

Cambridgeshire Schools Forum - Minutes

Date: Friday 3 November 2023

Time: 2:00pm – 3.30pm

Venue: New Shire Hall, Alconbury

Present:

Maintained Primary - Nicki Brown and Sasha Howard

Maintained Special Schools - Joanne Hardwick

Trade Unions - Helen Brook

Academy Sector Appointments - Susannah Connell, Jon Culpin (Chair), Richard Spencer (Vice Chair), Adrian Ball, Christopher Bennett, Ryan Kelsall, Richard Scott and Peter Law

Cambridgeshire County Council - Councillors Michael Atkins, Claire Daunton (virtual), and Simone Taylor (virtual)

Officers - Jonathan Lewis: Service Director Education, Martin Wade: Strategic Finance Officer, Tamar Oviatt-Ham: Democratic Services Officer

50. Appointment of Chair

It was resolved unanimously to re-elect Jon Culpin as Chair for the Schools Forum for the municipal year 2023-2024.

51. Appointment of Vice-Chair

It was resolved unanimously to appoint Richard Spencer as Vice-Chair for the municipal year 2023-2024.

52. Apologies for Absence and Declarations of Interest

Apologies were received from Mark Vickers, Nadine Gooding-Hébert, Karen Scott, Carin Taylor and Duncan Ramsey.

Jon Culpin, Richard Scott and Susannah Connell declared non-pecuniary interests in relation to Minute 56: School Budget Setting, as they represented schools in receipt of Growth Funding. Peter Law declared a non-pecuniary interest as a Trustee for Red Balloon, a school in Cambridge.

53. Schools Forum Minutes – 14 July 2023

The minutes of the meeting held on 14 July were approved as a correct record.

In terms of Early Years and Child Care entitlement, information had been issued about the wraparound provision, and more clarification was awaited around the extension from 18 months to 4 years.

There were no outstanding actions on the action log.

It was resolved:

to approve the minutes of the meeting held on 14 July as a correct record, and note the Action Log.

54. Schools Forum - Update on Appointments

Schools Forum noted the new appointments and outstanding vacancies, as set out in the report. It was noted that a Maintained Schools representative had recently been identified and would be in attendance at future meetings.

It was resolved unanimously to:

note the new appointments outlined in section 3.1 of the report.

55. Schools Forum - Update to Constitution

Members considered a report outlining recent updates to the Schools Forum Constitution. They noted the updated information on the nomination and election of School Members, on election processes for each Non-School Member and for Academy representatives, and other minor changes.

On the appointment of Academy representatives, the Chair advised that he would report the process by which Academy representatives were chosen to the new Cambridgeshire CEOs Forum.

It was resolved unanimously to:

note the updates to the Schools Forum Constitution in section 2.1 of the report.

56. Schools Budget Setting 2024-25

The Schools Forum received a presentation that outlined the 2023-24 Schools Budget setting process, which was based upon national budget allocations and 2022-23 pupil numbers. The presentation covered:

- 2024/25 Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) Funding arrangements
- Illustrative Budget Modelling (Primary and Secondary)
- Notional SEN/High Needs Contingency
- Central School Services Block
- Retained Funding and De-Delegations (Maintained Primary only)
- Growth Funding/Falling Rolls Funding
- Next Steps

Individual members raised the following points in relation to the overall settlement and the DSG Funding arrangements:

- asked how the National Funding Formula (NFF) and other factors compared with statistical neighbours? Officers explained that because each authority was required to move 10% closer to the NFF, all authorities were gradually becoming more aligned. Last year was the first time local authorities had to use a defined set of factors, with a minimum and maximum range, and there was now less flexibility e.g. around Free School Meals (FSM) and Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI). In terms of formula changes, the only real change was to the split site factor, and there was only two schools in the county that was affected by that change;
- noted Cambridgeshire was 136th in the 2024-25 Provisional Rankings, and that it would take many years to reach median. Officers agreed, commenting that it was a slow process because of protection factors only changing incrementally. The key issue would be when the move was made to a completely national formula, but there were still currently transitional elements. The increase in pupil numbers for secondary, where the unit values were higher, would effectively artificially elevate Cambridgeshire;
- asked how the Local Authority had responded to the DfE error, and whether there had been any challenge by the Local Authority. Officers confirmed that they were still trying to understand the implications at an individual school level. The Local Authority was working with the LGA and other authorities to make a collective representation;
- noted the very poor increase in SEND, which was particularly concerning given the pressures faced in this area.

Individual members raised the following points in relation to High Needs Block transfer:

- commented that the safety valve work had been invaluable, but having to request the Secretary of State for permission to remove more funding from schools to prop up the historically shameful funding over the high needs block was a perverse situation;
- commented that whilst applauding the work locally, he struggled to see how the work being undertaken aligned with rapid increase in EHCPs. The only response nationally had been to take money from schools or for local authorities to request more funding, it was not a response which reflected the rapid growth in EHCPs, and this put both the local authority and schools in a difficult position;
- observed that schools, the Local Authority and the Schools Forum had no control over these issues, but it would be helpful to identify what could be measured, so Value For Money could be identified in KPIs to show schools the direction was right. Officers responded that there had been a 24% increase in EHCPs, and outlined the progress that was being made in terms of increased specialist provision, more special school provision, and more support to schools in this area and in assessment. Officers committed to bringing back a more detailed report on this to the next Forum meeting;
- commented that Out of County placements were also a significant cost, and any progress in reducing Out of County placements would be very helpful. Officers outlined some of the work being undertaken including the “increasing independence” workstream, reviewing high cost placements;
- noted that the Local Authority needed to come up with innovative ideas to address these issues, but Cambridgeshire had never been funded enough for its SEND pupils, and was failing those pupils due to the lack of funding. The 1% uplift was insufficient and the whole situation was immoral. She suggested that MPs and opposition candidates needed to be lobbied. Officers confirmed they had regular discussions with MPs on the challenges of SEND, but the resources were not available nationally as priorities were elsewhere. Officers would support any decision by the Forum to contact MPs directly on these issues;
- expressed disappointment about the High Needs Block settlement, and commented that the wider context of intersectional disadvantage needed to be taken into account, e.g. the overlap with health and social care;
- highlighted the recruitment and retention challenges, and observed that colleagues were leaving the sector because of the inadequate provision for the most vulnerable children, and how SEND children were being failed every day.

Concluding, the Chair commented that he would like to invite CPH and CSH to the next meeting on progress being made with the safety valve. Whilst the detail of high needs provision was not within the remit of the Forum, it was the Forum’s role to examine the Value For Money issues, i.e. whether the safety

valve was working. Cambridgeshire was part of F40 group which challenges and raises questions with the DfE, and he suggested that MPs and Ministers should be invited to Forum, along with the DfE Regional Director to either the December or January Schools Forum meeting. Action required.

Central School Services Block

There were no Forum member comments or questions on recommendations (c) to (e).

Education Functions and De-Delegations – Maintained Primary Representatives only

It was confirmed that this area would be considered in detail at the next meeting.

Individual members raised the following points in relation to Growth/Falling Rolls Fund

- asked if funding was only released if the SCAP data demonstrated a need in the individual school or the district? It was confirmed that funding was based on the individual school. The member observed that the reliability of SCAP data was an issue. The funding was predicated on SCAP forecasts for individual schools. Officers outlined the complexities of SCAP and forecasting, and the census data was essential in order to plan and challenge appropriately.
- noted that in terms of total potential eligibility, based on early analysis, there were very few schools which would have the requisite increase over the next 3-5 years. Whilst it was a complex picture, demographic forecasts would be critical, acknowledging that there was greater mobility of families between schools than previously;
- asked if there was a clawback mechanism. Officers confirmed if the criteria was not met, the funding would effectively go back into the Schools Block allocation, in the same way that the Great Gidding closure had done. The decision from the Forum would be important in this regard.

The Forum noted the next steps and timescales. It was unclear when the next iterations of the budget would be available, but Forum members would be kept updated.

It was resolved unanimously to:

Funding Formula

- a) comment on the proposed LA approach for the Cambridgeshire Schools Funding Formula for 2024/25.

High Needs Block Transfer

- b) vote on the approval of a block transfer between the Schools Block and High Needs Block of 1% - (circa £4.78m – actual amount to be confirmed on receipt of final DSG allocations and subject to SoS approval).

Central School Services Block

- c) approve the continuation of the £467k to support the Admissions Service.
- d) approve the continuation of the £3k to support the servicing of Schools Forum.
- e) note the proposed budgets for the national copyright licence arrangements and retained duties funding. Final figures will be presented at the January meeting of Schools Forum.

Education Functions and De-Delegations – Maintained Primary Representatives only

- f) note the proposed retained funding and de-delegations to be approved at the December meeting.

Growth Funding and New Schools

- g) note and comment on the proposed changes to the Growth Funding amounts to apply to 2024/25.
- h) note the proposed variation to pupil numbers. Final numbers will be presented to Schools Forum in January.
- i) note and comments on the potential implementation of a Falling Rolls Fund for 2024/25.

57. Agenda Plan

Members noted the Agenda Plan. It was suggested that the next meeting could take place in person, dependent on the availability of meeting space.

Chair