**Norfolk Schools Forum**

**Minutes of Meeting held on Friday 14 May 2021**

**09:15 – 11:30 hours**

**Teams Meeting**

**Present: Representing**

Andrew Aalders-Dunthorne Academies

Keith Bates, Eaton Hall Specialist Academy Special School Academy

Chris Caddamy, (Vice Chair) City College 16 – 19 Representative

Lacey Douglass Early Years Representative

Mike Grimble, Avenue Junior School Primary Maintained Governors

Glyn Hambling, Unity Education Trust Alternative Provision

Tim Hillman (substitute) JCC (secondary phase)

Howard Nelson, Diocese of Norwich Diocesan Board of Education

Carol Jacques Maintained Nursery School

Clare Jones, Boudica Schools Trust Academies

Peter Pazitka, SJB CMAT Academies

Joanne Philpott, City of Norwich School Academies

Sarah Porter, The Heart Education Trust Academies

David Shaw, Creative Education Trust Academies

Sarah Shirras, St Williams Primary Primary Maintained Schools

Joanna Tuttle, Aylsham High School Secondary Maintained Schools

Vicky Warnes JCC (primary phase)

Martin White, (Chair) Nebula Federation Primary Maintained Governors

Rebecca Wicks, The Clare School Maintained Special Schools

Michael Bateman Programme Director SEN and Alternative Provision

Martin Brock Accountant

Marilyn Edgeley Admin Officer

Dawn Filtness Finance Business Partner

Nicki Rider Interim Head of High Needs SEND

Chris Snudden Director of Learning & Inclusion

**Apologies:**

John Crowley Assistant Director Learning and

Achievement

Sally Cutting Senior Accountant

Bob Groome JCC (Secondary phase)

Sara Tough Executive Director Childrens Services

1. **Apologies**

Apologies were received from John Crowley, Sally Cutting and Bob Groome, Tim Hillman is standing in as JCC secondary phase substitute for this meeting. Apologies also received from Adrian Ball who has been elected as the new Academies representative.

The Chair welcomed the new Maintained Special School representative Rebecca Wicks.

1. **Minutes of the Last Meeting and Matters Arising**

The minutes of the meeting held on 12 March 2021 were accepted as a true record.

* **Joint letter to the government with other School Forums in the Eastern Region on insufficient funding for the High Needs Block.**

School Forums in the Eastern Region have been contacted for a second time in relation to the sending of a joint letter regarding insufficient funding for SEN.

There has been a reply from five councils showing an interest.

**Action: A letter will be drafted and circulated to them**

* A letter has been sent to the Secretary of State jointly from the current Chair and previous Chair of Forum to correct the assumption that the School Forum was not aware of the authorities plans for the Dedicated Schools Grant Recovery. The Chair confirmed that no reply has been received.

**Action: The letter will be resent using the clerk to Forum’s email address.**

1. **Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG)**

**3a) Final Outturn and Balances 2020 -21**

The overall DSG outturn position for all four blocks was £12.093m overspend for 2020/21, including a significant overspend within the High Needs Block (£12.462m) offset by underspends within the Schools Block (-£0.152m) and Early Years Block

(-£0.217m). The Central Schools Services Block was overspent by less than £0.001m.

The combined cumulative year-on-year overspend on the Dedicated Schools Grant is now £31.797m.

Officers went through the paper detailing the different elements. School Forum Members’ questions and comments are recorded below:

**Schools Block**

This block was underspent by -£0.152m primarily due to rate savings from academy conversions and the pro-rata clawback of budget share monies following a school closure. Notice was drawn to the DfE’s consultation on changing the approach to business rates in future years that would result in the removal of the revaluation risk on this block. The variances against individual de-delegated budgets were highlighted and Members were of the Forum decision when the budget was set for 2021-22 to revise these.

**Comments and questions on Schools Block:**

Q. Has anything on the spend changed due to Covid?

A. This is the final outturn and there is likely to be some impact from Covid – most of the variances would have been anticipated in previous forecasts.

Q. No spend on Disabled Staff – what is the criteria? Are all schools aware of the available funding?

A. Carole Human produced a paper in the past this could be recirculated.

**Action: It was agreed that this information would be re-circulated to schools via an MI Sheet.**

**Central Schools Services Block**

This is overspent by £523. This includes a final payment to end a Joint User Agreement with Long Stratton. Members said they were pleased this had finally been dealt with.

The School Forum Budget has always been underspent significantly and this has now been reduced to £0.030m.

**Comments and Questions:**

Q. Will Schools Forum continue to meet virtually given the cost reductions?

A. There is a debate to be had in the future and we do need to consider the regulations, which were amended temporarily for the pandemic. One option could be to alternate between virtual and actual meetings.

**High Needs Block**

Encompasses the entire overspend of £12.462m. The plan was significantly re-modelled earlier in 2020-21, due to the previous versions being based upon the early capital investment business case and not reflecting recent trends. The deficit forecast is now realistically higher. The authority needs to continue to invest in good quality infrastructure of our own. The in-year deficit increase has been reflected in future years. The Council is working with the Department of Education (DfE) on the plan going forward.

Largest variant is the Independent placements pressure and amounts to £9m of the deficit.

The outturn position is largely in line with the previous forecast to Forum at its January meeting.

**Comments and Questions**

Q. Clearly the Independent placements have gone up but is there also an inflation factor, as they are so in demand are we paying more per place than we would have done a year ago? Pleased to see that a lot of work is going into realistic forecasting.

A. Complicated picture, in the majority of cases the independent schools we use are part of a procurement framework with fixed costs. We have had a couple of new independent schools and these schools have costs at the top end of the market. We estimate this has caused a rise in the overall average. Feedback regarding the forecasting improvements is appreciated.

**Early Years Block**

There is a -£0.217m underspend within this budget. The LA have included an adjustment of £1.1m for an estimated clawback from the DfE due to the level of parental entitlement take up. Also included is £0.500m to support Covid sufficiency claims relating to the 2020-21 financial year not yet paid.

This underspend will be transferred to DSG Reserves.

**Comments and Questions**

Q. How accurate have you been in the past with forecasting these adjustments?

A. Last year we were £35,000 out. Some authorities do not attempt to forecast this and roll everything forward which does not show what is used in the block and what is given back to the government. This is a difficult judgement to make as we do not have a full set of data at the time of making the adjustment.

This year the government will do a summer count as well and where take-up dropped below 85% they will give a top-up. We are confident this does not apply to Norfolk but it does mean that the clawback is unlikely to be finalised until November 21 rather than July 21. They will then do a count each term through 2021/22.

Q. Have maintained nurseries had any extra funding due to covid?

A. Maintained nursery schools were left out of DfE school funding protections, the support they could access was any business support they were eligible for. The DSG flexibilities meant the LA paid for DSG places in the summer term and put in place some additional payments for private provision, and the sustainability offer.

Comment from the PVI Early Years representative – we received no protection from the DfE but expected to stay open; this was a dire situation. The only help staff with covid could access was two weeks sick pay. The sector felt cut adrift by the DfE, but help from the local authority kept some settings going.

Q. Underspend not huge but is there a plan to ring fence underspend for Early Years so that it could be reused?

A. We are challenged by rules around Early Years funding, we have attempted to be creative. We will continue to lobby the DfE to support the sector.

The Maintained Nursery School representative agreed with comments made by the PVI Early Years representative and said that they had the challenge that they fell into a ‘no mans land’ with funding in Norfolk. One example being that when early years settings were provided with some PPE by the LA, and it was fantastic that they could do this, nursery schools were not able to access it and were not able to access it from the DfE Schools Fund.[[1]](#footnote-1) Issues raised by the PVI Early Years representative are a tip of the iceberg for early years and are equally felt by the three maintained nursery schools. Overall, this is a dis-heartening situation.

**School Balances**

The authority carries out an analysis of balances as at 31st March each year. The figures are subject to change once checked for clawback.

This year balances stand at £17m. Deficit balances £97,000.

There is a £5m increase in balances.

**Members Comments and Questions**

Comments - Quite difficult to compare this year to last year – some funds that can be carried over this year that could not have been last year – surplus balances not because schools have more money generally, but because of circumstances.

Schools have had to be cautious and lots of schools considered using 1st revision. to set their budgets. Will be interesting to see the figures after revision 1 and revision 2.

Response - Yes agree – paper sets out figures but not the background reasons. We will consider any comments before this goes to council.

**3b) Dedicated Schools Grant Recovery Plan Update**

This paper is an update rather than a full-scale review and does not take into account the recent consultation by the DfE on the historical base data for the HNB funding formula. It should be noted that Norfolk will continue to be underfunded because of capping. We do not know the implications of the SEND review. The next update will consider all implications.

We have taken the outturn and any amendments to forecast and projected them forward - so similar to what we predicted in January. Increase of cost of Independent places is a major factor.

The £8.63m deficit previously forecast for 2021-22 is now forecast to be more in the region of £10m. By the end of the plan’s period, we expect the overall deficit to be £66m rather than £60m.

Although we continue to show significant block transfers in future years it is not something as an authority that we necessarily agree with.

**Members comments and Questions**

Q. Placements by numbers – suggests an assumption that there are fifty more pupils going into independent places every year – can you refine this over time – presumably we are looking at this number reducing?

A. This assumption is based on what we have seen previously and using the trend information we have. Capital investment was planned around reducing the market – reality is that the increase in overall demand for places means that new maintained & academy provision will not fully meet demand. We will refine this as time goes on and we get better information. We will continue to update the plan and present to Forum again in the autumn term. We will continue to carry out benchmarking.

Members comment – pleased that the authority is showing more realistic forecasting.

The LA advised that despite the pandemic work continues to transform the system and the plan is iterative and will continue to be updated as plans develop and to take into account the outcome of the historical base data consultation and any impact of the national SEND review. Additionally, that significant assumptions are difficult to ascertain and different views as to what these assumptions should be, e.g. future block transfers assumptions.

It was highlighted by officers that the Authority has procured the services of the company Mastondon. The company are working with a few local authorities using an algorithm to attempt to model future demand.

We will be able to incorporate strategic planning resulting from the initial outputs into our autumn term update.

The appendix to this paper shows high level variances to the DSG plan shared previously.

Q. Where do we go from here – we are still looking at an increased deficit position? Title is recovery but it does not show any recovery.

1. The key thing is to get special schools built to control the market more and get provision up and running as soon as possible to stem the increase in flow to Independent places. Recovery Plan is a DfE term.

Comment - understand what is being said and the need to keep up national lobbying.

Comment – The disapplication side of things is a key issue, as the modelling assumes that additional Schools Block funding will be moved to High Needs Block each year.

Comment – we could state the things that need to happen in order to be a recovery plan this is what it is and this is what is needed to turn it around.

Officers agreed that we need to keep lobbying and stress the point that the government have to correct our base funding. We will continue to say that we need to be given capital investment to shift away from the Independent market – we could attempt to show a version of the plan of what would be needed to recover.

Comment – Recognise this has been brought to this meeting so important that what is minuted in this meeting gives a reflection for colleagues to go back to central government in line with that recovery plan. The point about transfer blocks and the notion of being able to have the money follow the need is the significant challenge, we need to recognise that as an ongoing issue.

It is sometimes very useful whilst not sending in another document to have a ‘ghost’ document saying that if we were given opportunity this would be the focused approach.

Officers said if required a smaller group could be brought together to discuss issues as they arise in the future.

**3b) Presumption Route pre-and-post-opening costs**

The LA recommends that Schools Forum agrees that:

* + the Growth Fund criteria for 2022-23 onwards is updated as per section 3.3.3 to reflect that pre-and-post-opening costs grants can be funded for new Academy Free schools opened through the LA Presumption Route to meet basic need;
  + pre-opening costs grants are based upon the DfE’s methodology for funding centrally-delivered free schools, with maximum values set out in the revised Growth Fund criteria;
  + and, post-opening costs grants are agreed on an individual basis between the sponsor Trust and the LA

**Comments and Questions**

Q. There was funding previously available in the local formula for primary and secondary schools – important schools are there to meet the need. This would need to be monitored how would you do this?

A. We plan ahead of time the level of resource that would be needed to be set aside and this would be monitored.

Members requested information item at a future meeting to review the demographic changes in Norfolk; this will enable Forum to have an insight reference future pressures and demographic dips.

**Action: It was agreed this could be bought to a future meeting.**

**Decision**

**Schools Forum agreed unanimously to the above proposal as laid out in the paper.**

1. **Annual Audit Report**

This paper is for information only.

Members said that Governors need to be aware of thematic audits so any information on timings would be appreciated.

1. **Agree Forward Plan**

It was agreed to add to the July meeting an item on how Schools Forum meet in the future.

1. **Next Meeting**

9 July 2021 09:00 – 12:00

1. Subsequent to the meeting, LA officers reviewed the PPE offer that had been in place and can confirm that maintained nursery schools were not offered PPE in the first round due to the LA being incorrectly informed that they would be covered by DfE arrangements for schools. However, PPE was offered from the second round onwards, when the situation had been clarified. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)