

DERBYSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL
DERBYSHIRE SCHOOLS' FORUM

Minutes of the Meeting Held on 30th June 2021
At 6pm on Microsoft Teams

Present

Members

George Wolfe – Curbar Primary
Peter Johnston – The Village Federation
Dr Alan Thomas – Northfield Junior School
Peter Hallsworth – South Normanton Nursery
Chris Greenhough – Swanwick School & Sports College
Martin Brader – Dronfield Henry Fanshawe
Nick Goforth – Belper School
Sarah Lorking – Redhill Academy Trust
Emma Hill – Castle View Primary School
Jennifer Murphy – Hunloke Park Primary
Sarah Baker – Team Education Trust
Peter Crowe – ASCL
Lisa Key – QEGS
Michelle Hill – CEO Derbyshire Network
Michelle Jenkins – Etwall Primary School

Substitutes

Cilla Holman – Hadfield Infants School
Matt Morris – Esteem MAT

Observers

Cllr Ruth George – Elected Member DCC

DCC Officers/others

Saranjit Shetra – Assistant Director, Education and Improvement
Iain Peel – Service Director, Schools and Learning

Paula Williams – Assistant Director, Learning, Access & Inclusion
Amanda Gordon – Early Years Manager
Chris Allcock – Children's Services Finance

Phil Burrows – Children's Services Finance
Jane Morgan – Risk & Insurance Manager

Hazel Swainsbury – Insurance Finance Assistant
Eddie Grant – Children's Services Finance
Shelley Kerslake – Children's Services Finance
Matt Migliorini – Children's Services
Ruth Lane – Children's Services Finance

Martin Brader chaired the meeting.
Chris Allcock confirmed that the meeting was quorate.

21/10 Apologies

David Baker – The Pingle Academy
Jeannie Haigh – Willows Academy Trust
Siobhan Johnston – The Brigg Infants
Thomas Osborn – Baslow St Anne's Primary
Chris Wayment – ASCL
Cllr Robert Flatley – Elected Member DCC
Cllr Alex Dale - Elected Member DCC
Ben Riggott – Parkside Community School
Canon Wainscot – CoE Derby Diocese
Julian Scholefield – Esteem MAT

21/11 Minutes of the meeting held on 28th January 2021

The minutes were approved for accuracy.

Matters arising.

Page 4 - Chris Allcock confirmed that following the concerns expressed in the January meeting, SEN Top ups for ER, special schools and PRUs were increased by between 1.45% & 2.23% for 2021-22.

Page 5 - Peter Hallsworth asked if there had been an update from the DfE regarding the Maintained Nursery Schools grant. Chris Allcock replied that it has been agreed for the period September 2021 to March 2022, but no further information had been received so far. He added that he would expect a consultation to take place if the DfE were to considered withdrawing the funding.

21/12 Items (3a) and (3b) LA Maintained Schools' Insurance 2022-23: Presentation and Report

Jane Morgan, the Council's Risk and Insurance Manager, gave a presentation setting out the issues facing the Council, schools and Schools Forum regarding insurance arrangements from May 2022. The Council has an option to exercise a break clause in the current contracts which would allow a change in provider and the presentation covered the issues to be addressed.

Martin Brader asked how the timeline presented fitted with the next Forum meeting not being until October. Chris Allcock said that he had written to schools and asked them to indicate if they would like to continue with the de-delegation for insurance for 2022-23. The responses will inform a report to the Forum in October on this aspect. The DfE have yet to confirm the national arrangements for next year so it's not certain if de-delegation will continue to be an option going forward.

So far, of the 45 responses received, 42 supported the continued de-delegation of funding. Forum will be asked to make a de-delegation decision at its October meeting.

The consultation ends in July and in September the Council will write to schools to ask them to indicate if they wish to go with the DfE's Risk Protection Arrangement (RPA) option from next May. This will help confirm the number of schools to be covered by any new blanket cover arrangements and allow insurers to give a clear price for the business. Schools not wishing to adopt the RPA will automatically be covered by the blanket insurance arrangements.

Peter Crowe said that School and Academy Insurance Framework (SAIF) provided by Zurich looked like the best option to him. Jane Morgan replied that it does look good unless Derbyshire could beat this under a tender process. Jane thought this would be difficult and the SAIF option means we would be an equal partner with Solihull Council and thus able to influence the policy. Zurich will want to look at our claims history and risks and the prices quoted in the presentation, £17.75 per pupil in year 1 and £18 per pupil in years 2 and 3, may change.

Michelle Jenkins thought it really important that schools have DCC support with insurance matters in whatever option was chosen.

Nick Goforth also liked the SAIF option and wondered whether claims made due to Covid trip cancellations would cause the price to increase. Jane Morgan replied she would hope this would not be the case and that the price would continue to be less than the RPA option. Alan Thomas asked who is DCC's current insurer and Jane Morgan replied it was split over several companies.

The Forum thanked Jane for the presentation and agreed to note the report and that further updates on this issue would be brought in the autumn.

21/13 DSG Outturn 2020-21

Chris Allcock presented the paper which provided the Schools Forum with details of the revenue budget outturn of the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) for 2020-21.

The key points were that grant income was £368.052m which, together with a drawdown from reserves of £0.701m, resulted in total resources of £368.753m for the year. Expenditure in 2020-21 was £370.037m resulting in a £1.284m deficit for the year.

The DSG general reserve had a deficit at the end of 2020-21 of £6.188m. Committed reserves' balances totalling £5.030m partially offset this meaning that the aggregate reported DSG position was a net deficit of £1.157m. Consequently, a DSG recovery plan is required by the DfE and a first look at this is included as item 6 on tonight's agenda.

The breakdown of the £1.284m overspend was provided, the major contributor was the High Needs Block (HNB) which overspent by £5.253m. Increasing high needs pressures are a national issue and a list of the high needs budgets and spend were provided in Appendix 1. Higher than planned spend on top ups was the main contributor, particularly in the primary sector and out county budgets. The overspend on top ups was offset by underspends of around £1m against service-related budgets, mainly due to teams working remotely.

There was also an overspend of £0.545m on the early years block due mainly to the number of provider hours funded by the Authority exceeding the January 2021 census point, which is the basis for calculating part of the 2020-21 grant.

At the end of March 2021 £2.433m was held in an earmarked reserve which represents the accumulated balance of funds de-delegated from schools. Notwithstanding the need to address the overall DSG deficit, the Authority requested permission to drawdown £0.050m of the earmarked reserve to provide a small fund to help the School Improvement Service support vulnerable schools. Appendix 2 to the report provided some narrative on the benefits last year's fund provided.

Collective school balances increased by more than 50% in 2020-21, from £22m to £33.356m; informal contact with other East Midlands authorities shows a broadly similar pattern of increasing balances. At 31st March 2021 13 schools reported an aggregate deficit of £0.960m but this was still an improved position compared with 2019-20 (29 schools, £1.883m.)

Peter Crowe asked why Out of County placements and primary SEN top up costs were so out of line with the budget set. Chris Allcock replied that for primary top-ups the number of approvals of GRIPs and EHCPs have increased not only in number but also the average amount per child. He was unable to give an answer on the Out of County budget at this stage.

Iain Peel added that nationally there has been an increase of 11% in EHCPs and Derbyshire's increases of only 9.5% is good in comparison.

No further comments were made.

The Forum agreed to note the report and to release £50,000 to support school improvement work in LA maintained schools as set out in section 2.2.

21/14 SEN Strategic update – presentation

Paula Williams Assistant Director, Learning, Access and Inclusion gave a detailed presentation looking at the High Needs Block, specifically how it was spent and the ongoing work to ensure monies are used to the best effect to support children and families. The presentation also looked at service improvements, including improvements in the timeliness of assessments and reviews and reductions in the levels of complaints and tribunals.

Peter Crowe asked if TAPS funding was contributing to exclusions decreasing. Paula replied that they have been decreasing for the last two years in secondary schools even before COVID hit, the LA is trying to continue those reductions.

Peter asked how schools and pupils were being supported on COVID related issues for SEND pupils. Paula replied that the LA has been working closely with pupils all year and many of them had been at school during the general closures as they were considered to be vulnerable. For some children this has been really helpful, they actually needed more support when other pupils returned. Several surveys have/are being done with parents to find out the ongoing issues for SEND pupils.

Peter Crowe said that the LA has been trying for a long time to reduce pupils at independent provision and the increases in costs were therefore disappointing. Paula replied the SEND sufficiency plan is designed to increase confidence in LA provision and a piece of work on Out of County and Independent provision is looking to see if any children currently placed there would like to move back to LA provision. Nick Goforth said he would be interested in setting up an ERS unit at Belper school and Paula agreed to make contact outside of the meeting on this.

Councillor George said she was worried about a lack of provision for autism in local areas and difficulties with getting EHCPs, adding there was a particular problem within the Glossop area. Paula Williams replied she was aware of this and is working closely with the Tameside and Glossop Health Authority to address the matter. Iain Peel added that the LA is trying to reduce the amount of travel to specialist places for pupils by setting up more local provision.

Lisa Key said that QEGS in Ashbourne has an ERS unit but no pupils have been placed there for a number of years now. Lisa was glad to hear that the EHCP assessments are speeding up as this is a particular area of concern for schools.

Chris Greenhough supported bringing pupils back from Independent provision but said that special schools are full and need to be extended. Key to bringing children back is that independent schools get around four times the funding per pupil than Derbyshire schools, so of course they can provide more support.

The Forum thanked Paula for the presentation.

21/15 DSG Financial Overview & Deficit Recovery Plan

Chris Allcock presented the paper to update the Forum of the DfE's revised process for managing DSG deficits and provide details of the current position for Derbyshire.

He said there were two key points to note: first, LAs which report an accumulated deficit must have a plan to deal with it. Secondly, Derbyshire's deficit to be addressed is the £6.188m shortfall in the main DSG reserve, the earmarked reserves the LA holds will be used to meet future costs in those areas and are not available to offset the general reserve deficit.

The recovery plan must have the high needs block as its focus, not least as this was the main cause of the overspend in 2020-21. The recovery plan will need to deal with the accumulated deficit and ensure that high needs costs are contained within the annual grant.

The report set out the basis for the estimated future costs and income, many of which are difficult to predict accurately. The recovery plan will be refreshed regularly and a report on progress will be a standing item on future Forum agendas.

A key point to note was that the Authority will almost certainly need to consult schools in the autumn on a transfer of resources from the Schools Block to the High Needs Block in 2022-23. The report gave an indication of the potential impact on a school's budget from a transfer equivalent to 0.5% of the Schools Block.

The Forum noted the recovery plan and no comments were offered from the floor. It was agreed to receive further reports on the DSG deficit and high needs spend in the future.

21/16 Derbyshire's Scheme of Financial Management

Chris Allcock presented a paper to seek Forum approval to propose changes to Derbyshire's Scheme for Financing Schools to align the tender thresholds with those recommended by the DfE.

He said a consultation was issued to schools in May to which five responses had been received. Two comments made by schools were included in the report, specifically that schools would welcome advice on procurement – this has now been published - and another which stated £40,000 is still quite a low tender limit for a large secondary school. Whilst the Authority understands the point, the DfE have indicated that £40,000 is a reasonable level.

The proposed £40,000 threshold is a maximum figure, individual governing bodies can set lower a lower limit if required.

The Forum agreed to note the report and to increase the maximum tender limit in the Scheme from £30,000 to £40,000.

21/17 Platform for future Forum meetings – discussion item

The Forum Chair, Martin Brader, asked members whether they would like Forum meetings to continue virtually or return to an in-person basis. Chris Allcock confirmed legal advice that the Forum can continue virtually should members so choose.

Chris Greenhough said meetings were much better in person as this was a Forum for discussion. Michelle Jenkins said that travel to Matlock is awkward and time consuming and would prefer perhaps a 50/50 split, a suggestion supported by Nick Goforth and Peter Crowe. It was suggested that perhaps the first and last meeting of the year were in person with the winter meetings taking place remotely to avoid travel at that time of year. This suggestion was generally supported.

Chris Allcock also suggested that given the need to travel the October and June meetings should commence slightly earlier with a start time of 5:00p.m. Also, the in-person meetings may not be at Matlock, the final details will be provided as soon as venues have been confirmed.

The Forum agreed that the October and June meetings should be held in person with 5pm starts and the December and January meetings held virtually with a 6pm start.

21/18 Dates of future meetings

13th October 2021 5:00 p.m. – Venue to be confirmed

1st December 2021 6:00 p.m. – Virtual meeting

27th January 2022 6:00 p.m. – Virtual meeting

29th June 2022 5:00 p.m. – Venue to be confirmed

The meeting closed at 7.50pm.