**Norfolk Schools Forum**

**Minutes of Meeting held on Wednesday 18 May 2022**

**09:00 – 12.00 hours**

**Teams Meeting**

**Present: Representing**

Adrian Ball, Diocese of Ely Multi Academy Academies

Trust

Lacey Douglass Early Years Representative

Mike Grimble, Avenue Junior School Primary Maintained Governors

Bob Groome National Education Union

Peter Pazitka, SJB CMAT 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

Martin White, (Chair) Nebula Federation Primary Maintained Governors

Vicky Warnes National Education Union

Michael Bateman Assistant Director, SEND Strategic Improvement & Early Effectiveness

Martin Brock Accountant, Schools, SEN, and Early Years

Marilyn Edgeley Admin Officer

Dawn Filtness Finance Business Partner

Nicki Rider Head of High Needs SEND

Chris Snudden Director of Learning & Inclusion

Alison Randall Head of Education Finance

Andrew Lipscomb Norse

**Apologies:**

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

John Crowley Assistant Director Learning & Achievement

Sally Cutting Senior Accountant

Keith Bates, Eaton Hall Specialist Academy Special School Academy

Glyn Hambling, Unity Education Trust Alternative Provision

David Hicks Academies

Howard Nelson, Diocese of Norwich Diocesan Board of Education

Carol Jacques Maintained Nursery School

Clare Jones, Boudica Schools Trust Academies

Rebecca Wicks, The Clare School Maintained Special Schools

Sara Tough Executive Director Childrens Services

1. **Welcome and Apologies**

The Chair welcomed members to the first face to face meeting since before lockdowns began.

Apologies received as above.

It was noted that Chris Snudden would join the meeting via a zoom call.

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

Accuracy of minutes for 19.1.22 Schools Forum meeting - Page 7 – the word ‘nothing’ should be changed to ‘noting’.

It was agreed the minutes were otherwise a true record of the meeting.

* Alternative Top-Up Funding Maintained Special Schools – timeline and proposal on how to keep the process under on-going review. **Part of agenda item 4c.**
* Independent Places Price Increases - Forum to work with other regional Forums to compose a letter lobbying the DfE on price increases. **Part of agenda item 4c.**
* Finance briefings for schools – Dawn Filtness/Sarah Shirras/Martin White to discuss after this meeting.
* Central Schools Services Block – members requested a report from the Authority on the way in which teams are put together in relation to their responsibilities to schools. **This item is deferred to the July meeting in order to allow time to consider the impact of the Government Schools White Paper to enable consideration by Forum of future expectations of LAs**

Pupil variations have been emailed to members prior to this meeting.

1. **School Catering Contract - Alison Randall/Andrew Lipscomb**

The LA currently has a contract for Norse Eastern Limited to provide catering services to primary maintained schools. A paper with proposals for the 2023-26 contract was presented.

The paper is for information/discussion as part of stakeholder engagement and the final decision sits with the Executive Director of Children’s Services.

The proposal for the Group Catering Contract 2023-26 is to charge participating schools the eligibility of UIFSM and FSM based on the numbers/income given by the Government. This would mean the cost of the school meal service will not financially impact the school’s budget and would enable Norse Eastern Limited to maintain a reasonable meal price for parents of paid meals with the view to increase meal uptake.

In addition, discussions have led to a methodology to allow for a ‘profit-sharing rebate’ with participating members should there be excess profit at the end of each year of the Group Catering Contract.

**Comments:**

* Norse is proposing that all the Universal Free Schools Meals budget would go to Norse in full and Norse would provide meals going forward.
* Officers said that Norse is making a pledge to have an impact on healthy eating.
* The LA has an obligation to have a contract – the changes to this contract are designed to be fairer and more cost effective.
* Comment made that this is the right proposal and asked how much is dependable on schools not academising .

Officers said that some schools come back into the contract after academising.

* Officers said there will be no impact on schools – we are trying to future proof the contract.
* Comment that this would be better for small schools.

Norse said that only 20% of schools would be liable and these are the larger schools. Fairer for everybody.

* Comment that this proposal would be using money for its intended purpose – will have an impact for schools on things like dining room set up etc.
* Question – why did the contact not go out to competitive tender?

Officers have sought advice for the legal department and were told there is no requirement to go out to tender.

Members said that going out to tender was a question of transparency. Members commented that Norse has been providing quality meals. Members felt uncomfortable with this proposal going ahead without a tender process.

**Conclusion**

**Officers agreed to do more work on the proposal to allow time to mitigate Forum members concerns. Officers will act on this quickly and send out an update to Forum as soon as possible.**

**Norse said they appreciate concerns around not going out to tender- they reiterated that they provide balanced meals and are local company.**

1. **Dedicated Schools Grant 2021/22 Outturn**

The overall DSG outturn position for all four blocks was £22.179m overspend – most of the overspend was attributed to the High Needs Block. A paper was presented by Martin Brock setting out the year end position for all DSG blocks and the cumulative DSG overspend.

The paper is for information only, comments are welcome and will be recorded.

School Block Section – At the end of the 2021-22 financial year, there was an underspend of -£0.322m.

There were no comments.

Central Schools Services Block – The Central Schools Services Block underspent by -£0.010m

There were no comments.

High Needs Block - The High Needs block overspend at year end was £21.681m.

The DSG Management Plan was discussed earlier in the year and it had been indicated that there would be significant variances on the High Needs Block.

The High Needs Block overspend had reduced by £1.030m compared to the January’22 DSG Management Plan forecast, down from an estimate of £22.711m.

**Comments:**

MG – Independent Places -is there any improvement in services or just an inflation in costs.?

NR – Difficult to pin down to a global view because that represents a significant number of different schools within Norfolk and outside. However the Independent sector is responding better to expectations but whether that represents value for money when maintained schools achieve fantastic outcomes at a fraction of the cost.

MG – concern is for the quality for pupils if this is going down but the cost are rising.

DF - Nationally the cost of independent places is significantly higher than maintained provision and is linked to supply and demand. We have in meetings with Department for Education raised the subject of regulation in prices for the independent market. This would have a significant impact if we paid the same to independent schools as we pay our special schools/academies we would wipe out most of our in-year deficit.

It was noted that placements in year have increased to 70. This is because, following tribunals, children are going into special schools earlier in the year. Schools are increasingly saying that these children’s needs cannot be met in mainstream, in the past we had been able to manage these pupils in mainstream until September. This has added notably to our problems and costs.

MW – there are children in primary schools in inappropriate provision because no special places are available and they would welcome a child going into a special school earlier.

Although this is not an authority recourse the system is broken!

Independent placements, a reduction of -£0.551m, previously over-estimated, mainly due to former TPG/TPECG grant monies budgeted for potential fee increase claims that are not required to be automatically distributed to providers (the LA requires evidence of pay/pension cost pressures as part of fee increase requests);. We will look in future at whether we can reduce the forecast on this line.

JT - Are you saying that if independent schools come to you and say they have cost pressures on their staff they can come to the Local Authority – why is there a mechanism for this. Is it ethically right that we would pay this out?

Officers said that when the DfE rolled the Teachers Pay and Pension Grants into the DSG they allowed an amount of that which can be used to meet increased costs in independent schools. The LA requires evidence of the increased costs, to consider before making a payment, providers are not paid automatically for this, hence the saving.

MG – Are we still looking at £150m running deficit?

Officers said they are not suspecting any significant change on the next DSG Management Plan update in July. We are forecasting an £18m deficit in 2022/23.

There were no further comments on the High Needs Block.

Early Years Block - The Early Years Block overspent by £0.829m which will be transferred to the Dedicated Schools Grant reserve as part of the in-year DSG deficit.

We did report previously that we had over-allocated the rate to providers by £0.06p in 2021-22 due to the maximising the hourly rate distributed and minimising the level of contingency.

Increased demand for SEN allocation had also added to the overspend.

There were no comments on the Early Years Block.

School balances – The total School Balances is £17.684m.

It was confirmed that no schools converted with a deficit balance.

It was confirmed all balances have been reconciled and no money has been re-distributed.

Officers said that a paper around school balances will be brought to the July meeting with a view to consult in the Autumn.

1. **Outcome of National SEND Review/Green Paper – presentation by Michael Bateman**

Presentation slides will be distributed to Forum members after this meeting.

The consultation on the Green paper has been extended to the 22 July and we would urge individuals to respond as well as groups.

The PowerPoint will help to give members a summary and the key points in the Green paper – however we do suggest that members read the Alternative Provision section of the Green Paper. The questions in the consultation do suggest the government has more work to do on this so we need to mindful in our responses.

BG – If we want to put out to our members is there any special groups we should target?

Officers suggested all members or a collective response and send out the government link to the Green Paper consultation.

Officers suggested an individual school response as well as a School Forum response.

MG – Does the paper suggest a figure that would fix the system.

Officers – No

PP – when standard tariffs are introduced across the sector including independent providers what do you think will happen to the independent sector?

Officers – We have some independent schools who are just trying to do the right thing – could we do something if they were to lose out?

There is quite a bit of work by the DfE already done on this with the independent sector. However this got kicked in to touch as it was too difficult. This is an area fraught with risk in terms of application of the green paper. There would be an enormous push back from the independent sector and it will be how much of an appetite the government has to get to grips with this.

JT – Make sure tariffs substantial for mainstream schools to incentify schools to be inclusive – this needs to be a strong message.

The consultation paper suggests questions to consider when responding to the consultation.

**Action - It was agreed that the Chair would produce a collective response from Schools Forum and that members would email their views to the Clerk of Forum by 30 June.**

**Emails to** **marilyn.edgeley@norfolk.gov.uk**

**Safety Valve**

A national approach that could assist with balancing high needs budget. The Safety Valve is the government response to increasing number of local authorities with deficits. The link to the Green paper and the Safety Valve is significant. Local authorities with largest deficits have been invited to the Safety Valve Programme one of these being Norfolk.

Officers said it was worth noting that they had carried out work on thresholds 4 years ago, expectations of demand management, but the DfE asked this to be taken down. The paper suggests questions to consider when responding to the question of the Safety Valve.

**Management Plan**

The Safety Valve is saying come up with a plan and how long the plan will take to achieve a balanced budget and then talk about the accumulative.

Officers said whilst clearly this is about having a financial recovery plan it is clear the emphasis is on how the whole system responds. As we go forward very much about how we work with all strands. What a refreshed set of expectations might be on the whole system. Will need to be a plan that the whole county signs up to.

Officers said that although work had carried on through the pandemic there were items of matters arising from previous discussions around alternative funding, place price increases and element 3 funding. Officers feel that with the work around the Safety Valve they would need to press the pause button on these items until they find out what the outcomes are of the Safety Valve programme.

An updated Management Plan which will include comments from our conversations with the DfE will be discussed at the Forum July meeting.

Officers said that a letter from the DfE implies that School Forum may not have a say in future block transfers. However this should not send alarm bells ringing, it could well be that in the future this is built into contributions from the DfE.

Officers are having an introductory meeting with DfE then subsequent meetings and the Chair of School Forum along with other members will be involved.

It had been intended to plan Headteacher finance briefings for this term.

**Action: Dawn Filtness/Sarah Shirras/Martin White to meet after this meeting.**

1. **Future Meeting Plan**

Members were in favour of a face to face meeting for July Schools Forum.

1. **Date of next meeting**

8 July 2022 09:00 – 12:00 – South Green Park, Mattishall