

CAMBRIDGESHIRE SCHOOLS FORUM: MINUTES

Date: Friday 17th May 2019

Time: 10:05am – 11:30am

Venue: Kreis Viersen Room, Shire Hall, Cambridge

Present: P Hodgson (Chairman & Academy Board Member – Anglian Learning) and
Dr A Rodger (Vice-Chairman & Academy Board Member – Morris Trust)

Maintained Primary – T Davies, S Howard and G Underwood

Maintained Special – L Calow

Maintained Nursery – R Waldau

Maintained Pupil Referral Unit – A Morris-Drake

Maintained Governor – P Stratford

Academy Primary – A Reeder

Academy Secondary – J Digby and A Goulding

Academy Special – Dr K Taylor OBE

Other Academy Appointments - J Culpin (CEO of Anglian Learning) and
R Spencer (Principal of Ely College)

Observers – Councillor S Bywater (Cambridgeshire County Council),
Councillor P Downes (Cambridgeshire County Council), Councillor J Whitehead
(Cambridgeshire County Council), A Read (Diocese of Ely) and J Duveen (Teachers
Unions)

Officers – J Lee, J Lewis, N Mills and M Wade

Apologies: Maintained Primary – A Matthews

Other Academy Appointments – J Horn and P Peres

Post 16 FE – J Lloyd

Absent: Academy Primary – S Connell

Academy Alternative Provision – S Roscoe

107. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies were received from Janet Horn, Jeremy Lloyd, Andy Matthews and Patsy Peres. The Forum was informed that Andy Matthews had left his position on the Forum.

108. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 29TH MARCH 2019

The minutes of the meeting held on 29th March 2019 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

109. ACTION LOG

It was queried why a report on nursery schools funding had not been submitted to the Forum at this meeting, as had been suggested in the minute for item 102. Members were informed that a note had been written which contained background information and early options and this had been shared with Nursery School Headteachers. Discussions were to continue and a progress report would be brought back to the Forum at the meeting on 12th July 2019.

Members expressed concern that previous minutes contained a number of questions put to officers for which they were still awaiting responses, including on issues such as staff costs, national insurance and pension arrangements relating to nursery schools. It was further noted that the Forum had been informed that a paper on these issues would be presented to the Children and Young People Committee (CYP) on the 9th July and that the Forum would therefore not have an opportunity to consider the report beforehand. The Service Director of Education acknowledged the concerns and noted that the paper presented to CYP in July would not include a decision and that it was not possible to do so until the national funding arrangements had been confirmed. The purpose for the paper being presented to CYP was to raise concerns on the issues and to consider available options and opportunities.

110. REPORT ON 1ST APRIL 2019 WORKSHOP

The Forum received a report on a workshop held on 1st April 2019, which had been attended by Schools Forum members and Social Emotional Mental Health (SEMH) working parties. The paper provided an overview of the issues that were raised and discussed at the workshop, as well as detailing some of the subsequent actions and future steps to be taken.

In presenting the report, the Service Director of Education noted that the workshop represented an attempt to pull together all the different stakeholders in order to make decisions and move forwards in a way that would break the cycle of the past few years, with the report aiming to support that. He acknowledged the challenges, including increasing levels of exclusions and insufficient resources, but assured the Forum that these were being addressed, drawing attention to the objectives laid out in section 3.1 of the report. Emphasis was placed on the importance of early, flexible, child-focussed intervention, to try and reduce the level of work and cost, allowing for support to then deescalate. However, it was also noted that work needed to be done to ensure that children were not moved through the system too quickly and that the financing of the proposals needed to be addressed.

Members' attention was further drawn to the secondary issues that were raised at the workshop and were detailed in section 3.2 of the report, notably on challenges around the Behaviour & Attendance Improvement Partnership (BAIP) model. It was suggested that Forum should consider the unresolved issues listed in section 3.3 of the report and consider proposals for how to address them. The Service Director of Education acknowledged that the local authority did not currently have the workforce resources to provide a quick implementation of the objectives and appealed to Forum members to consider ways in which they could contribute.

In discussing the report, members:

- Clarified that it was yet to be decided whether the centres of expertise and primary age assessment/resource centres mentioned in section 3.1 of the report would be financed or staffed by the local authority. The financing of such a project was problematic and the source of potential funds had yet to be established.
- Supported the production of a guidance as set out in section 3.1 of the report, noting that having a clear document for everyone and clarity on pathways for schools to follow would allow for a return to mainstream provision and for children to receive the support that they needed. There was specific encouragement for the process to be carried out in a timely manner.
- Established that case studies and national best practice had been taken into account when developing the ideas and proposals, but it was acknowledged that every region experienced different challenges and demands.
- Suggested that resource centres could also be situated in secondary schools, as having them as close as possible to where they were needed would reduce costs.
- Suggested that forming proposals would serve no purpose if the necessary funding and resources were unavailable. Members asked the Chairman of the Children and Young People Committee (CYP) whether it would be possible to seek further funding from the local authority. Acknowledging the pressures faced by schools on an annual basis, the Chairman of CYP confirmed that the Committee would make recommendations to the General Purposes Committee if sound proposals were submitted. It was also noted that extra funding would be difficult to attain when it was evident that some schools held substantial financial reserves, although members considered it important to note that financial reserves should not be considered as widespread and that they were not indicative of high balances. Such reserves were not available for spending, especially with regard to the smaller institutions. It was acknowledged that the Council was faced by its own financial challenges and the Chairman of CYP, while expressing his disappointment, informed the Forum that given that the Council was struggling to finance its statutory duties, there were no available resources to provide extra funding.
- Considered who would be able to pursue the objectives laid out in section 3.1 of the report, given that there was not a large pool of people specialised in the sufficient knowledge of schools and local government that would be able to effectively carry out the roles proposed in the report. While discussing this specific issue, members:

- Noted that while many local authority officers were well trained and knowledgeable on their individual areas, they would struggle to fulfil the overall role required, and it was requested for Forum members to consider proposals for people from outside the local authority that would be able to provide support.
- Acknowledged that even once suitable people had been identified, their financing, management and scrutinising would create further challenges.
- Suggested that working with other local authorities could help alleviate costs, although this idea was dismissed due to the large divergences in how neighbouring authorities worked.
- Proposed that schools could put people forward to work under the supervision of the local authority and it was agreed that members would take the idea away and consider whether they could assist in such a way.
- Noted that the abilities and knowledge of the person required were more important than the sector that they came from and that the responsibility implied by the role would be better suited to an established employment, as opposed to a voluntary role.
- Considered whether the request for assistance should be made by the Forum, the local authority or some other alternative, with support tending towards the local authority, given that any subsequent changes would largely occur on that end.
- Sought to establish the details of the position they were looking to fill in order to provide clarity for any potential candidates. It was suggested that the requirements needed a full time commitment for six months and that the person would need to understand how schools and the local authority operated, both individually and together. It was agreed that the Service Director of Education would produce the exact job requirements and details.
- Action required: Service Director of Education**
- Acknowledged the difficulties involved in finding a suitable person and arranging their employment but it was agreed that a solution must be obtained in order to reduce the increasing deficit.
- The Service Director for Education would work with members of the Forum to identify suitable candidates.

It was resolved to:

- a) Consider the questions arising from the workshop; and
- b) Agree in principle to invest the additional funding received from the Department for Education into start-up costs for primary resource bases and a training bursary for schools and services.

111. SCHOOLS FORUM APPOINTMENTS

Members received a report outlining recent appointments for members and substitutes to the Forum.

It was resolved to:

- a) Note that Sasha Howard and Guy Underwood have been nominated by the Primary Heads Group to serve on the Forum and that Liz Bassett will be a

named substitute for any of the four maintained Primary Heads unable to attend a Forum meeting;

- b) Note that Jon Duveen was in March confirmed as the permanent Teachers Unions advisor representative; and
- c) Note that the advisor place reserved for the Roman Catholic Diocese of East Anglia remains vacant.

112. MAINTAINED SCHOOLS & DEDICATED SCHOOLS GRANT FINANCIAL HEALTH

The Committee received a report that analysed the 2018-19 final closing balance position of maintained schools and the overall Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) as at 31st March 2019. In presenting the report, the Head of Integrated Finance Services informed the Forum that Maintained School Balances had increased by £1.6m over the past year, noting that there was no data on academies due to the way that they reported financial information. Members attention was drawn to the additional information that had been included in section 2.4 of the report by splitting community focussed balances and capital balances.

It was noted that some balances appeared to not be reducing or not be utilised and it was confirmed that the local authority would discuss that with the schools in question to discover the intents and purposes. The Forum was also reminded that some of the single revenue balance was paid in February and March, which meant that some of the figures would be adjusted slightly in the future. Members were asked to consider the recommendations made in section 3 of the report, notably over the issue of the balance control mechanism's effectiveness and whether it should be reviewed.

The Forum was informed that recent figures from the Society of County Treasurers showed that other local authorities were experiencing similar financial difficulties and some of them were indeed much worse off. Some of them were only recently entering deficit, while others had been for a number of years and had built up cumulative deficits in excess of £20m. Attention was drawn to section 2.4, which highlighted the main areas where pressures had occurred in Cambridgeshire.

While discussing the report, members:

- Observed that it was not appropriate to pick on any one school's figures as an example, given that there were a large number of variables in each school.
- Acknowledged the overview that balances were increasing on a national basis and that this visible increase made it more difficult to campaign for extra funding. It was suggested that funds needed to be employed in different ways, so as to lower balances and subsequently attract greater investment.
- Noted that there were a number of schools spending their carry-forward and it was suggested that it would be useful to see predicted levels of funding for the next year in order to make informed decisions on spending. The Head of Integrated Finance Services agreed that such information would be presented at the Forum meeting on 12th July, noting that the budget deadline had recently passed. **Action required:**
Head of Integrated Finance Services

- Suggested that it would be helpful to have three to five year outlooks, as schools were currently unable to say how much money they would need for specific areas. When it was observed that such information was not available for academies, it was suggested that if the local authority requested specific data from academies, they would most likely be happy to assist in providing it, which would allow for comprehensive data for the whole of Cambridgeshire.
- Expressed concern over the alleged practice of receiving additional funding from parents on a direct debit basis, either through coercion or otherwise, noting that such a practice was wrong and illegal. It was suggested that as the responsible body for the business model, the Forum should consider formulating a policy to advise on the issue.
- Expressed concern over the misleading public presentation by the government that school funding was at its highest ever level, noting that this was not the case when looking at per pupil funding or indeed many other levels of funding.
- Considered that Forum should be informed about why some schools had what appeared to be excessive balances, although members recognised that there were legitimate reasons for reserving funds. It was noted that other local authorities required schools in excess of 8% to provide an explanation, emphasising that there was not a requirement to pay back such funds but merely to explain them. The Head of Integrated Finance Services agreed to bring the information to the Forum meeting on 12th July. **Action required: Head of Integrated Finance Services**
- Agreed that in order to obtain extra funding, it was necessary for all schools, including academies, to be forthcoming about reserves. Representatives from Academy Trusts outlined their agreement to share their balances and it was agreed that a request would be made to collate these **Action required: Head of Integrated Finance Services**

It was resolved to:

- a) Note the contents of the report; and
- b) Consider the appropriateness of the balance control mechanism.

113. AGENDA PLAN

The Forum noted its Agenda Plan.

114. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The Cambridgeshire Schools Forum will meet next on Friday 12th July 2019 at 10:00am in the Kreis Viersen Room, Shire Hall, Cambridge.

Chairman
12th July 2019