relating to Free Schools Meals (FSM) as the amount received does not cover the full cost of these meals, especially as we are providing them during the holiday periods and holiday activity programmes or the Winter Grant programme where there is a gap.

Regarding testing, everything that was provided through the kits is not everything that is needed. Need to lobby for additional funding to cover all the costs.

Fr.M – Where is the LA proposing to place the priority re. funding for half term FSM and activities provision – if there is not sufficient funding?

HS – There is a shortfall and the LA has been plugging the gap so far. We believe that food is an important element of what we will offer and so we will look at other grants that might be available to supplement so that we have sufficient to cover everything.

SL – Good summary and to pursue additional funding to relieve some of the financial pressures.

7. GROWTH FUNDING POLICY CRITERIA, AMENDMENT AND SCHOOLS SPECIFIC CONTINGENCY 2021-22

Caroline Warren presented this item. This is a requirement to bring to the Schools Forum what our growth funding policy will be. The Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) is held centrally and allocated to schools if there is an increase in their Published Admission Number (PAN).

The purpose of the report is to review the policy for allocating funding.

DO – Growth funding – is that a Government requirement.

CW – We are allocated funding from the Government and the LA have calculated we would need all of that growth funding for next year.

SL – Do we think the funding is enough for the anticipated commitment?

CW – Yes it is a possible increase.

Agreed:

Schools Forum approved and agreed the criteria on which growth funding is allocated.

8. DEDICATED SCHOOLS GRANT 2021/21 QUARTER 2

Caroline Warren gave a summary to update the Schools Forum on the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) Quarter 2 position and DSG Recovery Plan.

As at Q2 the cumulative forecast on the DSG overspend is £24.4m. This is an in-year overspend of £8.1m with a slight reduction of £139,000. When the budget for 2020/21 was set, there was significant funding in the DSG to fund the shortfall of £7.7m.

The report shows the breakdown on the funding and summary of transfer request and our continued deficit showing an outturn of £24.4m overspend.

On the DSG Recovery Plan there have been delays within the Recovery Plan due to other work priorities due to COVID as well as Education, Learning and Skills implementing a new structure which was required to move this Recovery Plan on.

Propose to bring the DSG Recovery Plan to Schools Forum for scrutiny at the next meeting in March.

SL – The £24.4m overspend is a concern and we need to get back to an in-year balance.

MS – We are looking at the current position of the Recovery Plan going forward and concerned with the size of the deficit we tried to get some similar data from Local Authorities (LAs) in the South West Region. A lot of those LAs are in deficit and growing and whilst our size was at the higher end, there were a few that had a higher deficit than us. We are continuing to lobby Central Government to have High Needs shortfall in funding over a number of years recognised and although there is more funding coming to LAs, it is not sufficient to meet our needs and no way to cover historic pressures.

DJ – Mention of some LAs doing much better financially. Are they doing something different or are their circumstances markedly different?

MS - Our focus is to try and get an in-year balance. We have started looking at the Recovery Plan and using the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) and the Department for Education (DfE) format and should have an initial draft for the next Forum meeting.

We need to start looking at doing that in the next 2/3 weeks and continue lobbying that historic element. The Council understand the historic nature and the DfE recognises that LAs cannot use any other parts of the budget until a longer term solution can be found.

We are still positive that we have done the right things like investing in the Cluster Fund.

SL – For this meeting to raise a few concerns in relation to the preparing the Recovery Plan and at the next meeting to understand how deliverable it will be.

MF – How realistic is it to talk of balancing the budget given the size of the overspend and the fact that it is growing incrementally each year?

MS – I think we have to get to an in-year balance as this will be non-negotiable with the ESFA/DfE. We would achieve that just from getting our EHCP proportions and top-up levels in line with England averages and I don't see any structural reasons why we can't get to those averages.

HS – We don't get sufficient and what we have got we need to use wisely and effectively, especially compared with other LAs in relation to our top-ups of SEN support. We have strategies in place, importantly we have got capacity in place with the introduction of my new team. This is building capacity across Inclusion and SEND and also need our clusters and schools to be with us in accelerating.

We are focusing on commissioning and have a new Commissioning post in place and we are seeing savings already. We are looking at our financial arrangements and need to be more rigid, for example how we fund post-16 and college placements.

In terms of capacity, we have got Karina Kulawik providing some leadership in the interim. Karina has a wealth of experience of finance both locally and nationally. We are going to be retaining Karina to lead on the financial work and comparison and understand where are not getting it right.

SL – To support and provide to manage this.

PO to MS – Are there any parameters to the limit that is sitting within the Council?

MS – The Council hasn't put any limit at the moment, there is scope to get bigger. If it did, this would declare a crisis and have serious discussions with them. Some LAs are getting close to that. The DfE has recognised the problem cannot be solved by LAs dipping into their own budgets.

Because of the historic element and we were the lowest funded authority in the country, pressure hit us sooner than other LAs so ours is front of the queue. We can learn from practice such as the cluster fund trying to invest in early intervention and those interventions can take a long time. As we continue we will try and learn from those LAs what we can do better.

Action: To have a detailed recovery plan for the next meeting.

9. EARLY YEARS FUNDING ARRANGEMENTS FOR 2020/21 – CONSULTATION OUTCOMES

HS - A meeting was held with the Early Years Working Group about the Inclusion Fund. As part of that discussion we identified some thoughts in relation to funding and we used their feedback to inform the consultations options we developed. We were not able to meet with the working group before we went out to consultation on the options but then we met on Monday this week to share the outcomes of the consultation and had a discussion about the feedback. The majority of the people had voted for Option 1.

Rachel Webb gave a summary of the report.

Following the consultation, 153 responses were received, which was over half of the sector. 44% preferred Option 1 – to have most of the funding. We decided to take Options 2 and 3 combined to have some sort of contingency. The feedback showed they wanted any underspend in the contingency to be returned to the sector.

66 respondents (44%) supported Option 1 which does not involve any contingency. However, 58 respondents (40%) supported Option 2 and a contingency of £100,000. A further 24 respondents (16%) supported Option 3 and a contingency of £219,000.

The conclusion that has been drawn from this response is that most respondents, 82 (56%) support having a contingency and the favoured contingency is that proposed in Option 2.

Therefore, it is recommended that Option 2 is taken forward via Schools Forum as the basis of the funding allocation for 2021/2022. This would be conditional on the contingency funding being required to offset a deficit once any funding secured from the Council Covid-19 fund has also been fully utilised. Any contingency fund remaining would be redistributed to the sector

MS – Just need clarifying that the setting of the Single Funding Formula (SFF) have to get a formal view from the Forum. Recommendation goes to Cabinet and then Full Council to make that decision.

SL – Challenging Early Years around the issues of the census.

NE – This consultation did not go past the Early Years Working Group as we were a provider. They issued the guidance before Christmas and we felt quite strongly that the settings don't understand the consultation. It's quite common potentially it had been voted with the middle ground. We said we didn't feel the settings understood and had not had the opportunity to explain and didn't agree that money should be taken from the front line. If we have to vote I cannot support it as those early years providers will be worse off as result of this proposal.

HS – The majority of respondents, i.e. 44% (Option 1) had voted for all of the money to go to the front line with no contingency but a further 40% (Option 2) with a contingency. What we will put into the report is that the contingency would be a last resort and that we are also bidding from the COVID pot for £240,000 which is the full amount and then we won't need the contingency.

MS – Timescale from the COVID fund, that request is going to the next Cabinet meeting on 1st February where they will also make the decision about the rate. What we need clarity on is the order of setting the rate – if the application of £240,000 is approved by Cabinet, we need to be clear is the Option 2 to proceed or pay back without the contingency.

SL – Are we agreeing to have the contingency pending the approval of the £240,000 or not?

NE – Could the deficit be managed in a different way? Some other way of covering this if the COVID grant doesn't happen.

RA – If the contingency is not required, how would that be distributed?

CW – We need to wait until all the summer term claims have been submitted, and any late claims, and then we need to review in total what we had spent out and what we have been funded for the spring and summer term. We need to look at

the censuses in the spring and summer and how much we have spent out of the census.

MF – Can someone explain what happens to the deficit in early years block? Are you saying it has to be top-sliced from the next year's grant?

MS – If there is no other way then we would need to top-slice it from the Early Years funding formula rates and reducing those rates from one year to the next.

DO – There has been no top-slicing to solve the problem of the deficit, so it seems unfair to top-slice early years funding.

MS – That was the case for the High Needs Block to top-slice. The problem is that the DfE is insistent on sticking to using the January census.

SL – What does the deficit look like? Would the Council carry forward and not top-slice?

MS – The option of the Council will be to use the COVID contingency and there would be no need to topslice. The Forum to give its view on the consultation as the ultimate decision is with the Cabinet.

Agreed: To support an application to the Council COVID-19 Fund to address the deficit.

SL – Add some stronger wording in terms of a number of challenges in the Early Years Sector to access the COVID-19 fund for the Early Years Sector.

SL – Voting on the Options:

Option 1 – 13

Option 2 - 0

Option 3 - 0

Agreed: The Forum agreed to take forward Option 1.

There are a number of challenges but recognise having a contingency is probably going to be helpful. However, we want to make sure the funding is going direct to providers.

10. INTERNAL AUDIT INFORMATION – ACADEMIES

Sarah Lovell gave a summary of this report which highlights a number of items that were helpful for consideration that Academies have audited and includes any recommendations that came from those audits. This is for information only and no decision or comments required.

11. HIGH NEEDS WORKING GROUP (HNWG) UPDATE

Dave Baker was representing Susie Weaver who was unable to attend. The HNWG did meet before Christmas and reviewed the Terms of Reference and agreed to focus on 6 themes (as shown in item 5 of the report).

The HNWG is accountable to the Schools Forum and we have agreed to be identifying and linking with South Glos with the High Needs Strategy. A meeting coming up very soon focusing on key priorities. The SEND development was high on the priorities. Karina Kulawik produced a good report and Hilary Smith will be taking it to the next Secondary Head teachers meeting.

PO – Will some of the new appointments taking place within the Education, Learning and Skills team be part of the HNWG as well?

HS – Definitely Hugh Disley will be linking with the HNWG. Ali Ford from the Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) has been appointed as the Planning and Participation Officer and will be joining us in mid-February and picking up work from Kate East looking at the placements and driving forward the cluster needs strategy.

DB – Joined up approach to make the best use of the DfE Schools Benchmarking for High Needs Funding Tool and also work with parents/carers to hear the voice of the parents.

HS – Should there be representation from Early Years on the HNWG?

Action:

Hilary Smith to submit an update of the staffing plan.

12. FORWARD PLAN

Action:

Recommend to include on the agenda for the 25th March Update on the Early Years Funding.

PO – Possibility of also including an update on Schools in Financial Difficulty at the next meeting.

MF – Will there be a report on a secondary school going to academy – what happens about the deficit?

HS – The conversion is planned for the new academic year and hopefully the deficit situation can be reported at the 13th May meeting rather than the March meeting.

MS – We have got no reason to believe there will be any impact on other schools by that conversion.

13. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

None