

CAMBRIDGESHIRE SCHOOLS FORUM: MINUTES

Date: Friday 29th March 2019

Time: 10:00am – 11:50am

Venue: Kreis Viersen Room, Shire Hall, Cambridge

Present: P Hodgson (Chairman), Dr A Rodger (Vice-Chairman), L Calow, J Culpin, S Connell, T Davies, J Drummond, J Horn, D Parfitt, P Peres, A Reeder, S Roscoe, R Spencer, P Stratford, Dr K Taylor OBE, G Underwood and R Waldau

Observers

Councillor S Bywater	Cambridgeshire County Council
Councillor P Downes	Cambridgeshire County Council
Councillor J Whitehead	Cambridgeshire County Council
A Read	Diocese of Ely DEMAT
J Duveen	Teachers Unions

Officers

E Jones, S Kingston, J Lewis, N Mills and M Wade

Apologies: J Cornwell, J Digby, J Lloyd, A Matthews and A Morris-Drake

99. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies were received from J Cornwell (substituted by J Drummond), J Digby, J Lloyd, A Matthews and A Morris-Drake.

100. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON

The minutes of the meeting held on 18th January 2019 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

101. ACTION LOG

With regard to Minute 76, it was noted that an email had been circulated to members of the Forum regarding areas of overspending and that any further queries would be addressed if presented to officers.

With regard to Minute 85, the Forum was informed that an increasing number of academies were disclosing information on a school level and that the Schools' Balances report being presented to the Forum on the 12th July 2019 meeting would include more detailed information on school balances across Cambridgeshire.

With regard to Minute 95, members were informed that details on spending and allocations from the Growth Fund would be included in a report being presented at the Schools Forum meeting on 17th May 2019. It was also noted that there were ongoing

discussions with the Department for Education about assessing the methodology of establishing funding allocations for local authorities and that information on indicative budgets had been issued to schools on 28th February 2019.

With regard to Minute 96, the Chairman confirmed that there would be a Schools Forum meeting on 17th May 2019. The Service Director of Education noted that having reached a certain level of overspend, the authority was required by the Department for Education to make a return on the High Needs block. A response to this would be presented to the Schools Forum at the meeting on 17th May for consultation and would subsequently be taken for approval by the Children and Young People Committee, in order to submit the response to the Department for Education in before the deadline in June.

102. EARLY YEARS NATIONAL FUNDING FORMULA REVIEW 2019/20 UPDATE

The Forum received an update on the Early Years National Funding Formula Review, with the funding formula having been in place for three years. In presenting the report, it was noted that there would be no increase to the baseline funding rate of £4.42 received during 2018/19 and that deprivation would remain the only supplement within the formula, as set out in sections 2 and 3 of the report. Attention was also drawn to the fact that the £130k that was retained to support the implementation of the extended 30-hour entitlement in previous years would not be retained in 2019/20 or future financial years, as set out in section 5 of the report.

In discussing the update, members:

- Established that the 3.6% of funding that was retained in the previous year would continue to be retained. Officers noted that this figure varied across the country, with some local authorities, such as Peterborough City Council, retaining 4% or above, while the maximum permitted was 5%. The Forum was reminded that the extra £130k would no longer be retained on top of this.
- Expressed concern over the lack of information regarding future funding for Early Years beyond 2020. Members were informed that the government was undertaking a review of Early Years funding and that once the review was published, it would be discussed further at the Forum to decide how to proceed.
- Sought clarification over how the £1m Centrally Retained Budget was divided among the duties listed in section 5 of the report. Officers were unable to provide exact figures and informed the Forum that they would be circulated once they had been obtained. **Action required: Shelley Kingston, Policy & Operations Manager School Admissions and Early Years Funding**
- Suggested that the local authority would not be able to keep up with increases in National Insurance contributions and pay awards due to the limited funding and it was acknowledged by officers that this would be difficult.
- Expressed concern that budgets in the nursery sector were entering deficit and that this would cause problems for the local authority. The Service Director of Education acknowledged the concerns and noted that a dialogue had been started on what changes needed to be made. Members were informed that the Council were not confident of the market's ability to take care of rates, as propounded by the

government, and that cost pressures such as rate bills and building issues often placed nurseries in danger of being forced to close. Officers also noted that they were wary of the increasing tendency for struggling, smaller provisions to be bought out by larger providers, which resulted in a limited choice for those unable to travel elsewhere.

- Suggested that the report on this issue that would be presented to the Forum on 17th May 2019 could include a representative sample of small and large providers that were not in the public sector, noting that such information was not publically available. Officers agreed that this would be helpful and that some providers would be approached with a request to provide this data, but it was pointed out that they were not obliged to share it.
- Confirmed that the local authority received additional income based on the number of nursery schools that were open, although it was acknowledged that this commitment was currently only in place until August 2020 and that there was no clarification over what would happen beyond this date.

It was resolved to:

- a) Note the contents of the report
- b) Approve the planned Centrally Retained amounts for 2019/20

103. 2019/20 BUDGET

A report was received by the Forum on the 2019/20 budget setting and consultation process, which was published as a late report due to much of the report's contents being discussed at a workshop only two days before the Schools Forum. The Service Director of Education acknowledged the challenges schools across Cambridgeshire had faced as a result of the divergence between the funding expected through the National Funding Formula (NFF) and the amount that they had actually received.

Attention was drawn to the fact that throughout the budget setting process, modelling was carried out on figures from the previous year due to the late publishing of current figures by the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA). Whereas previously data sets had been maintained within the local authority, the current dependence on the ESFA had proven to affect the reliability of figures.

It was proposed to members that a summary of Schools Forum meetings could be produced and circulated to schools across the County, in an effort to engage them and help them understand in less technical terms. It was also suggested that consideration needed to be given to its democratic process, including how and when it held consultations as well as establishing a more carefully planned timetable.

While discussing the report, members:

- Acknowledged that throughout the budget setting process, the local authority had consistently clarified that the final amounts may differ and that it was beyond their control. However, concerns were expressed that the complex and technical nature of the process made some aspects difficult to understand for members of the Schools Forum and particularly for everyone else in their sectors that did not

participate in the Forum. Some suggested that it was the responsibility of members of the forum to assist in helping other schools to understand such complexities.

- Expressed concern that the report was only focused on preventing similar problems occurring in future budgets, rather than mitigating the problems that had arisen from the current one.
- Sought an explanation over why the negative effects on some schools had been so large, given that the local authority had not made any significant changes to the previous budget setting processes. Members were informed that the main reason was due to the reduction in growth funding, although it was acknowledged that expectations as a result of the NFF could have been better managed.
- Suggested that it was unclear who owned the risk of making sure institutions were adequately funded, which was further exacerbated by conflicting information being provided from different sources. It was important to develop a clear accountability framework to ensure that the correct channels of communication were followed and to reduce the risk of the system fracturing into separate levels.
- Expressed support for the idea of providing a summary of the Forum's meetings to schools as a means of developing and enhancing communication throughout all the sectors. However, it was noted that committing to provide such a document implied a level of accountability and responsibility, with some members concerned over the local authority taking on an extra layer of work.
- It was also acknowledged that consideration should be given over further ways in which to build bridges to all head teachers and finance departments, as well as parents. Members discussed whether it was more effective to communicate with schools individually or in mass communications, especially given the high level of misunderstanding over the budget process that continued to prevail despite repeated efforts to inform them. Members also argued that the communication should go both ways and that greater attention should be given to allowing schools the opportunity to contribute, rather than simply being informed on what had been discussed at Forum meetings. To this end, it was agreed to add a further bullet point to section 2.3 of the report stating "Members of the Schools Forum to work with local authority and other stakeholders".
- Considered the benefits of school level data being included in the budget process, noting that it would allow schools to see whether they were likely to lose out and therefore enable them to take corrective action at an earlier stage. Indicative data would also assist in keeping track of cumulative impacts, although it was noted that there were dangers to being over-reliant on such figures. Concern was expressed that such a practice might give the impression that members were more interested in their institution than their institution's sector. It was proposed that some of the finance directors from within the institutions that would be able to help produce these illustrative documents could form a working party.
- Suggested that Schools Forum meetings could sometimes begin with small group discussions so that sectors could provide more productive and coherent input to debates.

- Noted that not all schools received less funding than the NFF had allocated, with the situation impacting in different ways from one school to another and one year to the next.
- Recalled that in previous years they had been able to formulate three-year budgets that were largely achievable, whereas now they struggled to set and stick to an budget of just one year. It was suggested that this was not helped by the lack of timely information, meaning that head teachers were unable to plan, mitigate or prepare corrective actions.
- Discussed the group that would review the growth requests and allocations and the Service Director of Education informed the Forum that he would circulate information on what the group would look like and how it would work. **Action required: Jonathan Lewis – Service Director: Education**
- Acknowledged the importance of involving MPs in discussions going forward, although it was noted that it had proven difficult to communicate the extent of the problems to the government. Aggressive lobbying needed to be accompanied by a more subtle, targeted approach and the representative from the teachers' unions expressed his support and desire for the unions to be involved and able to contribute to the campaign. The Chairman informed members that he would discuss the formation of this second group with the Service Director of Education on the basis of the points raised during the meeting. **Action required: Jonathan Lewis – Service Director: Education**

It was resolved to:

Support officers in taking forward the proposals and action points set out in sections 2 and 3 of the report.

104. AGENDA PLAN

It was resolved to:

Note the Agenda Plan

105. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The Cambridgeshire Schools Forum will meet next on Friday 17th May at 10:00am in the Kreis Viersen Room, Shire Hall, Cambridge.

106. NEXT FORUM WORKSHOP

The next workshop will be held on Monday 1st April 2019, at 10:00am in Huntingdon.

Chairman
17th May 2019