

SCHOOLS FORUM

TUESDAY, 22 SEPTEMBER 2020

PRESENT: Hugh Boulter, Maggie Callaghan, Isabel Cooke, Sarah Cottle, John Fletcher, Richard Pilgrim, Joolz Scarlett, Martin Tinsley (Chairman), Chris Tomes (Vice Chairman) and Mike Wallace

Also in attendance: Councillor Gurpreet Bhangra, Councillor Maureen Hunt, Councillor Neil Knowles and Councillor Donna Stimson

Officers: Andy Carswell, Kevin McDaniel, James Norris and Fatima Rehman

APOLOGIES

None.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Joolz Scarlett, Headteacher of Manor Green School, declared an interest in item 6 as the schools funding came from The High Needs Block, as well as an interest in the inclusion outreach services.

MINUTES

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY: That the minutes of the meeting held on 16 July 2020 be approved as a true and correct record, subject to the following changes:

- **RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY: That the Schools Forum covered the cost of the business rates for this financial year for all maintained nursery settings be approved.**

BUDGET MONITORING AND FORECAST 2020/21

James Norris, Head of Finance (RBWM), introduced the report to Members, which set out the financial forecasting for the financial year and the anticipated deficit carried forward. The total funding allocated for 2020/2021 was shown in the report, with £125 million of the funding allocated by Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) for all schools. £69 million was for academies and direct funding, leaving a net budget of £65 million and an anticipated £208,000 net overspend. There was a projected deficit of £1.3 million at the end of the financial year, which was a similar position reported in July 2020. There had been an underspend of £450,000 in the Schools Block, specifically the Schools Pupil Growth Fund. There was also an underspend of £52,000 on the Central Block due to a restructure in staffing.

Discussions were still being undertaken with the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) to determine the actual level of funding to be received for the Early Years Block for this financial year. However, the forecasted underspend was £100,000 due to the previous financial years underspend. The overspend on the High Needs Block is £810,000 due to an increase in the special education needs funding matrixes and an increase in both the number and complexity of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP). In addition, there was a reported underspend on the Schools Growth Fund of £450,000. Overall, the net in-year overspend is £208,000. There is a potential further risk estimated at £70,000, resulting in a total of £1.3 million deficit balance at the end of the financial year.

The future actions and next steps included a Deficit Recovery Plan to be submitted to the Department for Education (DfE). The local authority was awaiting a template and forecasted the submission to be by the end of November 2020.

The Chairman asked if the School's Budget would be used by the local authority with the current pandemic and national government pressures. The Forum was informed that there were no plans for the dedicated schools grant budget to be reduced for the time being.

The Chairman asked if there was still a potential for school's underspend to be taken by the authority, and the Forum was informed that this was a potential but was currently paused. Kevin McDaniel, Director of Children's Services said the dedicated schools grant (DSG) was ring-fenced and therefore there was no risk for the council taking from the fund. The government changed the regulations in 2020 that states the council did not have to cover the DSG deficit, and Schools Forums must have a recovery plan for any DSG deficit. Schools Forum had to have a budget recovery plan that would balance in-year and historical deficit of £1 million. This was going to be a challenging year for the education sector, and he anticipated the DfE's revised guidance on the current lack of support in COVID-19 related expenses.

The Chairman said he was concerned for the potential and frequent changes from DfE and the central government and said there was a need to protect schools to ensure they were not negatively targeted due to a deficit. The Forum was informed that the bigger risk was the national funding formula being implemented sooner than expected, which would take away local decision-making. This would leave the borough with a budget that does not balance.

The Forum noted the report.

SCHEME FOR FINANCING SCHOOLS 2020/21

James Norris introduced the report to Members and said this item was moved forward as there were insufficient maintained schools' representation in the last meeting to approve the scheme for current financial year. Sarah Cottle, Michael Wallace and Chris Tomes approved the scheme.

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY: That the Scheme for Financing Schools 2020/21 be approved.

HIGH NEEDS BLOCK REVIEW

Kevin McDaniel introduced the report and informed Members that one element of the DSG was the High Needs Block of approximately £18 million to support the needs of children with additional requirements for education. Officers working under the Director of Children's Services could make a proposal for the budget via consultation with the Schools Forum. There was a need to balance the budget next year, considering:

- An in-year deficit of £810,000
- An Ofsted inspection in 2017 and the care quality commission, with temporary funding provided by the local authority and health provider through the Better Care Fund to innovate work around Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) type work. This led to an improvement of the quality of support for young people in schools. The Forum needed to consider whether projects like this should be continued.
- The Schools Forum and wider groups needed to identify four new resource units over the next two years to support 40 more places for children with needs in the borough. There was a need to reshape the High Needs Block.

The report requested to seek early feedback from Members to enable officers to make a proposal for the 2021/22 budget. Some of the priority areas of expenditure from the High Needs Block were statutory or required by regulation. Feedback from the Members was

requested to ensure the order of priority was correct, in order to bring forward a revised budget. Kevin McDaniel requested for the Member's representative groups to be informed of the change in the spending structure of the High Needs Block from April 2021 due to three pressures.

Michael Wallace, Headteacher of Furze Platt Junior School, requested for details of how cost-effective projects that were funded by the High Needs Block were, and the Members were informed it was possible to share the cost breakdown of the projects. Kevin McDaniel said approximately £5 million was spent on ensuring places and resources unit existed for children. Another £5 million was spent on the top-up funding, and approximately £50,000 - £100,000 was spent on other smaller project items. It was difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of the projects as reviewing the projects were based on individual case studies and would be subjective.

Michael Wallace said the non-statutory projects were required to be reviewed. Kevin McDaniel agreed and said statutory and non-statutory projects should not be used as a discriminator, as some non-statutory projects had made a fundamental difference to some children. He said there was a need to review the amount spent on statutory items to ensure the money was being used in the most effective manner. The Chairman said projects like Area SENCO Capacity had a large impact on the borough despite not being statutory duty, and there was a need to take the impacts into consideration when refining the list.

Joolz Scarlett asked if the SEND Local Area Review was taken into consideration when the table was assorted into priority order, as the finances were not necessarily available to support some of the outstanding actions. The Members were informed that this was taken into consideration, and the table was put together by area of spend rather than the budget line of services. Kevin McDaniel said there was a need to improve the quality of signposting families to the range of activities available.

The Chairman asked if there was an opportunity within some statutory duty projects to receive support from healthcare, and the Members were informed that there was a meeting due to discuss the input healthcare could provide in activities.

Kevin McDaniel said several the items on the list that were funded by the High Needs Block also coincided with some of the traded services that were offered by the local authority. There was a possibility to consider a traded option for the schools that valued the service. Whilst this may move the cost from the High Needs Block to the Main Block, this may be a possible solution.

Michael Wallace said this was an option worth reconsidering, though the concern was the staffing costs as there was an uncertainty in guaranteed funding through the Service Level Agreement (SLA) method. As a result, practitioners could be lost, such as in the example of Behaviour Support Teams. The Forum was informed that this was a risk. Sarah Cottle, Headteacher of Cookham Nursery School, said the concern of relying on SLA would be that schools that needed access to a high level of support would result in a strain on their budget.

Kevin McDaniel said the first £6,000 cost of the child with additional needs would be met from the delegated budgets. Under the inclusion agenda, there had been an attempt to bring the disparity of children with and without EHCPs in schools towards the national average of 1.92. There was an understanding that every child and school was different, there was a need for the system to work together, and it may be that there is a need for more paid-for services, or different services to be added. The Chairman said the discussion would be shared with other Headteachers and Kevin McDaniel said he was happy to virtually join any cluster groups in order to receive comments and feedback.

The Chairman introduced Maggie Callaghan to the Forum.

Councillor Stimson, Lead Member - Climate Change, Sustainability, Parks and Countryside, said Clive Haines had shared a questionnaire to all school's for children to complete regarding the climate consultation. The Chairman said this could be shared in the cluster meetings.

The Chairman thanked Members and officers.

The meeting, which began at 2.00 pm, finished at 2.42 pm

CHAIRMAN.....

DATE.....