

SCHOOLS FORUM

Thursday 14 December 2023

Present (virtually): Chris Tomes (Churchmead) (Vice-Chair in the Chair), Isabel Cooke (White Waltham), Catherine Page (Oldfield Primary), Neil Dimpleby (Altwood), Ben Bausor (Early Year PVI), Joolz Scarlett (Manor Green), Sarah Cottle (Maidenhead Nursery Federation), and Eddie Neighbour (Pioneer Academy).

Officers (virtually): Louise Dutton, Clive Haines, Tracey Anne-Nevitt, Sarah Ward and Laurence Ellis

Apologies for Absence

The Vice-Chair in the Chair, Chris Tomes (Churchmead), welcomed everyone to the meeting. Forum members then introduced themselves.

Apologies were received from Tim Fettes (Holy Trinity CE Primary) and Andrew Morrison (Furze Platt Senior).

Declarations of Interest

No interests were declared.

Minutes of the Previous Meeting

Louise Dutton, Head of Finance (Achieving for Children, AfC), highlighted that the minutes stated that the Forum had voted for Option C in regard to the Growth Funding, claiming that they actually voted for Option B.

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY: That the minutes of the meeting held on 16th November 2023 be approved as a correct record.

Strategy for Maintained Schools in Deficit

Clive Haines, Deputy Director for Education (AfC), explained that the RBWM Schools Strategy to Support Maintained Schools in Financial Difficulty had materialised because the central government had allocated some additional funding to some local authorities (LAs) which were experiencing financial difficulties (notably deficits). He further stated that this funding strategy applied to maintained schools, nurseries, and special schools; but did not apply to academies (which would receive separate funding) and private voluntary nurseries.

For 2024-25, RBWM had been allocated around £220,000 in order to support schools with deficit budgets. Based on this, an eligibility strategy was formulated to implement this. Clive Haines informed that the report was for Schools Forum to adopt the strategy.

The eligible criteria (based on current trends) would encompass:

- Falling numbers on roll,
- Engagement with the Schools Management Resource (SMR) Advisors through their reports,
- A garrison intake – military schools that provides the primary education for the children of the armed forces,
- Larger than usual disadvantaged intake.

The strategy included strategic aims and sustainabilities under each of the eligibility criteria (detailed in Table 1, page 22 of the report).

Discussing the transparency and governance of the strategy, Clive Haines informed that:

- Schools would be selected against the strategy criteria and invited to submit an application based on the criteria.
- A suggestion that a panel be formed consisting of Schools Forum representatives with applicants being invited to present their cases to this panel.
- The panel would have a set terms of reference with delegated powers where it would agree/disagree each application and decide on the amount to be awarded based on the strategic aims and sustainabilities, ensuring the funding would help schools become more sustainable with their budgets in the future.
- Schools Forum would have the responsibility to monitor the grant budget, whereby the reports and grant budgets would be presented to Schools Forum in order to have governance around this strategy.

Clive Haines requested for Schools Forum to adopt the strategy and to take in the panel membership and the reporting governance into the Forum.

Joolz Scarlett (Manor Green) asked whether the number of schools which could be eligible had been identified. Clive Haines replied that he identified the potentially eligible schools but added that he could not reveal this publicly at the moment. Nevertheless, Louise Dutton informed that around 4 or 5 schools were potentially eligible.

The Chair asked whether schools needed to meet every single part of the criteria. Clive Haines replied that they did not, only a selection of the criteria. He reiterated that the criteria was set against the current trends which schools were experiencing that had put them into a deficit.

Neil Dimbleby (Altwood) asked about the timeframe for schools to apply, and then asked whether this would be all-in-one or would schools have to apply at different stages of the year. While needing confirmation with AfC finance officers, Clive Haines believed that it was all-in-one and applications had to be submitted in the first quarter of 2024. Neil Dimbleby stated that he would be happy if it was the case.

Neil Dimbleby then asked about the phrase “greater than usual” in regard to the number of challenging students, opining that the wording sounded a bit “woolly”. Clive Haines explained that it was difficult to place a definite criterion trigger and added that an example of a school meeting this criterion could be the number of students with EHCPs (Education Health and Care Plans) or on the SEN – K register (Special Educational Needs) in which the school had.

The Chair asked for confirmation on whether this would be allocated before the end of the current financial year. Louise Dutton answered that the funding needed be allocated and distributed to schools by the end of March 2024.

Ben Bausor (Early Year PVI) asked whether the process would involve the school requesting for a specific amount of funding or the panel deciding the amount to specific schools. Clive Haines replied that £220,000 was not a huge amount of money; therefore, it would be based on the application and then be distributed on the information AfC possessed on the budget deficits of each school. He added that this was the reason that a panel was required: to give this allocation strong governance.

The Chair asked for clarification on whether the aforementioned panel would be composed of members of Schools Forum who would then be invited to a meeting in the next school term. Clive Haines answered that the panel meeting would be separate to the Schools Forum meeting, but its activities would be reported back into Schools Forum.

Referring to the lack of engagement from headteachers on the financial aspects of schools, Catherine Page (Oldfield Primary) asked whether the eligible schools would be directly contacted so that they were aware of this. Clive Haines confirmed this, and that it would be based on the information which AfC had on each school.

Louise Dutton added that AfC would be contacting all schools and then set out the strategy and the guidance. If the school believed that they were eligible for the funding, they could submit an application. The likely next step would be for the local authority to do a triage on which schools met the criteria before their application was presented to the panel.

Joolz Scarlett commented that there would need to be a more definitive definition with the “greater than usual” or some metrics put in place if the aforementioned process was to be followed, so that schools knew that they had a higher-than-average number of students with EHCPs or were on SEN – K register. Clive Haines suggested that this criterion could be amended to ‘high number of EHCP plans’.

The Chair asked the Forum whether they were happy with the aforementioned amendment, whereby the change of wording would be linked to the number of EHCPs.

AGREED UNANIMOUSLY: RBWM Schools Strategy to Support Maintained Schools in Financial Difficulty with the added amendment of rewording the criterion to ‘high number of EHCP plans’.

2024-25 Schools Formula Funding Consultation outcome and DSG Budget update

Tracey Anne-Nevitt, Business Finance Partner for Schools and Early Years (AfC), introduced the report as an update on the schools funding consultation as well as an update on the recent announcement of early years funding for 2024-25, the de-delegation rates, and the central schools budget.

The schools funding consultation had ended on 1st December 2023 with 25 schools forwarding responses (42% of schools who received the consultation). Tracey Anne-Nevitt then went through the questions in the consultation and the responses from the schools:

- The proposal to retain the minimum funding guarantee at 0.5% for mainstream schools was supported by 92% of respondents.
- The continuation of the capping and scaling in the minimum funding guarantee (MFG) was supported by 64% of respondents.
- For the sparsity factor, the option with the highest support was Option 1: increase sparsity by 10% increase (the minimum increase to apply). Tracey Anne-Nevitt reminded the Forum that the sparsity was introduced to the formula for the first year (2023-24) with AfC gradually adding to this factor.
- For the headroom allocation, Option 1 had the highest support (52% support) which would be applying additional funding to the four formula factors which were funded below the NFF (national funding formula) levels.
- On de-delegation (which only applied to maintained schools), where a table of rates for the proposed rates for 2023-24 was provided to the consultation, including the School Improvement Service being partly de-delegated, 60% of maintained schools supported the de-delegation of school improvement, with one responding with ‘no’ and another 5 (33%) responding with ‘unsure’.

Regarding the low response rates from schools to consultations, Sarah Cottle (Maidenhead Nursery Federation) wondered whether a different approach could improve responses from schools, such as a short Zoom chat.

Louise Dutton responded that a drop-in session through Google Meets was offered, with an invite being sent out to headteachers and school business managers (including academies) but only four of these had joined the drop-in session. Concluding that a drop-in session did not

work, Louise Dutton informed that AfC would consider further actions they could do for 2024 in hopes of increasing responses. One option she mentioned was that AfC officers could attend headteacher meetings and present the information to them, possibly before a consultation was sent out, to give them insight on what was coming up.

The Chair agreed that there would likely be improved responses at headteacher meetings, stating that this was important for headteachers as it had significant impact on their school budgets. Louise Dutton added that she once came across a headteacher of an academy who believed that academies were not affected. From this, she highlighted that AfC needed to ensure that the message was being sent out and the right people received it.

Isabel Cooke highlighted that headteachers and school business managers received a high volume of emails, and as a result, they would likely miss important emails, such as consultations. As such, she believed that engaging through headteacher forums would be beneficial.

Continuing with her report, Tracey Anne-Nevitt highlighted the table which detailed the proposed de-delegation rates for 2024-25, adding that this table was brought to Schools Forum annually. She stated that the representatives for maintained schools were required to approve the de-delegation rates to go into the formula funding for the new financial year (2024-25).

Catherine Page, representing a maintained primary school, and the Chair, representing a maintained secondary school, approved the de-delegation rates.

AGREED: To approve the de-delegation rates to go into the formula funding for the financial year 2024-25.

Tracey Anne-Nevitt then moved onto the Central School Services Budgets (Table 3), explaining that this was to give the Forum an update on the budgets for places in independent schools – non-SEN, Admissions Team and servicing Schools Forum. She requested for the Forum to support these areas.

UNANIMOUSLY AGREED: To support the Central School Services Budgets.

Tracey Anne-Nevitt then moved onto the Early Years Funding Notification. She explained that at the end of November 2023, the Borough received an update on the outcome of the Early Years Funding consultation which central government carried out with local authorities. They also sent over the Early Years Local Authority Funding Rates (Table 4), which illustrated the RBWM rates per entitlement (Under aged 2, 2-year-olds, and 3- and 4-year-olds) for 2023-24 and 2024-25.

Tracey Anne-Nevitt then discussed the Early Years Block Funding (Table 5), stating that these were illustrative rates based on estimates on the PTEs (part-time equivalent) from the central government.

Tracey Anne-Nevitt then informed that the AfC School Finance Team were working on the next consultation which would be brought to the Forum at the next meeting in January 2024 to showcase the details on the formula proposals. From there, this consultation would be sent out to schools so they could give their feedback on the proposals for April 2024 onwards.

The Forum noted the Early Years Block Funding.

The Chair concluded the meeting by wishing all attendees a Happy Christmas.

The meeting, which began at 2.02 am, finished at 2.28 pm

Chair.....

Date.....