

SCHOOLS' FORUM

Minutes of the meeting held at 4.30 pm on 26 January 2023

Present:

David Dilling (Chairman)	Primary Academy Governor (Charles Darwin Academy Trust)
Andrew Ferguson (Vice-Chairman)	Non-School Representative (Church of England)(Aquinas Trust)
Patrick Foley	Primary Maintained Head Teacher (Southborough Primary School)
Chris Hollands	Primary Academy Head Teacher (Aquinas Trust)
Neil Miller	PRU Head Teacher/Governor Academy (Bromley Trust Academy)
Andrew Rees	Secondary Maintained School Head Teacher (St Olaves Grammar School)
Brid Stenson	Non-School Representative (Early Years)
Steve Whittle	Secondary Academy Head Teacher (Impact Multi Academy Trust)
David Wilcox	Secondary Academy Governor (Darrick Wood School)

Also Present:

David Bradshaw	Head of Children, Education and Families Service Finance
Jared Nehra	Director of Education
Julie Crew	Head of Schools' Finance Support
Carol Arnfield	Head of Service, Adult Education
Richard Baldwin	Director of Children, Education and Families
Kevin Walter	Democratic Services Officer

14 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Clare Grainger. Clare is no longer working in a Bromley school and is therefore unable to continue in her role on the Schools' Forum.

Apologies were also received from Ian Travis.

15 MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 24TH NOVEMBER 2022

The minutes of the meeting held on 24th November 2022 were approved and signed as a correct record.

MATTERS ARISING

A Forum Member raised the question of whether any further information/data had now been received regarding comparison data with Bromley's statistical neighbours. In response the Director of Education confirmed that some data had been received, although variable in quality and he was not currently able to publish the full details. Neighbouring boroughs did have a range of DSG deficits, with some considerably higher, and Bromley being in a better position than the vast majority. The data had been requested from DfE, but as they declined to provide it, the data had been sourced from internet research.

16 2023/24 DEDICATED SCHOOLS GRANT

The Head of CEF Finance introduced the Report and stated that it had also been presented to the CEF Budget Sub-Committee on 19th January 2023. Comments from the Schools' Forum meeting would be forwarded to the Portfolio Holder for consideration in order to move forward with approving funding.

With the overall DSG of £356m there were many constraints on how the funding was used across four various-sized funding blocks - High Needs, Early Years, Schools and Schools Central.

Starting with the Central Schools Block, The Head of CEF Finance stated that funding had decreased by £45k with the grant expected to fall by £50k per year for the next four years. The Council continued to underpin the expenditure within this block, with an additional contribution of £50k planned for 2023/24.

Funding within the Early Years Block had increased due to an increase in rates. The estimated funding levels would change once data from the January census was analysed by DfE and again in July.

As referenced in Section 3.11 of the Report, a Schools' Forum member raised a question regarding Bromley being an outlier in comparison to other LAs. In response the Head of CEF Finance explained that for 2-year-olds Bromley were paying a higher rate, but it had now been lowered to nearer DfE rates. For 3 and 4-year-olds, other LAs were paying lower rates, so a balance had been needed to meet the overall position of the Early Years DSG balance.

The Director of Education acknowledged that Early Years Services had undertaken engagement with representatives from Early Years Providers and questions had been raised regarding funding for 3 and 4-year-olds. A question had been raised whether if funding for 2 year-olds was maintained at the same level i.e. no 6p increase, would this facilitate an increase in funding for 3 and 4-year-olds? The Director of Education confirmed that this would not be the case due to the disparity between the size of the cohorts.

In addition, the Director of Education explained that unfortunately there was no real room for any movement in the various funding rates as the reality was that there had been a deficit within the Early Years Block in successive years and this needed to be addressed. The Head of CEF Finance added that a lot of analysis

had been undertaken with the Head of Service, Adult Education, and the team to maximise the figures, but within the restriction of making the funding Blocks balance. The data would be reviewed in July following the census data.

Following questions and a discussion with Forum Members regarding funding levels and deficits, the Director of Education stated it was important for the Forum to acknowledge that often the figures mentioned or announced by Government, in reality did not match with the actual figures received. The LA was accountable and responsible for having a sustainable DSG and could not add to the current predicted deficit by allowing areas to overspend.

The Head of CEF Finance reported that funding within the Schools Block had risen by £12m, including a figure of £7.1m paid as a supplementary grant in 2022/23. An additional supplementary grant of £8.75m for 2023/24 had also been announced.

Referring to Appendix 3 on page 19 of the report, the Head of CEF Finance explained to the Schools' Forum the four different ways of distributing the funding. Option 4, inflating all National Funding Formula rates across the board by +0.5%, was the one being recommended to the Schools' Forum. This was because it more closely mirrored the NFF announced by DfE. DfE had fixed the level of movement allowed by LAs to be outside of the NFF rates. Bromley was very close to the NFF rate and with Option 4 Bromley would only be 0.5% above this rate.

The Head of CEF Finance turned the Forum's attention to the additional information circulated to Members on Falling Rolls analysis. This suggested that demand for Falling Rolls would increase due to decreases in some schools this year. However demand over the last few years, i.e. where Falling Rolls funding had been paid out, has been minimal, mainly due to strict criteria previously agreed by the Schools' Forum. It was for the Schools' Forum to decide whether to continue with the Falling Rolls Fund.

The Chairman then returned to the question of distributing funding. Following general agreement from the Schools' Forum that Option 4 was most favourable, it was agreed by vote to support the recommendation.

In response to a question regarding a decrease in birth rates and any subsequent effect on Falling Rolls, the Director of Education stated that there was nowhere in the borough where there had been a significant reduction in birth rates or demand for Primary School/Reception places. Forecasting data was used to continually check data/trends. Some neighbouring boroughs had seen a reduction in the need for school places, particularly Reception. Although Bromley had not seen the same drop-off, there had been a slight reduction in overall numbers. There was also some surplus capacity in some parts of the borough.

The Director of Education explained to the Forum that only one school received Falling Rolls Funding last year as it was the right decision in that situation, and they met all the criteria set by the Schools' Forum. It was not the case that a lot of funding would be paid out, but it was helpful to have it available.

Further discussions were had by Forum Members regarding the Falling Rolls Fund, with the Director of Education informing the Forum of the tight criteria and restrictions in place, with funding only approved in 'sudden shock' situations to support a school through a transition period.

It was agreed by the Schools' Forum to continue with the Falling Rolls Funding under the existing eligibility criteria.

The Head of CEF Finance informed the Forum that funding within the High Needs Block had increased by £6.5m, including a supplementary grant of £2.9m for 2023/24. DfE had provided guidelines as to how this was to be distributed. There continued to be significant pressures in this block, with a current estimate of a £4m deficit for 2023/24, with plans in place to address this.

The Director of Education felt it important to reiterate that Forum Members were all aware of the pressures on the DSG, primarily within the High Needs Block. The Deficit Recovery Management Plan had previously been seen and noted by the Schools' Forum. Progress was being made, with one of the key documents mentioned in the Plan, the eligibility criteria for EHC Needs Assessments, being published this week. This set clear expectations for eligibility and would hopefully assist with current demand and need issues. An update on this would be provided to Schools' Forum in due course.

A Forum Member raised a question regarding the percentage of funding allocated to Pupil Referral Units and AP Academies. In response, the Head of CEF Finance explained that the 3.4% figure was based on older data. DfE had now provided more recent data and an update would be provided.

RESOLVED: That the Portfolio Holder be recommended to approve the Dedicated School Grant allocation for 2023/24 and the methodology of its distribution, taking into account the views of the Schools' Forum.

17 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

There was no other business.

18 DATES OF NEXT MEETINGS

It was noted that the next meetings would take place at 4.30pm on Thursday 13th July and Thursday 14th September 2023 via MS Teams (subject to change).

The Meeting ended at 5.25 pm

Chairman