

**CAMBRIDGESHIRE SCHOOLS FORUM: MINUTES**

Date: Friday 12th July 2019

Time: 10:00am – 11:30

Venue: Kreis Viersen Room, Shire Hall, Cambridge

Present: Academy Board Member Philip Hodgson (Chairman)  
Dr Alan Rodger (Vice-Chairman)

Maintained Primary Tony Davies  
Sasha Howard

Maintained Nursery Rikke Waldau

Maintained Pupil Referral Unit Amanda Morris-Drake

Maintained Governor Paul Stratford

Academy Primary Susannah Connell

Academy Secondary Jonathan Digby  
Andrew Goulding

Other Academy Appointments Jon Culpin  
Patsy Peres  
Richard Spencer

Early Years Reference Group Deborah Parfitt

Post-16 and Further Education Jeremy Lloyd

Observers Jon Duveen (Teachers Unions)  
Joe McCrossan (Diocese of East Anglia)  
Alex Rutterford-Duffety (Diocese of Ely)  
Councillor Peter Downes (CCC)  
Councillor Joan Whitehead (CCC)

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

Apologies: Maintained Special Lucie Calow

Academy Special School Kim Taylor

Observers Councillor Simon Bywater (CCC)

Absent: Maintained Primary Guy Underwood

Academy Primary Anna Reeder

#### **115. APPOINTMENT OF CHAIRMAN/WOMAN AND VICE-CHAIRMAN/WOMAN**

It was proposed by Rikke Waldau and seconded by Deborah Parfitt that Philip Hodgson be elected as Chairman of the Schools Forum for 2019/20. On being put to the vote the Forum resolved unanimously to appoint Philip Hodgson as Chairman.

The Chairman proposed, and it was seconded by Richard Spencer, that Dr Alan Rodger be elected as Vice Chairman of the Schools Forum for 2019/20. On being put to the vote it was resolved unanimously to appoint Dr Alan Rodger as Vice-Chairman.

#### **116. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Apologies were received from Lucie Callow, Kim Taylor and Councillor Bywater.

The Forum was informed that Jane Horn had resigned her seat while Andrew Goulding would be resigning his seat after today's meeting.

There were no declarations of interest.

#### **117. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 17TH MAY 2019**

The minutes of the meeting held on 17th May 2019 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

#### **118. ACTION LOG**

Written updates to the Minute Action Log were noted by Forum.

#### **119. GROWTH FUND UPDATE – JULY 2019**

The Forum received an update on Growth Fund allocations for 2019/20. While presenting the report, the Head of Integrated Finance Services reiterated to Forum that funding did not take into account the fact that new schools did not immediately operate at full capacity. As a result, the cumulative cost that was passed onto existing schools was significant and further exaggerated by the high levels of growth across Cambridgeshire. It was proposed to Forum that the expected surplus of £350k-£400k should be ring-fenced against the Growth Fund for future use, to minimise any potential top-slicing, as the Education and Skills Funding Agency did not allow for the money to be simply dispersed among schools.

Members' attention was drawn to section 4.2 of the report and the fact that there was a wide range of approaches taken by other local authorities, given that each area experienced different growth levels and were faced by different restraints.

While discussing the report, members:

- Reiterated a desire to be provided with demographic figures and the Service Director of Education stated that the information would be forthcoming as soon as it became available. **Action Required: Service Director of Education**

- Expressed concern that requests for increased funding would be rejected due to the high carry forwards of some schools, although it was noted that arguments and evidence could be put forward that levels of spending far outweighed funding, and that this would worsen with the forthcoming opening of new schools.
- Commented that criticism and challenges had been directed towards the demographic forecasts produced by the local authority. The Service Director explained that the main cause of divergence was due to the local authority including children who moved in and out of the County. It was also noted that the forecasting of figures had proved difficult with a large number of new housing developments in Cambridgeshire being repeatedly delayed. This issue had also led to a problem of overstaffing at some schools and it was confirmed that there had been no clawback awarded in such situations.
- Suggested that basing the formula for the allocation of funding to schools on a separate formula that was based on differential rates was unreasonable and had led to a disparity between primaries and secondaries. It was noted that the formula had last been discussed with Heads and the Schools Forum in 2016/17 and that a review of the process would be appropriate. **Action required: Strategic Finance Business Partner**
- Acknowledged that growth funding would sometimes help overcome a lag in finances but suggested that the nature of funding sometimes led to a double dip. Officers noted the concerns and informed members that figures did not pick up on nuances such as late entering pupils, a particularly disruptive occurrence in the first year, when children are not all at the statutory age at the beginning of the year.
- Expressed concern that some schools did not appear on the list for Growth Funding, suggesting that it was perhaps because they did not know how to apply. It was also suggested that some schools might benefit twice from the funding, but the Service Director of Education assured Forum that this was not the case.
- Argued that sending a letter to the Department for Education (DfE) would be less productive than arranging a face-to-face meeting, given that ministers received correspondence seeking further funding on a daily basis. While acknowledging the point, it was noted that the DfE would only make any changes to the general funding principles, as opposed to Cambridgeshire specific issues, and therefore it would be more effective to focus on that area.
- Noted the difficulties that arose from the Local Authority and schools operating on different financial years, although it was suggested that a greater difficulty lay in the use of various points of the year to produce pupil numbers.

It was resolved unanimously to:

- a) Note the contents of the report; and
  - b) Support the proposal to write to the Department for Education in respect of recognition of funding for new schools within the national funding formula.
- Action**

## 120. REVIEW OF MAINTAINED NURSERY SCHOOLS

The Forum was advised that a need had been identified to undertake a review of the Authority's maintained nursery school provision in response to funding challenges, as set out in the report. In presenting the report, the Service Director of Education informed members that there was an uneven distribution of Nursery Schools across England with around half of the 150 local authorities nationally supporting just under 400 maintained nurseries between them, of which the Council held responsibility for 7.

Following changes in the funding blocks, a top up for nursery schools was created to support the additional costs they faced from holding a school status. This supplement had never been formalised and indeed early years funding had not been properly reviewed for many years. It was noted that the additional funding was only committed until the end of August 2020, and although ministers had indicated that it was likely to continue beyond that date, there had been no confirmation. Members were reminded of the value that nurseries provided, especially for children with special educational needs and disabilities, in preparing children before they started primary and secondary education.

While discussing the issue raised in the report, members:

- Observed the presumption against closing nursery schools in the guidance and the messages from Government that nothing would change. There was concern expressed that it was premature to be considering such eventualities, although the Service Director of Education pointed out that if there was no funding beyond September 2020, then the Local Authority would be unable to provide the shortfall and planning for such a potentiality was not unreasonable.
- Acknowledged the challenge of having two separate provisions which existed with separate frameworks and guidances.
- Observed that the nurseries were located in some of the most deprived areas of the County and that problems would arise further down the line if no action was taken. The Forum was reminded that such a philosophy of prevention was supported by the Council.
- Sought clarification on a timescale for when any decision from Government could be expected, noting that it was just over a year before the funding was due to be terminated. It was suggested that a decision could be expected by December alongside the school settlement, but that would leave only 9 months to find a potential solution. The maintained nursery representative stressed that such uncertainty was extremely difficult to manage and as a result, schools had no choice but to keep reserves. She informed the Forum that nurseries from across the Country were meeting to develop a strategy and formula, given that schools in more affluent areas, which did not have the same costs due to additional needs, were receiving the same level of funding.
- Expressed concern that any review carried out over the summer holiday period would not involve staff and that such a review should involve all staff and not just teachers. It was clarified by the Service Director of Education that there would not be consultations over the summer period and that the time would be used to establish proposals that would be taken to Heads and then other staff and unions in the autumn.

- Established that an update report on the review would be presented to the Forum at its meeting on 16th October 2019 and that no decision would be made before the beginning of 2020. **Action: Service Director of Education**
- Considered alternative sources of funding and investment, although it was noted that protecting established streams of funding was the current priority.

It was resolved to:

Note the contents of the report.

## 121. MAINTAINED SCHOOLS AND DEDICATED SCHOOLS GRANT FINANCIAL HEALTH (SCHOOL BALANCES)

In response to queries made regarding a report at the previous meeting, the Forum received a follow-up paper regarding school balances and carry forwards. While presenting the report, the Head of Integrated Finance Services clarified that further information would be presented to the October Schools Forum meeting, as opposed to the September meeting indicated in section 1.1 of the report.

Attention was drawn to the chart in section 3.6 and the concern that had been raised over the four schools that had dropped below the rest. It was noted that questions had been asked over why schools were holding balances, including a letter from the Leader of the Council, Councillor Count. Acknowledging the relaxation of balance control mechanisms, it was suggested that retightening that process could help improve the amount of information on why schools were holding money.

While discussing the report, members:

- Sought clarification on how academy reserves would be broken down, given that they were pooled. The Service Director of Education acknowledged that it was not yet certain how it would be achieved, but advised that a letter would be circulated regarding the issue in August. **Required Action: Service Director of Education**
- Queried whether balance control mechanisms existed to reduce the chances of in year surpluses, or whether they were simply to demonstrate that the local authority was clear on the reasoning behind any carry forwards. It was argued that any carry forward represented money that had not been spent on the children it had originally been destined and apportioned for. While there were legitimate reasons for this, it was suggested that such reasons should be shared in order to alleviate concerns that some schools were dramatically increasing their carry forwards, while others were dramatically reducing theirs.
- Noted that some other local authorities, including Peterborough City Council, took back any reserves that exceeded the balance threshold. Forum discussed the effectiveness of such a policy. While the short-term effect tended to be schools arbitrarily spending funds to ensure they kept below 8%, the overall quality of financial management appeared to have improved. It was also noted that any money that was taken back by the local authority went to other schools instead and was not removed from the education sector.
- Observed that many schools raised funds of their own accord and received donations. It was agreed that it would be unfair to then have that money taken away

as the result of a balance control mechanism and therefore there would need to be means to extract such funds from the calculations.

- Suggested that it would be useful to receive figures detailing the difference between what schools had budgeted for and how their balances ended up at the end of the year, noting that some schools had budgeted for a deficit on the advice of the local authority while others had not. The Head of Integrated Finance Services cautioned against retrospective accounting but agreed that insight could be gained by revisiting this paper at the end of the 2019/20 year.
- Expressed unease over the high levels of carry forwards maintained by some schools.
- Suggested that Northamptonshire was not the most suitable local authority for comparison, given its financial situation, suggesting that it have been more useful to compare data with a number of other local authorities. It was agreed to review the level of balances once DfE benchmarking tools had been updated.
- Observed that the current system did not allow for schools to model and set budgets effectively, as they did not know how much money they would have or how many staff they would lose. If funding had not come through, such savings would have been spent. The concerns were noted and Forum was informed that the issue had been raised formally with the Council's Chief Executive. **Required Action:** the Head of Integrated Finance Services would work with maintained schools to improve the budgeting and returns system.

It was resolved to:

- a) Note the contents of the report; and
- b) Agree the proposed revision to the balance control mechanism set out in the table in paragraph 4.4 of the report.

## 122. REVIEW OF MEMBERSHIP AND PROPORTIONALITY

The Forum received a report detailing the current membership and proportionality of the Forum, which advised that there was no need to make any changes. While discussing the report, it was noted that a representative would need to be appointed for the maintained secondary school that would be opening in the autumn. A number of seats had become vacant and new representatives would be sought to fill them.

The Forum was also informed that discussions would be held over the summer on how the Schools Forum operated, specifically on issues including the number of meetings, kind of recommendations, style of meetings and communication. A recent conference had demonstrated the variety of ways in which School Forums operated across the country, and these would be considered, along with regulations that had been recently reiterated, with a report to be presented to the Forum at its October meeting. **Action required: Service Director of Education**

It was resolved to:

- Note the report.

### **123. AGENDA PLAN**

With the addition of a report reviewing the Schools Forum and a further report on the Maintained Nursery Review both to be considered at the meeting on 16th October 2019, it was resolved to:

Note the Agenda Plan

### **124. DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

The Cambridgeshire Schools Forum will meet next on Wednesday 16th October at 10:00am in the Kreis Viersen Room, Shire Hall, Cambridge.

Chairman  
16th October 2019