

SCHOOLS FORUM

THURSDAY, 15 JULY 2021

PRESENT: Martin Tinsley (Chairman) and Tomes (Vice-Chairman), Joolz Scarlett and Maggie Callaghan

Also in attendance: Councillor John Baldwin, Councillor Gurpreet Bhangra, Councillor Maureen Hunt, Councillor Gurch Singh, Councillor Donna Stimson and Councillor Amy Tisi

Officers: James Norris, Kevin McDaniel, Clive Haines, Alasdair Whitelaw, Helen Huntley, Sarah Ward and David Cook

APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Andrew Morrison and Mike Wallace.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest received.

MINUTES

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY: That the minutes held on 21 January 2021 be approved.

BUDGET OUTTURN AND SCHOOL BALANCES 2020/21

The Forum considered the report regarding the budget outturn and 2020/21 school balances.

James Norris (Head of Finance AFC) introduced the report as an update on the finances of both central school's Dedicated School's Grant (DSG) budgets and maintained school balances over the last financial year of 2021, which ended 31st March 2021. A final deficit position of £766,000 overspend was reported.

The biggest area of overspend was the high needs block, especially a high increase during the 3rd quarter of the financial year. James Norris also informed that towards the end of the financial year there was a change in the funding for the early needs block.

There was an overspend of £441,000, however this was in line with what had been forecasted to be spent over the year. All forecasts were based upon the knowledge that a DSG grant of just over £800,000 would be given, but in March officials were informed that the money would be received in the following financial year instead. A surplus of £808,000 could then be seen for the current financial year, having taken this grant into account.

Over the 2 financial years, the impact of this will be nil and the deficit or surplus is nothing alarming. This would be monitored closely.

Net deficit for financial year was just under £1.791 million, 1.4% over. James Norris then asked the Chairman if there were any questions.

The Chairman asked where the RBWM stood as a borough compared to neighbours, within the South-East. James Norris stated that the RBWM were not in a bad situation compared to neighbours such as Kingston or Richmond. The trajectory that the RBWM was on, showed a potential deficit of 2.6% by the end of the financial year.

The Chairman asked if there was any news from the government on if there were any plans regarding high needs. Kevin McDaniel, Director of Children's Services, informed that there had not been any firm commitments from the government regarding this.

Chris Tomes asked for clarification on the surplus of £808,000 and the overspend of £441,000. James Norris explained with reference to table 1 that once the financial year ends, there would be more transparency visible between the two years.

The Chairman asked if the £808,000 is definite or if the Department of Education (DfE) could change the goal posts. James Norris confirmed that this is in writing, however it is the borough's calculation. Therefore, this figure was an estimate with a 10% threshold either way, as to how much the final figure will be. James Norris said that hopefully over next 6 weeks, a final figure would be hopefully made available.

(Councillor Bhangra joined the meeting)

James Norris informed the forum that a surplus had been seen in the maintained school balances, increasing from 1.5 million to 2.2 million. He noted that it was important to state that some schools were operating with a deficit of 24% of their budgets. Whilst others were in a surplus position of up to 30% of their school budgets. All sectors moved favourably, except the primary area. This was mainly due to in-comparable results. Marginal surplus seen at the end of March 2021.

The Chairman asked at what point does the borough need to begin clawing back money from schools. Kevin McDaniel said that now was the time to start thinking about attempting to claw back money. He insisted that moving money from surplus schools to deficit schools would not be correct, as it would not encourage the correct financial management. Instead supporting deficit schools, whilst levelling off some surplus schools in his opinion would be more suitable.

The Chairman asked Kevin McDaniel what the next steps would be. The Forum were informed that the excess balance decision would need to be a forum decision rather than an official borough decision. Discussions would potentially be needed on guidance of what the money would be used on and where it is obtained from. Only maintained schools would be included within this.

James Norris said that there was a balance of £460,000 which maintained schools had paid into, and this money would be evaluated for its best purpose later in October.

(Councillor Singh joined the meeting)

Councillor Stimson asked if there was the same behaviour every year with regards to budgets. Kevin McDaniel informed that if there was reason to believe poor handling of budgets in schools, then the borough would take action. Kevin McDaniel said there was currently no school on this list.

Resolved unanimously: that the Schools Forum notes the report including the reported variance. Deficit balance carried forward, maintained schools' balances and de-delegated balances as at 31 March 2021.

BUDGET MONITORING AND FORECAST 2021/22

The Forum considered the report that provided a projected financial position for 2021/22.

James Norris stated that there was currently an overspend of around £1.8 million. The borough's deficit position would effectively double by the end of the financial year as it stands. James Norris stated that the current trajectory was not sustainable, and costs would need to

be looked at. This year, the budget allocation was 1.4% and this would increase to around 2.7% of the overall budget.

Kevin McDaniel stated that the RBWM was part of 19 local authorities who make up the South-East and when reviewed in October, data showed projections of all but one having an overspend on high needs, suggesting it is a national issue.

Joolz Scarlett informed the Forum that she had 320 applications for 6 places at her school, showing there was a high demand for high needs places. Kevin McDaniel supported this statement and also added that demand for special school places had increased and not just because of population increases.

Chris Tomes queried whether there were any upcoming financial packages that were in the pipelines from government. Kevin McDaniel stated that there was no news as it stands regarding high needs.

In terms of value for money, Kevin McDaniel informed that the £130 million was a very good amount and should give good value for money.

Joolz Scarlett asked if the borough were able to claw back money, that could be used to spend to save, which would save in the long run. Kevin McDaniel said it would be his desire and James Norris stated that he believed that they could do that using a block transfer, as was seen 2 or 3 financial years ago. This would be subject to the forum's approval. The Chairman stated that this would be a sensible way forward.

Chris Tomes asked if there was any news from national government regarding high needs. Kevin McDaniel reiterated that he was unable to give a definitive answer on a government decision on budgets. He said that they must prepare for the worst still at this time.

(Councillor Hunt joined the meeting)

Resolved Unanimously: that the Schools Forum notes the report including the reported variance, schedule of Risks & Opportunities and the projected deficit balance as at 31 March 2022.

SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL AND MENTAL HEALTH FUTURE PROVISION

The Schools Forum considered the report regarding the consultation with Headteachers regarding the provision for Children and Young People (C&YP) with a Social Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) difficulty.

The Chairman invited Helen Huntley to discuss the increased pressure on the high needs block, including social, emotional, and mental health (SEMH). The aim of the intervention was to reduce permanent exclusion, which so far had been promising with a decrease amongst primary age children.

Permanent exclusions and fix-term exclusions amongst secondary children with SEMH, had been seen to be increasing. Helen Huntley stated that early intervention is extremely important. Arises from children as young as 5 being permanently excluded. SEMH may be harder for teachers to deal with rather than a child with dyslexia for example, as SEMH is so broad.

Helen Huntley referred to the draft statement of intent that a powerful statement of intent from the borough's headteachers.

Appendix 3 was referred to showing what priorities Headteachers thought it was important to target. These came under 3 different headings. These were universal, targeted and specialist services. Helen Huntley then explained what each of these 3 services involved specifically. Helen Huntley also shared her worry for teachers and headteachers own mental health during the pandemic.

The Chairman identified the importance of the issues raised by Helen Huntley and that the financial side of it was also a very real issue.

Joolz Scarlett asked if possible, for the surplus to be included within the autumn proposal and to see what could be done about potentially using some of the money. Chris Tomes supported this idea of including the surplus on the proposal if possible.

Kevin McDaniel thanked Helen Huntley and Alistair Whitelaw and echoed his support for supporting SEMH children. The Chairman and Kevin McDaniel also supported

Joolz Scarlett's proposal of funding at the point of need for individual children, rather than per school. This was due to differing numbers of children requiring additional support per school.

The Chairman also reiterated the pressures that teachers and his staff also are under in recent times.

Councillor Tisi informed that a wide range of things such as teaching and testing needed to be looked at with regards to students and their SEMH, due to pressures placed on them. Councillor Tisi also stated CAMs waiting times have gone from 18 to 30 months, so she fully supported these proposals.

Councillor Stimson stated her thanks for the report and her support for it. Places on record her support for sustainability and clean air, which in turn can also help with mental health.

Joolz Scarlett brings the attention of the members to the pressures league tables put upon mainstream schools and proposes scrapping them as a suggestion.

Kevin McDaniel understood the argument about league tables and was supportive, however he believed it was unrealistic to have them not be published due to newspaper headlines.

Helen Huntley acknowledged the support towards the proposals. Helen Huntley stated that there would be a meeting before the end of the school term between the wellbeing team, the educational psychology team and the inclusion team to look at the agenda and SEMH approach.

In terms of what happens next with the SEMH proposals, Kevin McDaniel says that

Helen Huntley and Clive Haines would:

- What it would look like when put into action?
- Where would it fit into the offer?
- Where does the money come from and how would it be funded?

The Chairman asked for consideration for 2 items to be added to the agenda for the next meeting. These involved a letter from the Headteacher at Wessex and nursery and business rates. The sensitivity of both agenda items needed to be looked at to identify if they were appropriate for the Schools Forum to discuss.

Councillor Tisi referred to a motion passed in November/December 2019 regarding nursery and business rates. Councillor Tisi said there was support from the council, and a letter was written to the national government regarding this matter.

Kevin McDaniel confirmed Councillor Tisi's statement and confirmed a response to the letter that was sent, was indeed received. The Chairman stated that there unfortunately was not a lot more that the Schools Forum could do.

The Chairman ended the Forum by thanking all officers and members for their attendance.

Resolved unanimously: That the Schools Forum notes the report and

- i. Comments on the proposals set out in section 2.7, 2.8, 2.9 and 2.10.**
- ii. Provides guidance on the potential funding options as set up in 4.2 to allow a further report for 2022/23 budget setting, which sets out recommendations as to how the intervention and provision can be paid for on a sustainable basis.**

The meeting, which began at 2.00 pm, finished at 3.28 pm

CHAIRMAN.....

DATE.....