

SCHOOLS FORUM

THURSDAY, 21 OCTOBER 2021

PRESENT: Martin Tinsley (Chairman), Chris Tomes (Vice-Chairman), Isabel Cooke, Joolz Scarlett, Michael Wallace, Sarah Cottle, Andrew Morrison

Also in attendance: Councillor John Baldwin, Councillor Gurpreet Bhangra, Councillor David Cannon and Councillor Gurch Singh

Officers: James Norris, Kevin McDaniel, Clive Haines, David Cook and Oran Norris-Browne

APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Maggie Callaghan and John Fletcher.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest made.

MINUTES

AGREED UNANIMOUSLY – that the minutes of the meeting held on the 15th July 2021, be an accurate record.

The Chairman mentioned two discussion points that were made at the last meeting with regards to Wessex Primary School and a letter that had been sent to government. The Clerk agreed to investigate the letter further offline.

The Director of Children's Services (Kevin McDaniel) said with regards to Wessex Primary School, that he would discuss this with the Chairman offline.

BUDGET MONITORING AND FORECAST 2021/22

The Schools Forum considered the report regarding the budget monitoring and forecast for 2021/22.

The Chairman invited the Head of Finance for Achieving for Children (James Norris) to introduce the report to the forum.

The Head of Finance for Achieving for Children said that the report set out the projected variants coming into the financial year and it identified the level of balances and the deficit. He added that this showed the pressures that the authority was facing.

The Head of Finance for Achieving for Children referred to section 2.1 of the report, which showed the financial summary and set out the indicative budget for the current financial year of £133,912,000. He added that the estimated early years block grant claw back from the previous year was still being assessed by the ESFA and should be available in November 2021. He also added that the budget was allocated last year and the majority of it had already been spent in the previous financial year. He reiterated that this result would simply be correcting an error in the early years pupil data from the previous year.

The Head of Finance for Achieving for Children said that the current position for the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) for the current financial year was a £1.755 million overspend. He

estimated that there would be more updated forecast presented to the Schools Forum in November 2021, and it would provide a good understanding as to what the finances currently were.

The Head of Finance for Achieving for Children said that there had been one change in accounting treatment, that a previously unearmarked reserve within the Dedicated Schools Grant of £134,000 could no longer be held separately due to the deficit and that the two balances had to be aggregated together.

The Head of Finance for Achieving for Children asked the forum to direct their attention to section 3.1 of the report, which stated an overall projected deficit as of 31st March 2022 as being £3.412 million. He said that this was made up of a brought forward deficit of £1.791 million, the in-year projected deficit of £1.755 million and the release of the previously discussed £134,000. He then added that the £3.412 million represented 2.5% of the total budget allocation 2021/22.

The Head of Finance for Achieving for Children stated that a deficit management plan needed to be drawn up and submitted to the Department for Education (DfE) between the Local Authority and the Schools Forum, with a sign off also required by the RBWM's Chief Finance Officer.

The Chairman asked if the borough stood reasonably compared to neighbouring authorities. The Head of Finance for Achieving for Children said that he had comparisons for Richmond and Kingston and that Richmond reported a predicted deficit of 4% and Kingston reported 7%. He added that this was favourable, as the borough's stood at 2.5%.

The Chairman asked the Director of Children's Services on how this compared to the rest of the South-East.

The Director of Children's Service replied by saying that 3 years ago, the local deficit was zero and that increased to 1% 2 years ago and 2.5% in the previous year. He said that this was rapidly catching up to the South-East average of between 5-6%. He also added that some authorities with the largest deficits were able to enter an arrangement with the Department for Education called safety valve funding. The aim of this being to prevent the deficit from increasing.

The Head of Finance for Achieving for Children added that the indicative projection for the next financial year showed another £1.7 million overspend, which meant the deficit by March 2023, would be in the region of £5 million.

The Chairman referred to the previous forum meeting where it was discussed that any surplus budgets could be used to claw back some money and offset some of financial difficulties faced by the authority. He added that this would be unpopular, but potentially necessary.

The Director of Children's Service acknowledged that this would be unfair on schools who managed a successful budget and to penalise them would not be welcomed by all in the forum. Additionally, it was not permissible to clawback funds from academies. He added that the price inflation that was being seen, was mainly due to increased staffing costs, especially for the high needs block as more families were now requesting specialist schools and out of borough schools.

The Director of Children's Service put this into perspective for the forum by saying that top ups for children going into schools ranged from £5000 to £17,000, whereas many of the out of borough placements were running at £35,000 to £80,000 a year. He stated that by keeping children in the first bracket, this would assist in managing the budget better.

The Director of Children's Service said that 3 years ago, the forum had allocated money for a Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) intervention from a reserve, which had seen a

positive impact. He added that there was no funding for this in the next financial year. A separate report would follow at the next Schools Forum to present future options for delivering the SEMH service.

Mike Wallace asked if the role to negotiate package deals with key specialist providers had been seen to have had an impact in the local authority and if the role was continuing.

The Director of Children's Service said that an expanded commissioning team had been recruited for both high needs and social care placements. He added that results so far suggested that it was having a slight impact on price, but this was patchy and was dependant on school settings. He admitted that it was an important role to maintain, however the role needed repurposing and on its own it would not make the biggest impact in budget savings.

The Chairman asked if projects such as the Rainbow Centre in Dedworth were the types of projects that needed to be rolled out more, to keep children within the borough.

The Director of Children's Service stated that the ambition of those primary units was to keep children within the borough, both reducing the cost to the borough and keeping the children closer to their local communities. He added that the units were very good but noted that they must be managed carefully to ensure their usefulness was maximised.

The Chairman asked if there were any plans for more of these. The Director of Children's Service confirmed that there were principle plans for 2 more units, however the funding would come from the high needs block and therefore an assessment would need to be carried out on whether they would add value.

Joolz Scarlett acknowledged that this issue was a national one and that mainstream schools needed to be more inclusive. She added that the Covid-19 pandemic had not helped the situation and that demand was completely outweighing the availability of places.

The Chairman asked Sarah Cottle if she had seen a difference to children with high needs entering the nursery setting. Sarah Cottle confirmed this and said that the current year especially had shown children from all over the UK coming into this setting at a very young age, each with varying plans.

The Chairman asked if there was an update on works carried out about using the information provided, to plan for the future.

The Director of Children's Service said that the Covid-19 pandemic led to a lower number of school places than originally forecast and therefore there were no further updates to provide at this time. He did add that the lower intake of children, would likely lead to a lower budget being provided next year.

The Chairman asked if the downward trend seen in 2018 regarding this issue was likely to continue.

The Director of Children's Service said that in Windsor it was down slightly, however Maidenhead had seen a greater decrease than originally projected. He added that it was unclear currently if this was due to a reduce in migration due to the UK leaving the EU or if it was down to the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Mike Wallace said that it was important to ensure that the resource provisions were fit for purpose and that each high need was identified as being able to be managed by this provision successfully. The Chairman added that value for money could also prove to be difficult with falling numbers in both Windsor and Maidenhead.

The Chairman asked if Andrew Morrison had seen similar things at a secondary level. Andrew Morrison confirmed this and said that so many provisions were required for many different

high needs. He observed that not all high needs could be addressed in the borough, and some children would still have to attend schools outside of the borough.

Both Chris Tomes and Isabel Cooke agreed with Andrew Morrison's assessment of the situation.

The Director of Children's Service also agreed with Andrew Morrison's statement and said that some existing provisions may have to be stopped to prioritize areas that would make the biggest difference. He added that the National Funding Formula for both the main school's budget was 2% and the high needs block was an 8% increase. The local borough was only to be receiving closer to 7% for the high needs block, due to having a lower deprivation compared to other boroughs.

The Chairman asked how the local authority would inform parents of why certain provisions were to end. The Director of Children's Service said that services that were identified as being underutilised, would need to be looked at how they could be run differently.

The Head of Finance for Achieving for Children said that the Schools Budget Consultation would come out on the 22nd November 2021, with the results being brought to the Schools Forum in December 2021. He asked forum members to engage with this process and to similarly encourage their cluster groups to do the same.

The Director of Children's Service asked the Chairman if it was possible for volunteers from the forum to engage in a meeting before the next forum meeting to provide some early guidance on tough decisions that needed to be made. The Chairman confirmed a willingness to participate.

The Director of Children's Service said that a meeting was needed out of the public domain with a range of schools to discuss the options that were available. The Chairman confirmed this.

The Head of Finance for Achieving for Children said that the next forum meeting on the 18th November 2021 should go ahead, with a purpose of discussing the upcoming consultation at that time.

The Chairman thanked all forum members and officers for their attendance.

The meeting, which began at 2.00 pm, finished at 2.45 pm

CHAIRMAN.....

DATE.....