

GLOUCESTERSHIRE SCHOOLS FORUM

Minutes of a meeting held on Thursday 12 November 2020

The meeting was held remotely

Present:

Matthew Bishop	- Primary School Governors (Maintained)
Helen Bond	- Gloucestershire Parent Carer Forum
Lyn Dance	- Special School Head Teacher
Andrew Harris	- Community Representative (Chair of the Schools Forum)
Kirsten Harrison	- Secondary School Headteachers (Academy)
Kate Hawkins	- Special School Governors
Amanda Horniman	- Early Years Providers
Rachel Howie	- Gloucester Diocese
Lisa Jones	- Primary School Headteachers (Maintained)
Gwyneth Keen	- Early Years Providers
Becky Martin	- Special School Governors (Maintained)
David Metcalf	- Primary School Headteachers (Maintained)
Will Morgan	- Secondary School Headteachers (Academy)
Sarah Murphy	- Unions
Alexander Norman	- Secondary School Governors (Academy)
Jacqui Phillips	- Secondary School Governors (Academy)
Steve Savory	- Primary School Headteachers (Academy)
Clare Steel	- Special School Headteachers
Rob Wilcock	- Secondary School Governors (Academy)
Stuart Wilson	- Secondary School Headteachers (Academy)

Observers:

Cllr Richard Boyles, Cabinet Member for Children's Safeguarding and Early Years

Officers:

Chris Spencer, Director of Children's Services
Philip Haslett, Head of Education Strategy and Development
Neil Egles, Finance Manager, Schools Strategy and Capital
Sarah Hylton, Early Years Service Manager
Suzanne Hall, Finance Business Partner
Simon Harper, Head of Democratic Services and Deputy Monitoring Officer
Joanne Bolton, Democratic Services Officer and Clerk to the Schools Forum

Apologies:

David Alexander, Secondary Headteacher (Maintained)
Penny Chislett, Post-16 Education
Elisa Entwistle, Alternative Provision Schools
Peter Hales, Primary School Governors (Academy)
Dan Johnson, Primary School Headteachers (Maintained)

Minutes subject to their acceptance as a correct record at the next meeting

Cllr Patrick Molyneux, Cabinet Member for Economy, Education and Skills
Adam White, Secondary School Governors (Maintained)

61. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were made.

62. PUBLIC QUESTIONS

No public questions were received.

63. MINUTES

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 17 September 2020 were approved as a correct record.

64. UPDATE ON THE F40 AND COVID-19

- 64.1 Philip Haslett, the Head of Education Strategy and Development gave a presentation on the funding and support available to the school system during the Covid-19 pandemic. *(For Information: A copy of the presentation slides covering each agenda item has been uploaded to the Council's website.)*
- 64.2 He reported that following submissions to the DfE in July 2020, the total amount of Covid-19 exceptional costs successfully claimed by maintained schools in Gloucestershire, against the standard three criteria, was £441,059. A further £228,689 had since been received and paid to 63 maintained schools - those schools had claimed for other costs not within the three standard categories, or had submitted a claim above their limit for the total of the three standard categories, which had since been approved for payment. The Forum noted that the ESFA had confirmed that it was making final assessments of the claims for other costs, for which it received a large number of claims in a wide range of categories. The ESFA was expected to inform schools of the outcome of this process by the end of November 2020.
- 64.3 The Forum noted that the ESFA and the DfE had made it clear that they did not expect there to be a further round of funding to support exceptional costs. This decision had caused concern for school leaders, local authorities, unions and education funding groups. The local authority was aiming to build a complete picture of the on-going exceptional costs to Gloucestershire's schools, and the criticalness of schools continuing to track Covid-19 related costs was emphasised. Forum members were urged to convey this message to their colleagues and encourage the reporting of the exceptional costs to the local authority's finance team.

- 64.4 The Head of Education Strategy and Development explained that the evidence from schools would help to create a clear picture of the on-going impact and would be used to support the F40 campaign for a further round of exceptional cost funding, moving into term 2. It was reported that to date, the finance team had received 50 responses from schools. The responses showed that those 50 schools had incurred collectively £385,119 of additional costs as a result of Covid-19, this was solely in relation to term 1. Pressures were expected to rise during term 2 as the tightened national restrictions commenced. The Forum noted the latest letter from the F40 to the DfE, which provided a detailed account of the Covid-19 related funding pressures in schools. It was reported that the F40 was due to meet with the DfE funding team to discuss the issues in detail.
- 64.5 The Head of Education Strategy and Development reported that the priority areas for local Covid-19 funding and support were: Transition Chat - this project focused on supporting Year 11 students who were at risk of becoming NEET (not in education, employment or training); support to children and young people who, on return to school were struggling to access education and were at risk of exclusion; school staff mental health and well-being; school improvement performance; and schools at risk of deficit.
- 64.6 Members of the Forum provided feedback about the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on schools. Key points were made about the significant exceptional costs incurred from having to upgrade the IT infrastructure in schools, to successfully provide a remote/blending learning system. The Head of Education Strategy and Development acknowledged that some schools were having to invest quite significantly in their IT infrastructure, due to years of financial pressures and competing priorities, which had resulted in IT systems not fit for purpose for today's requirements around remote learning. He agreed that the local authority would advise schools to capture information on the additional costs incurred due to IT as a separate item.
- 64.7 Concerns were also expressed over the significant costs involved with meeting the enhanced cleaning requirements in schools. It was reported that some schools did not have the funds or reserves to procure additional cleaning services etc, and were instead having to use existing support staff to undertake Covid-19 related activities – thus taking staff away from providing the usual level of learning support to pupils. Members emphasised that the situation was having a significant detrimental impact on the well-being of staff. A member suggested that schools should be asked to record the percentage of time staff members were having to spend on Covid-19 related activities as opposed to teaching and learning duties, as the associated costs could be quite significant. The Head of Education Strategy and Development advised however, that whilst this was a valid concern, in terms of engaging with decision makers on making the case for additional funding, it would be difficult to provide evidence on issues that could be managed within schools, as opposed to providing evidence on material costs such as enhanced cleaning and IT.

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- 64.8 The loss of income to larger schools which in some cases was a substantial amount, particularly for schools that had service level agreements with sporting organisations, was also acknowledged as a concerning impact of Covid-19.
- 64.9 Sarah Murphy, Trade Union representative, reported that as part of her casework she was representing staff who were facing redundancy or restructuring within their schools. She explained that this type of casework usually increased during the spring/summer time, so was unusually early this year. The Trade Union representative reported that she was also experiencing an increase in complex and serious casework relating to suspensions and capability procedures; and also an increase in emails from staff in schools regarding mental health concerns, particularly following the recent government announcements on the tightened restrictions. She explained that the most common concern being raised by staff was about providing blended learning and the use of IT in classrooms. She emphasised that the unusual conditions were having a massive impact on the workloads of teachers and support staff.
- 64.10 A member raised the point that as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic, there could be, over time, a rise in the staff turnover within school system, which may add additional pressure on school budgets.
- 64.11 A member raised the point that there were some staff members, predominately in special schools but potentially in mainstream schools also, who were parents of children who had profound and multiple learning difficulties, and consequently were currently shielding. It was often the case, that due to the medical elements of the care required, parents were unable to find appropriate childcare. As a result, those staff members had not been able to return to work. This was resulting in additional cost pressures to schools of using supply staff to cover staff absences.
- 64.12 Members of the Forum were strongly of the view that schools should not be penalised financially because of the additional Covid related costs of staying safely open during the pandemic. A further round of exceptional cost funding was therefore viewed as critical, and members acknowledged that the F40 group was widely recognised as an important component in conveying that message to the DfE. It was also acknowledged that if no further funding was received from the government then the Forum would be consulted on how schools exceptional costs could be managed locally.
- 64.13 The Forum noted that a report on the maintained schools' budgets would be received at the January 2021 Forum meeting. It was expected that due to the impact of Covid-19 the school system in January would be forecasting significantly more deficit than it would have done otherwise. Forum members were in support of the Local Authority taking a prudent approach when reviewing the budgets of maintained schools that were in deficit or at risk of going into deficit, to ask schools to separate out the costs incurred due to Covid-19, and those that related to the normal running costs. Further review of the budgets would then pause until there was a clearer national picture of how those exceptional Covid-19 costs would be addressed.

65. EARLY YEARS FUNDING

- 65.1 Sarah Hylton, Early Years Service Manager, presented the report which detailed the options for the use of the carried forward Early Years underspend, to support sufficiency following the increased risks on the Early Years provider market due to the impact of Covid-19.
- 65.2 The Early Years Service Manager explained that the fragility of the Early Years infrastructure had always presented a challenge to the sufficiency and quality of early education and childcare both locally and nationally, and that had now been further impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic.
- 65.3 It was reported that 260 responses had been received to a survey, circulated to all 702 Early Years providers, covering a number of areas to help gain an understanding of the impact of the pandemic. The information was collated to identify Early Years provision that reported cash flow and income/expenditure deficit as their primary concern. A through analysis was undertaken, together with further consultation with some providers to identify those settings at the highest risk of closure due to financial losses. In total, 36 settings had been identified as being at risk of closure with the potential loss of over 800 childcare places -12 of those settings would potentially cause significant sufficiency challenges if childcare places could not be maintained through some means.
- 65.4 The Early Years Service manager explained that the local authority had considered how best to support those settings most at risk of closure, being mindful that if one of those settings was to close then it would have a knock-on effect across the whole sector – those settings that were at low risk of closure, could become high risk. She outlined to the Forum the options for the use of the carried forward Early Years underspend to support sufficiency.
- 65.5 The Forum recognised the importance of children having the best possible start in life, and that being able to access good quality, local early years provision was critical, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and therefore maintaining a good cross section of Early Years provision in the county was crucial.
- 65.6 Amanda Horniman, Early Years representative, made reference to the Covid-19 emergency fund for schools, and pointed out that there was no similar funding available for Early Years providers to claim for loss of income and additional costs incurred due to Covid-19. She emphasised that for some Early Years providers with a high percentage of private fee paying children, the wider impact of the pandemic on employment patterns meant that parents were choosing to keep their children at home, meaning that settings were experiencing financial losses and struggling to stay open.
- 65.7 Having considered the options, Forum members were in support of the carried forward Early Years underspend being used to support sufficiency following the increased risks on the Early Years provider market due to the impact of Covid-19.

It was acknowledged however that further analysis of the business models and budgets, of each individual setting in financial difficulty, was needed to ensure that the settings most in need of help received it. Further analysis was also needed to ensure that the impact of Covid-19 was the primary reason for financial concerns and that the business would otherwise be viable and likely to be sustainable in the future if supported in the short term. The Early Years Service manager confirmed that additional business support would be commissioned to work with the Early Years providers to undertake that further analysis. She confirmed that this would be undertaken in conjunction with a wider review of childcare sufficiency in the county.

- 65.8 The Forum agreed that the Early Years carry forward balance of £1.169 million be used as follows:
- Allocate £400,000 to support sufficiency of childcare provision in areas where settings at risk of closure impact on childcare sufficiency.
 - Retain £200,000 of the underspend to provide contingency should any unforeseen costs arise.
 - Allocate £560,000 to the remaining providers based on the full academic year hours and adjust for deprivation factors (as last year).

66. HIGH NEEDS

- 66.1 Philip Haslett, Head of Education Strategy and Development presented a report, which provided an update on the financial forecast for the 2020/21 High Needs budget, and an update on the progress of the Joint Additional Need and High Needs Transformation Programme.
- 66.2 He reported that there had been a number of significant movements in the reporting period, this was primarily due to the transition work that took place in September and a subsequent reworking of the mainstream and special school forecasts.
- 66.3 The Head of Education Strategy and Development drew the Forum's attention to the key reasons for the movements, which were detailed in the report. He explained that overall, the forecast had moved closer to the original budget set in June. During the last period it was forecast a £306,700 underspend against budget. This period had seen that reduce to forecast underspend against budget of £173,700. He advised however that this should be treated with a degree of caution, as the special schools had been commissioned to capacity, and increases were now being seen in the independent special schools element of the High Needs Block, due to a number of complex, high cost, joint funded placements.
- 66.4 The Forum was informed that the key driver of the overspend continued to be the number of Education Health and Care Plans (EHCP) in the system, which had continued to rise as forecast. As at 1 October 2020 there were 4,185 active EHCPs, which was a rise of 103 since August 2020. There had also been an increase of 28% in the number of requests for EHCPs, in the most recent reporting period, (in comparison to the same period the previous year). He warned members that increases in this area would add more pressure to the High Needs budget.

- 66.5 A member questioned whether action was being taken by the local authority to improve on the timescales involved with the processing of an EHCP. She explained that in her personal experience there were significant delays from the point of a child needing an EHCP, to issuing, and at the stage of every annual review thereafter. In response, the Head of Education Strategy and Development explained that the emerging data related specifically to new requests for EHCPs, and that the number of requests being processed within the statutory timescales (taking no more than 20 weeks from the date of the request until the plan was issued), was generally high and above the levels of other comparator local authorities. It was noted that the local authority would be reviewing the data to determine whether the rise was a consequence of the impact of Covid-19, and if so, whether more efficient solutions could provide support to children struggling to transition back to school, as opposed to locking into long-term statutory plans.
- 66.6 The Forum noted that officers would also be looking to determine whether the impact of Covid-19 was a factor in the significant rise in the number of permanent exclusions. Since the start of the new academic year there had been 18 permanent exclusions (there were 11 permanent exclusions in the same period in 2019/20).
- 66.7 Cllr Richard Boyles, Cabinet Member for Children's Safeguarding and Early Years, queried whether the rise in the number of EHCP requests, could be attributed to a specific area or schools. In response, the Head of Education Strategy and Development explained that this was new emerging data that had yet to be fully reviewed; however, initial indications were that the new requests were spread out across the county. He confirmed that once the data had been reviewed he would circulate the results of the analysis to the Forum, and meet with the Cabinet Member.
ACTION: Head of Education Strategy and Development.
- 66.8 It was acknowledged that out of the total number of children and young people for whom the local authority maintained an EHCP, the number of males was strikingly higher in comparison to the number of females. Lyn Dance, Special School Headteacher representative, explained that she aware that this was a national trend and that comprehensive research had already been undertaken on the reasons behind that particular distribution. She agreed to signpost members to the relevant publications on the web.
ACTION: Lyn Dance/ Clerk to the Forum.
- 66.9 The Head of Education Strategy and Development provided an update on the three areas agreed at the September Forum meeting, where potential savings could be made within the High Needs budget. He reported that options on central in-year savings on the Advisory Teacher Service were being looked at and it was anticipated that the Forum would consider a report and recommendations on this at its meeting in June 2021. Officers would be meeting with the Gloucestershire Association of Special Schools Headteachers in late November to discuss the diseconomy of scale model, and the Forum would consider a report and recommendations at its meeting in January 2021. A Forum working group would be established to review options for the '1 in 40' model following some early modelling

work, and the Forum would then consider a report and recommendations on this at its meeting in June 2021.

- 66.10 The Forum received an update report on the completed and planned activity on each of the 6 projects in the Joint Additional Needs and High Needs Transformation Programme. The EHCP Spend Redesign project had completed its first key milestone and produced the proposed changes to the funding model for SEND. It was reported that the aim of the proposed approach was to simplify the provision of funding for children with SEND and provide access to support outside of the statutory EHCP process, which was focussed around the child's needs.
- 66.11 The Forum considered the common banding system which would operate across the mainstream and specialist provision. The Head of Education Strategy and Development presented a diagram which showed a comparison between the existing approach and the proposed approach for next year. It was noted that the proposed system was now out for engagement. A member emphasised the importance of the local authority ensuring that headteachers and colleagues were made aware of the consultation at what was now the crucial developmental stage. It was confirmed that officers would be consulting with the headteacher associations with a view to setting up groups to gather feedback, talk through the process and answer questions. It was noted that feedback was being sought particularly on the descriptors which were the essential component in ensuring that the banding system could operate progressively and effectively. It was noted that the next step in the process would then be the design of the provision map against those descriptors, and this was an area that the Forum's working group would also look at, before a report and recommendations were considered by the Forum at a future meeting.
- 66.12 In response to a question, the Head of Education and Strategy explained that whilst there was a rising level of need across the system, the local authority was not in position to afford any increase in High Needs expenditure by lowering the thresholds. Alternatively, the local authority was aiming to unlock the statutory process, so that additional funding and support could be accessed more efficiently for eligible children and young people outside of an EHCP. It was acknowledged that the quality and rigour involved in the assessment process for a MyPlan, MyPlan Plus and an EHCP, was critical to making sure that it was the right approach for each individual child or young person.

Chair

Meeting concluded at 3.48 pm