

GLOUCESTERSHIRE SCHOOLS FORUM

Minutes of a meeting held on Wednesday 22 November 2023
The meeting was held remotely.

Present:

Dominic Burke	- Secondary School Headteachers (Academy)
Karen Clinton	- Secondary School Headteachers (Maintained)
Stephen Dean	- Primary School Headteachers (Academy)
Rhian Evans	- Primary School Governors (Maintained)
Mikey Ezewudo	- Primary School Governors (Maintained)
Justin Godding	- Primary School Headteachers (Maintained)
Emma Gundry	- Alternative Provision
Andrew Harris	- Community Representative
Kate Hawkins	- Special School Governors (Academy)
Becky Martin	- Special School Governors (Maintained)
Jon Millin	- Primary School Headteachers (Maintained)
Will Morgan	- Secondary School Headteachers (Academy)
Sarah Murphy	- Unions
Roz Nelson	- Early Years
Wendy Newby	- Special School Headteachers (Maintained)
Liz Oakey	- Special School Headteachers (Academy)
David Williams	- Diocese of Gloucester

Apologies:

Matthew Bishop, Primary School Governors (Maintained)
Helen Bond, Gloucestershire Parent Carer Forum
David Kettleby, Post 16
Chiquita Henson, Secondary School Headteachers (Academy)
Amanda Horniman, Early Years
Karen Lewis, Primary School Headteachers (Maintained)
Alexander Norman, Secondary School Governors (Academy)

1. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were made.

2. PUBLIC QUESTIONS

No public questions had been received.

3. MINUTES

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 14 September 2023 were approved as a correct record.

4. SCHOOL FUNDING 2024/25

- 4.1 The Head of Education Strategy and Development gave a presentation on the implications of government indicative announcements on school funding for 2024/25.
- 4.2 The Forum was informed that the DfE first published the 2024/25 National Funding Formula (NFF) and indicative 2024/25 Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) in July 2023. However, following the discovery of a technical error made by the DfE's officials during the initial calculations in relation to pupil numbers, an update was made to the schools NFF in October 2023. This error meant that nationally the overall cost of the schools NFF was underestimated, and incorrect factor values were published in July 2023. The report before the Forum contained the new, corrected, factor values. The DfE's correction to the Schools block 2024/25 indicative DSG was a reduction of £4.345M.
- 4.3 The Forum considered the revised 2024/25 indicative DSG block summary. The Schools block (indicative) allocation had increased by 1.8%, the High Needs block allocation had increased by 3.4%, the Central School Services block by 3.9%, and the Early Years block had not yet been updated by the DfE so was currently showing at 0% change, resulting in an overall forecast increase to the DSG allocation of 2%. The final DSG position would be presented at the 11th January 2024 Schools Forum meeting after being updated for the final DSG and revised pupil data due to be announced in December 2023.
- 4.4 The Head of Education Strategy and Development explained that in the last two years there had been adjustments following increases to education spending announced through the Autumn Statement, which had been delivered through additional grants. The Autumn Statement 2023 had only recently been announced but it looked like there would be no further increases to school funding. Consequently, it appeared that subject to changes based on the October census in relation to pupil numbers, the indicative DSG figures represented the final allocation for 2024/24.
- 4.5 He informed the Forum that this was concerning as the uplift to the Schools block DSG allocation in 2023/24 was a 6.8% increase. He also pointed out that, similarly, the uplift to the High Needs block allocation of 3.4% in 2024/25 (£3.169M) was significantly lower than the increase in 2023/24 of £8.782M (10.4%).
- 4.6 The Head of Education Strategy and Development reported that the impact of the DfE's adjustments to the DSG following the error, meant that the Minimum Per Pupil Funding Level (MPPFL) had reduced by approximately 1%. Based on the revised allocations, the difference for a 300 place primary school would be £13,500 less than the figures presented to the Forum in September, and the difference for a 900 place secondary school would be £49,500 less.
- 4.7 He informed members that in 2024/25 there would be 28 less primary schools on the Minimum Funding Guarantee (MFG) and 3 less primary schools on the MPPFL;

there was no movement in the number of secondary schools. Overall, this represented a move towards all schools being at the NFF level, without the need for MFG and MPPFL adjustments. The government was continuing with its plan to implement the hard NFF; once implemented there would be no opportunity for any local decision making on the formula, instead decisions would be made on a national basis.

- 4.8 One Forum member referred to the increase to the Schools Block in 2024/25 of just 1.8%, and emphasised that this would not be sustainable given the cost pressures that schools were facing, particularly around pay increases to staff. He questioned what was taking place nationally to highlight this issue. In response, the Head of Education Strategy and Development explained that the Collaboration Group (the Group's members were from a number of organisations including teaching unions, the County Councils Network, the Society of County Treasurers, and the f40) had been working on identifying the additional funding needed to remove the real term cuts to schools and to stabilise the funding within the system. The Collaboration Group and the f40 had been waiting for the publication of the Autumn Statement as they had anticipated an additional funding allocation to be announced, similar to the announcements made in the previous two years. He expected there would now be a mobilisation of those groups to analyse the 2024/25 figures in order to obtain a clear picture to counter the DfE's view that the uplift and the Teachers Pay and Pension Grant were sufficient to meet the inflationary pressures and that schools were not facing real term cuts.
- 4.9 In response to a question, the Head of Education Strategy and Development clarified that schools would still receive the full allocation of the Teachers Pay and Pension Grant for 2024/25. However, the funding from this grant was significantly lower than what schools had received in the previous two years through the additional Supplementary Grant in 2022/23 and the Mainstream Schools Additional Grant in 2023/24.
- 4.10 The Forum noted the revised NFF rates following the October 2023 update from the DfE, and the revised top-slice of the Schools block for the Growth Fund of £0.931M.
- 4.11 The Head of Education Strategy and Development reported that the response to the local authority's funding consultation was poor, with just two respondents which did not provide a reliable basis for feedback. There were three areas on which the local authority consulted:
- De-delegated funding (LA maintained schools only)
 - Notional SEND funding formula (all schools)
 - Targeted SEND funding for all schools (currently the 1:30 formula).
- 4.12 Within the funding consultation the local authority was not considering or recommending any changes to the funding levels de-delegated from maintained schools. The only change recommended by the local authority was an adjustment to how the de-delegation for local authority statutory duties was used; in effect pivoting it to support school improvement services, following the removal of the Local Authority School Improvement Monitoring and Brokering Grant. The de-

delegation proposals in the report reflected this change, with all other delegations remaining the same for 2024/25.

- 4.13 Sarah Murphy, Trade Union representative, referred to her previous report which detailed the breakdown of the type of casework undertaken over the period August 2022 - September 2023, and she provided an update on the casework that had been undertaken since 1 September 2023, on behalf of the NEU members. Approximately 100 cases had been received with 41% of those cases coming from primary schools. The casework covered a range of issues including capability, grievance, support plans and disciplinaries. Members were informed that the de-delegated amount for union facilities (at £3.05 per pupil) paid for the release time salaries of three elected county union representatives.
- 4.14 The Forum's maintained schools' representatives present at the meeting (by sector) agreed de-delegation at the per pupil rates shown in the report for:
- In-year increases in pupil numbers – primary
 - Union facilities – primary
 - Targeted intervention (primary)
 - Targeted intervention (secondary)
- 4.15 Following the poor response to the funding consultation the local authority did not feel it was appropriate to recommend any changes to the Notional SEND formula for 2024/25. At present, every local authority was responsible for setting their own notional SEND formula. The current formula in Gloucestershire is: 2.5% of the basic entitlement; and the full low prior attainment allocation. The Head of Education Strategy and Development explained that the local authority would carry out further modelling work on the formula factors and would bring it back to the Forum again for review in June 2024.
- 4.16 In response to a question, it was explained that the Notional SEND formula local allocation equated to 8.3% of 2023/24 Schools block funding compared to 10.8% national median. The formula factors and the way it was allocated would neither increase nor decrease school funding in any way.
- 4.17 The Forum agreed that the Notional SEND formula should remain unchanged for 2024/25.
- 4.18 The Head of Education Strategy and Development reported that the local authority would now be moving forward with changes to the way in which targeted SEND funding (currently the 1 in 30 model) would be allocated in 2024/25. A meeting of the School's Forum High Needs Working Group would be arranged in due course to take this forward and develop a model for approval by the Schools Forum.
ACTION: Head of Education Strategy and Development/Clerk.
- 4.19 A Forum member representing secondary headteachers strongly emphasised that as schools were legally required to provide support to pupils with additional needs

as detailed in their EHCP, it was critical that the funding followed the children and that it was not lost within the system. He suggested that any savings made due to changes to the targeted support model could still lead to an increase in High Needs spend as there could be a rise in permanent exclusions in mainstream schools. It was important that this message was conveyed.

- 4.20 In response, the Head of Education Strategy and Development explained that the way in which the current proxy factors within the NFF around additional needs worked, meant that schools with a high proportion of pupils with additional needs, were not receiving an equitable level of funding. The current 1 in 30 model was a local model, implemented to provide additional funding for those schools with more complex cohorts. There was no intention to reduce the level of funding by making changes to the targeted support model, the focus of the review would be on how to ensure that it was being used in a way which would support schools effectively and would be sustainable in the long-term. He acknowledged, however, that there would be a reduction in the availability of the funding to schools. He made the point that the working group would look at all the issues raised in more detail.

5. EARLY YEARS (TO FOLLOW)

- 5.1 Roz Nelson, Forum member representing Early Years, presented a report which provided a summary of the changes and challenges for the Early Years sector, following the announcements on the Early Years and Childcare Reforms in the Government's Spring Budget 2023. She emphasised that final details were still awaited and therefore it was difficult for providers to make any plans for staffing and provision.
- 5.2 The Forum was informed that the expansion of the funded childcare offer would be rolled out in stages over the period Autumn 2023-September 2026 (as outlined in the report accompanying the agenda).
- 5.3 The Early Years representative reported that at the introduction of the new entitlements from 2024 to 2025, the average funding rate for local authorities for under 2-year-olds would be around £11 per hour. This was the amount the local authority received. Local authorities were permitted to retain up to 5%, therefore the hourly rate passed to providers was significantly lower. The hourly rate differed across local authorities; the Gloucestershire rate was typically slightly lower than the national average. The majority of the 5% that was retained by GCC was contributed to the C&FC contract value, that currently did not deliver any Early Years services. In addition, if 80% of additionally eligible parents choose to take up the offer, in Gloucestershire up to 5000 additional childcare places could be needed. The sector was already reporting significant staff recruitment and retention challenges, forcing many to close some of their rooms and in some cases the whole provision. Also, there were concerns around the potential impact on the quality of Early Years provision given that providers continued to be clear that the funding attached to entitlements does not meet actual costs.

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- 5.4 Members were informed that a consultation had been undertaken with the sector to establish how many settings anticipated they would offer a full or partial expanded offer and what support they would need from the local authority to achieve this. Around 50% said they anticipated they would consider expanding their offer, but all said they were unable to commit to this until further information and funding rates had been provided by the DfE.
- 5.5 It was reported that the Early Years DSG funding rates received by GCC and paid to Early Years providers remained below the national average. Low funding rates in the sector, along with increased service delivery costs, was the primary factor in the surge in the number of settings closing across the county and the country. In addition, the announced uplift was unlikely to cover the minimum wage for staff.
- 5.6 The Government was proceeding with changing staff: child ratios from 1:4 to 1:5 for two-year-olds in England to align with Scotland and bring the UK in line with other countries. The Early Years sector was concerned that this plan risked compromising the children's quality of education and the care that children received potentially putting their basic safety and wellbeing in jeopardy. It would potentially add further pressure on the early years workforce, driving even more highly skilled educators away from the sector, at a time when the Early Years sector was already struggling with a recruitment and retention crisis.
- 5.7 The Early Years representative reported that start-up grants for new childminders had been announced which would grow the childminder market. The Early Years Sector anticipated that in the main this would be a positive reform and would encourage much needed additional childminders across the county.
- 5.8 It was reported that the government had announced plans for additional local authority funding for extra wrap-around childcare. The government's ambition was for all schools to deliver wraparound childcare that was self-financing and sustainable by September 2026, and for local authorities to take responsibility for the implementation and oversight of this element of the reform. It was explained that the wraparound proposal raised several questions around capacity to deliver in already over stretched primary schools. In addition, local authority support for out of school childcare provision (as opposed to Early Years) in Gloucestershire was removed several years ago during service restructures. Consideration would need to be given to how the local authority would support this development and fulfil the local authority's duty to implement and provide oversight of this element of the reform.
- 5.9 The Head of Education Strategy and Development commented that from the local authority's perspective, due to there being a lack of the full funding information at this stage, it was difficult to determine what capacity there would be within the retained 5% of funding to deliver on the policy changes. He reported that the Forum would receive a further report on Early Years at the next meeting in January, when there would be more budget information available from the DFE.

5.10 The Director of Education reported that the local authority had very recently received notification of a delivery grant of £107k, but it was not clear what the arrangements were for carrying the grant forward into the new financial year and how the funding could be deployed. She endorsed the points raised around the challenges the policy changes presented. The local authority was pressing the DfE to provide the full details of the funding information as soon as possible.

6. HIGH NEEDS

6.1 The Head of Education Strategy and Development presented a report which provided an update on the High Needs financial forecast for 2023/24, the current numbers of Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), plus the planning of specialist sufficiency and DfE – SEND and Alternative Provision Change reforms.

6.2 He reported that there had been a further rise of £1.56M in forecast spend. The key variations to note were a £1.5M increase in spend on independent placements, increased pressure on Education Other Than At School (EOTAS) and special school bespoke packages, and small increases in secondary mainstream top-ups and specialist centres.

6.3 Members were informed that the local authority would be undertaking a detailed review of the forecast of independent placements and would update more fully at the January Schools Forum meeting when the position was clear.

6.4 In response to a question, the Head of Education Strategy and Development explained that independent special schools in the county were monitored by the local authority's Specialist Commissioning Team, so they received regular reviews and the quality of provision was good. However, the local authority was committed to making sure that there was sufficient capacity within the county's special schools to reduce the reliance on the independent sector. Nationally, independent special schools were a critical element of the infrastructure within the SEND system and there would always be a need for some independent schools within the system.

6.5 In response to a question, it was agreed that the Forum would be provided with a breakdown of the number of children, by age range, attending independent special schools.

ACTION: Head of Education Strategy and Development.

6.6 The Head of Education Strategy and Development reported since the last Forum meeting in September the number of EHCPs supported in Gloucestershire had risen by 108 to 5,734 and 32.9 per 1000 0–24-year-olds. The data showed that the significant majority of new plans were issued prior to the age of 10 and that the volume of EHCP's in the system was peaking between the ages of 11 and 14. Locally the rate of growth between January 2022 and January 2023 was 2.5 per 1000, compared to 2.6 nationally and 3.5 per 1000 for statistical neighbours.

6.7 It was reported that the local authority was working on the assumption that in the next few years the number of EHCPs at statutory school age would start to level off.

This would mean that the increased need for specialist placements should also start to settle.

- 6.8 The Head of Education Strategy and Development reported that Gloucestershire's High Needs block allocation was the 10th lowest per pupil in the country. This clearly demonstrated that Gloucestershire did not receive an equitable level of High Needs funding. The High Needs block deficit had grown by £29M over the past two financial years (£9M in 2022/23 and £15.2M in 23/24). He pointed out that whilst the High Needs block was under significant pressure, school budgets were also under increasing pressure, which presented a challenging environment for inclusion when there was a rising number of children with SEND in the system. There were also core Council funding pressures on Home to School Transport with a £3.6M increase in spend in 2023/24 (the key pressures were around SEND transport), and a significant investment in SEND services in 2022/23 and 2023/24 of £2.4M.
- 6.9 In response to a question on how the increase in expenditure in High Needs was funded, it was explained that currently the Council was able to support the High Needs deficit through its own central reserves, but this was not a long-term solution. There were some local authorities who were supporting their High Needs deficit through borrowing, meaning their deficit was increasing with an interest rate attached. It was explained that Councils were not required to report their High Needs deficit as part of their overall accounts. It was agreed that officers would look into whether information on the Council's reserves was publicly available with a view to sharing this with the Forum.
ACTION: Finance Manager - Schools, Strategy and Capital.
- 6.10 The Head of Education Strategy and Development gave an update on the Local Area Improvement Plan. He reported that the Gloucestershire Local Area SEND and Inclusion Partnership Board was overseeing the development work taking place as part of the improvement plan which included activity in relation to Gloucestershire's SEND Strategy 2022-25 and the DfE SEND and Alternative Provision (AP) Change Programme.
- 6.11 He informed members that Gloucestershire would be working in partnership with Swindon to lead the piloting of the SEND and AP reforms for the southwest region. The focus was on ensuring that all the development work and activities taking place locally including around the Delivering Better Value in SEND Programme (DBV), were aligning with the changes taking place on a national basis.
- 6.12 He emphasised that even though the DBV Programme was driven by the need to make financial efficiencies, in effect how to achieve better value for money within the local system, most importantly the focus was centred on how the local authority could deliver the best outcomes for children and young people.
- 6.13 The Head of Education Strategy and Development gave a detailed update on the activities taking place in relation to the Local Area Improvement Programme. He reported that the Local Area Improvement Plan would be brought to the next meeting of the Forum in January 2024.

- 6.14 In response to a question about how the impact of the Local Area Improvement Programme would be measured, it was explained that officers had been working on developing performance indicators and evaluation criteria for the local partnership. It had been a complex exercise, however, progress had made on the development of a model. The focus was now on ensuring this aligned with the DfE's approach in order to develop a clear performance matrix.
- 6.15 In response to a question, the Head of Education Strategy and Development explained that the DfE's Funding Policy Team had indicated that at present, no legislative changes were planned around the SEND Code of Practice: 0 to 25 years, but it had not been ruled out. The Director of Education added that as part of the change programme process, around 50 local authorities, including Gloucestershire, were meeting regularly with the DfE's policy makers who were looking at the various elements of the reforms. This provided local authorities with a valuable way of delivering robust feedback about what would and would not work on the ground. It was an important piece of work as it was one of the key ways to affect some influence around those who were proposing the policies and what they would take forward.
- 6.16 The Forum was informed that the local authority's current plan was to increase the number of special school places in the county by 270 places over the next four years (200 places in a new special school and 70 in existing schools (20 at Brook Academy, 30 at Sladewood Academy and 20 at Heart of the Forest)). The current estimates suggested that an extra 330 places could be needed over that period.
- 6.17 One Forum member questioned whether some of the extra provision could be developed within mainstream settings. In response, it was explained that the SEND Team and the Specialist Commissioning Team were currently looking at the options for future expansion of places both in the mainstream and special schools, including expansion of the mainstream resource base model, and would be developing proposals on the way forward.
- 6.18 The Head of Education Strategy and Development gave an outline of Gloucestershire's DSG Management Plan. The Plan had been developed through the DBV programme using the required DfE template and it set out the mitigated and unmitigated position, alongside the narrative around the local context. It painted a clear picture of the challenges faced - by 2027/28 the forecast mitigated position was £199.8M spend and unmitigated £230M. Forum members noted that the Plan would be submitted to the DfE in December 2023. It was explained that the DfE, periodically, would be asking local authorities to review and resubmit their plans.

7. F40 UPDATE

- 7.1 The Head of Education Strategy and Development gave an update on the recent activities of the f40 Group. He reported that over the last few months the priority had been informing manifesto's ahead of a General Election.

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7.2 The f40 Group was asking for:

Schools:

- Fast-track the implementation of the NFF to address inequity.
- Move SEND proxy factors above the MPPL.

SEND:

- £4.6b cash investment.
- Review of the High Needs funding formula.
- Increased capital funding and pause of the free school programme.

Activities of the f40 Group:

- Letter to chancellor signed by 37 MPs.
- Briefings for MPs in Westminster.
- Meeting with David Johnston,
- Meeting with Bridget Phillipson.
- Re-launch of Collaboration Group with CCN, LGA and Unions.
- Seeking SEND debate on the house floor.

7.3 As Deputy Chair of the f40 Group, the Head of Education Strategy and Development commented that he would be keen to hear from Forum members if they felt there were any issues not being given the profile they should be in the f40 Group's publications that were circulated to the Forum.

7.4 In response to a question, the Head of Education Strategy and Development explained that the f40 Group would be looking at the issue of how the timing of the additional grants, and the periods for which they were supposed to support schools, fitted with the cost pressures that schools were facing. He would also look at whether it would be possible (given the short timescale involved), to provide information at the next Forum meeting on the impact of this at school level, giving an example of a primary and secondary school.

ACTION: Head of Education Strategy and Development.

8. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The next meeting of Gloucestershire Schools Forum will take place at 2:00pm on Thursday 11th January 2024. The meeting will be held in-person in the Council Chamber, Shire Hall.

Chairman

Meeting concluded at 4:00pm