

## **Minutes of the Schools Forum**

**19 January 2023**

**-: Present :-**

**Lisa Finn (Vice-Chair)** Secondary Academy Rep; **Tim Stephens**, Primary Academy Governor; **Clive Star**, Secondary Academy Rep; **Alex Newton**, Secondary Maintained Head; **Beth Woodward**, PRU (substitute for Stephen Hulme); **Mike Lock**, Special Schools Head; **Jayne Jones**, Early Years Rep; **Sarah Tomkinson**, Primary Maintained Head; **Kelly Sooben**, Post 16 representative

**-: Also in attendance :-**

**Rachael Williams**, Assistant Director for Education, Learning and Skills; **Nancy Meehan**, Director of Childrens Services; **Martin Phillips**, Director of Finance; **Rob Parr**, Principal Accountant; **Dan Hamer**, Head of Vulnerable Pupils; **Hannah Spencer** Head of SEN; **Sarah White**, Early Years Finance Officer; **Michael Freeman**, Clerk

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### **1. Islington Partnership**

As part of our sector led improvement partnership with Islington Council, the forum welcomed Nicolas King to the meeting as an observer.

### **2. Apologies/Changes to Membership**

Apologies were received from James Piper and Steven Hulme. The Forum welcomed Beth Woodward to the meeting as Steven's substitute.

Stewart Biddles also sent apologies, Lisa Finn chaired this meeting in his absence.

### **3. Minutes of the last meeting**

The minutes of the last meeting held 24<sup>th</sup> November 2022 were agreed as a true record.

### **4. Financial Report**

Rachael presented an updated financial report to members, having been deferred from the previous meeting.

Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) funded activities are currently forecast to overspend by £2.864m, this is an increase of approximately £130k since the last meeting. The two areas of significant volatility are within the Early Years Block and Higher Needs Block. While pressures remain the same, it was noted that EHCP top ups have slowed, and commissioned places for Special Schools have also decreased.

Lisa asked why there has been an underspend on Joint funded placements. It was explained that methodology applied through the Independent Pupil Overview Panel has seen an increase in Children remaining within the Local Authority area.

A comparison of DSG funding between 2022/23 and 2023/24, with the related increases in minimum per pupil funding levels was then shown. It was pleasing to note that it looks like funding will be in place for 2024/25, and members gave thanks for Rob Parr for his work on this.

The Forum noted the findings of the Financial report and agreed to the recommendation of continuing to work with the Local Authority to make the necessary reductions in the budget through the Safety Valve process.

## **5. Early Years Funding - Budget Allocation & Hourly Rates**

The forum heard from Sarah White, Early years Finance Officer, who presented the new allocations for the Early Years Block of the DSG for 2023/24. The budget has provided the Local Area with increased rates and includes the changes to the Early Years National Funding Formula (EYNFF) following the consultation in summer 2022. There will be no changes to the local formula used by the LA.

There will be an increase of 25p per hour for both 2 year olds and 3 & 4 year olds as well as an additional £20m investment to help meet the cost of the National Living Wage increase from April 2023. Members asked whether this investment would be a one off or the new baseline, although confirmation has not been given yet officers are not expecting a reduction in funding in future years.

After discussion, members were asked to vote on the new Hourly Rates presented, voting as follows:

*To endorse the budget and hourly rates as proposed:*

**For: 9**

**Against: 0**

**Abstain: 0**

Forum voted unanimously in favour.

## 6. Post 16 Pathway Plans

Rachael explained to members the current process for the contract management and data requirements for Post 16 High Needs Learners, before proposing a new way of working moving forward. Whilst the pathway plans were necessary during the period where the LA was growing post 16 opportunities for young people, a recent overview of our annual review process has led to the data being recorded in annual reviews, therefore there is some duplication required in continuing to produce both documents. It was proposed pathway plans be stepped down and instead use the annual review process to gather the intelligence needed. Members asked whether we will be losing anything by stopping the pathway plan process, however it was explained that no data will be lost, merely recorded through a different mechanism.

A vote was held on the proposals as follows:

*To step down the requirement of Post 16 providers to produce a pathway plan for pupils:*

**For: 9**

**Against: 0**

**Abstain: 0**

Members unanimously supported the proposals. Rachael explained that the current cycle of pathway plans will be finished before this takes effect, as there is still some outstanding data to be collected.

## 7. Safety Valve Recovery Plan

Rachael gave an update on the progress of the Safety Valve recovery plan. A management plan has now been submitted to the DfE and colleagues will be meeting with them to discuss this on the 26<sup>th</sup> of January, before the final submission date of 3<sup>rd</sup> February. Nancy said that they expect to hear from the Secretary of State in March, asking for deficit to be written off.. Whilst this is a positive position at this point, it is not in a final position, and further discussion with the DfE will be needed.

Members asked what happens if the debt isn't agreed to be written off – It was explained that all signs are that it will be, it would be surprising if it is not. Martin Phillips explained that the money is allocated to the LA over a number of years, emphasising the importance of the Action Plan and the need for monitoring and reporting mechanisms to be put in place.

Hannah then explained to members changes made to the SEN panel and the annual review process. These changes have led to a refusal rate of 34% for new RSAs (Request for Statutory Assessments), up from 5% in previous years. Parents whose children have been refused at SEN panel are now being offered next step meetings, ensuring that the reasons for the refusal to assess are made clear to parents. A more robust annual review mechanism, including colleagues from Health

and Social Care, is now in place. 232 EHCPs have been ceased this year, an increase of 74% on last year. Hannah reassured the Forum that we are not just ceasing plans, and that the annual review process is still child centered.

It was noted that the DfE has offered annual review training for all colleagues 23<sup>rd</sup> Feb.

Members were encouraged by the plan and the graduated response paperwork, acknowledging that we now have a coherent plan for moving forward. It was also felt that the better engagement with health colleagues is also a huge step forward. Whilst work is already underway and effects are being seen, Rachael pointed out that there will be a length pilot phase, and significant challenges remain ahead.

A vote was held on whether members agree with the plan, with voting as follows:

*To continue with the Safety Valve recovery plan and submit before the 3<sup>rd</sup> of February deadline:*

**For: 9**

**Against: 0**

**Abstain: 0**

Members were unanimous in their support for the plan.

## **8. Items for next meeting**

- School Allocations
- Safety Valve update

## **9. Future meeting dates**

- Thursday 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2023, 09:00 (Virtual Meeting)
- Thursday 4<sup>th</sup> May 2023, 09:00, (Virtual Meeting)
- Thursday 15<sup>th</sup> June 2023, 09:00 (Virtual Meeting)

After discussion members felt that future meetings should be held virtually, making it easier for everyone to attend.