

GLOUCESTERSHIRE SCHOOLS FORUM

Minutes of a meeting held on Thursday 11 January 2024
in the Council Chamber - Shire Hall, Gloucester.

Present:

Helen Bond	- Gloucestershire Parent Carer Forum
Dominic Burke	- Secondary School Headteachers (Academy)
Karen Clinton	- Secondary School Headteachers (Maintained)
Stephen Dean	- Primary School Headteachers (Academy)
Mikey Ezewudo	- Primary School Governors (Maintained)
Justin Godding	- Primary School Headteachers (Maintained)
Emma Gundry	- Alternative Provision
Andrew Harris	- Community Representative
Chiquita Henson	- Secondary School Headteachers (Academy)
Amanda Horniman	- Early Years
Karen Lewis	- Primary School Headteachers (Maintained)
Becky Martin	- Special School Governors (Maintained)
Jon Millin	- Primary School Headteachers (Maintained)
Will Morgan	- Secondary School Headteachers (Academy)
Roz Nelson	- Early Years
Liz Oakey	- Special School Headteachers (Academy)
David Williams	- Diocese of Gloucester

Observers: Cllr Philip Robinson - Cabinet Member for Education, Skills and Bus Transport

Apologies: Matthew Bishop, Primary School Governors (Maintained)
David Kettleby, Post 16
Rhian Evans, Primary School Governors (Maintained)
Kate Hawkins, Special School Governors (Academy)
Sarah Murphy, Unions
Wendy Newby, Special 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

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

The minutes of the previous meeting held on the 22nd November 2023, were approved as a correct record.

4. GLOUCESTERSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL BUDGET CONSULTATION 2024/25

- 4.1 The Finance Business Partner gave an overview of the County Council budget proposals and provided details on the specific budget information relating to Children and Families. (For information: a copy of the presentation slides covering each agenda item has been uploaded to the Council's website.)
- 4.2 The Head of Education Strategy and Development pointed out that even though there was substantial pressure on various elements of the budget, a significant investment would be made in the Education Planning Service in regard to casework, to improve the timeliness of support and to enhance the local authority's ability to manage the rising number of Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) in the system.
- 4.3 He also pointed out that whilst the Council had commissioned external support (EDGE) to work with the Council to implement a service wide review of SEND transport due to the increasing cost pressures in the Home to School Transport budget, this would not involve making any changes to the policy or reducing access to transport. The review would be focussed on improving the efficiencies of multiple occupancy transport routes and moving away from solo transport.
- 4.4 The Forum noted the report.
- 4.5 The Forum was informed that the budget and the feedback from the consultation would be considered at the 31st January Cabinet meeting, and the recommended draft budget would be discussed and agreed at the Full Council meeting on the 21st February 2024.

5. DEDICATED SCHOOLS GRANT 2024/25

- 5.1 The Head of Education Strategy and Development presented the report on the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) for 2024/25.
- 5.2 He reported that the final census update for the 2024/25 DSG announced on 19 December 2023 had, compared to November reporting, increased the Schools Block allocation by £4.45M, High Needs Block by £409K and Central Services Block by £23k.
- 5.3 The 2024/25 DSG totalled £644.898M. This represented an increase in funding of £40.039M (6.6%) from the current 2023/24 DSG and Mainstream Schools Additional Grant total. Compared to 2023/24, the Schools Block had increased by 2.8%, High Needs 3.8%, Central Services 4.7% and Early Years 61.4% (this included funding for the expanded childcare offer for eligible children aged two and under).

- 5.4 The Head of Education Strategy and Development informed members that the breakdown on the budget for the Central School Services block allocation had not been provided as information on the local authority copyright licence fees, which were a significant cost, would usually have been announced in December, but this year the DfE were still in negotiations for new agreements with some of the copyright management organisations. He was slightly concerned that as negotiations were still on-going there could be an increase in costs. A budget breakdown for the proposed use of the £3.221M Central School Services block would therefore be presented to the Forum once the 2024/25 copyright fee for local authorities had been announced by the DfE.
- 5.5 The Head of Education Strategy and Development explained that at previous Forum meetings he had raised a concern that the final Schools block allocation may not enable the full delivery of the National Funding Formula (NFF). However, he was pleased to report that after accounting for the previously agreed growth fund of £0.931M, the funds allocated in the DSG Schools block settlement were enough to allow each formula factor rate, the minimum funding levels to be implemented 100% at the NFF level; and for the Minimum Funding Guarantee to be set at the same +0.5% level as the funding floor within the NFF.
- 5.6 This left a balance of £0.611M in the 2024/25 Schools block to be used, as previously agreed at the September 2023 Forum meeting, to support the continued funding of the targeted support High Needs model (currently 1 in 30).
- 5.7 The Head of Education Strategy and Development informed members that some local authorities were in the position of not being able to deliver their funding formula in full due to a shortfall in their 2024/25 Schools block funding.
- 5.8 Members were informed that it was not advisable to pass through the surplus in the Schools block to schools, through the funding formula; this was because it could not be distributed evenly amongst schools. Also, if the surplus was passed through into the formula it would then be locked in for the following year as part of the MFG calculations which protected schools from losing funding, meaning that potentially, depending on the Schools block allocation in 2025/26, the local authority could be locking-in funding that it could not afford. It was also pointed out that the local authority did not want to create a position in which it was operating outside of the NFF, when a move to the hard NFF was likely to take place within the next few years.
- 5.9 In response to a question from a member about whether the £6.011M surplus in the Schools block could be used in another budget area, the Head of Education Strategy and Development explained that it would be used to support the cost of 1 in 30 model in 2024/25. In the 2023/24 financial year, the cost of the model would be around £3.2M, and the 2023/24 surplus of £90k would be used to support that cost. He would ensure that when the Forum considered the targeted support funding model at the March Forum meeting, it was clear within the breakdown of the budget where the £6.0111M surplus would be used.

- 5.10 Having considered all of the information presented, the Forum:
- Recommended the Council agree the school funding formula for 2024/25, to be delivered in line with the National Funding Formula, as set out in Annex A to the report.
 - Agreed that the balance on the Schools block be used to support the continuation of the targeted support High Needs model (currently 1 in 30).

6. EARLY YEARS FUNDING

- 6.1 The Head of Early Years presented a report which set out the context in Gloucestershire, the proposed hourly rates for 2024/25 and provided options for how the percentage retained by the local authority could be best used. The report also provided an overview of the Early Years and childcare reforms announced in the Spring budget.
- 6.2 Members were informed that the DSG Early Years block funding was calculated using the numbers from the claims submitted in the January 2023 census for the existing offer multiplied by a nationally set hourly rate. The hourly rates for 2024/25 in Gloucestershire were: £5.47 for three- and four-year-olds; £7.60 for two-year-olds and from September 2024 £10.33 for under 2s. For the extended offer, the DfE had estimated what the take-up numbers would be, but these would be adjusted for the actual take-up on a termly basis. Gloucestershire's hourly rates were slightly lower than the national average, this was due to there being no local authority maintained nurseries in the county and therefore no requirement for qualified teachers within Gloucestershire's Early Years settings. Gloucestershire's business rates were also lower than the national average.
- 6.3 The Head of Early Years reported that locally 67.8% of pupils attained a good level of development compared to national 67.2%. Attainment gaps for children eligible for free school meals, children with SEND and children from minority communities had significantly reduced but remained higher than the England average.
- 6.4 The fragility of the Early Years infrastructure had been further impacted by the long-term effects of the Covid pandemic and the on-going cost of living crisis. Rising costs and the low hourly childcare rate have led to nurseries struggling to recruit and retain staff and to ensure long-term sustainability. Locally, there had been a significant increase in providers closing or reporting that they are at risk of closure.
- 6.5 The Head of Early Years explained that Gloucestershire's Childcare Sufficiency and Assessment (2023) had concluded that there was sufficient provision to meet the needs of children requiring childcare in most parts of the county, with most of the provision of good or outstanding quality. Two new settings would be opening - one in Dursley and one in Stroud, both areas had been identified as needing additional Early Years places. Gloucestershire's sufficiency would be further challenged following the implementation of the expansion of the funded childcare offer

commencing in April 2024. This was coming at a time when the sector was already struggling to provide for the children who were currently eligible.

- 6.6 The Forum was informed that there was a degree of frustration within the sector that the reforms were largely focussed on childcare to enable parents to return to employment, and less focussed on the value of high-quality early education. The challenge was trying to ensure that there was not only a sufficiency of places, but that the places all offered high-quality early education that benefitted children.
- 6.7 It was reported that the Government's ambition was that by 2026, all parents and carers of primary school-aged children who needed it would be able to access term time childcare in their local area from 8am-6pm. The local authority was responsible for ensuring that wraparound childcare was available to the parents who needed it. Over the next two years the local authority would be working with schools and the out of school providers sector to increase the number of these childcare places throughout the county. The local authority was currently mapping the expected supply and demand; as part of this work a wraparound childcare survey would shortly be sent to schools and parents to obtain a clearer picture of the expected take-up.
- 6.8 Members were informed that the Government was providing £289M of start-up funding, nationally, over two academic years to expand childcare provision. This would come in the form of: capacity funding for local authorities to increase service capacity; programme funding to deliver the objectives, including provider start-up funding; and capital funding.
- 6.9 The Head of Early Years explained that the local authority was permitted to retain up to 5% of its total Early Years DSG block and therefore local authorities must plan to pass through at least 95% of their funding from the government to Early Years providers. The use of the remaining (up to) 5% expenditure was to be used for delivering Early Years service support. The local authority had considered a number of options to retain between 3% and 5% of the funding, which would provide sufficient funding in the local authority's centrally retained pot to support the Early Years system and the sector, and importantly would also pass through an hourly rate to providers that was as high as possible.
- 6.10 Two options for the distribution of the pass-through rate were presented to the Forum (as outlined in the report). Option 1 and 2 included the same rate for inclusion funding and central services at circa 4%. The difference between option 1 and 2 related to the split between the basic and the deprivation rate.
- 6.11 One member questioned whether the arrangements for wraparound childcare in special schools were being considered differently, particularly in terms of the impact on home to school transport. In response, the Head of Early Years explained that local authorities had raised this issue with the DfE, and in response, the DfE had circulated information answering some of the key questions. It was clear from the DfE's response that unless there was a change to home to school transport policy there would be challenges. The local authority would be looking at this in greater

depth and would provide information and advice to schools and parents in due course.

- 6.12 One member pointed out that there could be a significant increase in High Needs spend if special schools were to provide wraparound childcare for their primary school-aged pupils, due to the specialist care needed for those children. In response, the Head of Early Years explained that officers were currently unaware of what the level of demand would be in special schools, but that they plan to explore this with schools and parents. Start-up and capital funding to increase capacity would be available over the next two years. The local authority, as part of the planning for the delivery of the expanded childcare offer would need to consider how best to use this funding. The local authority was, however, requesting that the DfE provide clarification on what would happen in future years, in terms of how it could be sustained.
- 6.13 The Head of Early Years clarified that parents would have to pay for the wraparound childcare. She anticipated that the only increase in uptake would be in relation to parents being able to work as a result of the expansion of the funded Early Years childcare, and then needing the wraparound childcare for primary school-aged children.
- 6.14 One member suggested that consideration should also be given to providing wraparound care for secondary school-aged children in special schools.
- 6.15 One member asked whether good quality Early Years provision was being made for children aged 9 months and above with additional needs. In response, the Head of Early Years reported that over the past few years there had been a greater focus on ensuring that there were sufficient places for children with SEND in the county's Early Years settings. An Early Years Specialist Provision Centre had recently opened and the local authority would continue to review whether more of this type of provision was needed. Officers would also be looking at how best to encourage more parents who were unable to find suitable provision for children with SEND, to make the local authority aware of this so that the local authority could be more responsive. She added that questions on Early Years provision for children with SEND would be included in the wraparound childcare survey to parents. In addition, as part of the preparation work for the annual Sufficiency Duty report, a survey had been sent to all parents who were registered, to ask them about their experience of Early Years provision for children with SEND.
- 6.16 The Forum agreed that the Early Years providers be consulted on the two options for the hourly rates set out in the report, and the majority decision be agreed and implemented.
- 6.17 The Forum agreed that the retained percentage be used as follows in 2024/25:

Strategic Lead for Early Years Team - £719,984
Children's Centres - £1,048,758
Sufficiency Pot - £250,000

Funding Officer Grade 5 - £32,114
Support Services - £294,006.

7. HIGH NEEDS

- 7.1 The Head of Education Strategy and Development presented a report which provided an update on the High Needs Budget for 2024/25, the High Needs financial forecast for 2023/24, and the current numbers of Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) and permanent exclusion rates.
- 7.2 Forum members noted the High Needs funding formula allocation of £96.810M for 2024/25.
- 7.3 The Head of Education Strategy and Development reported that overall, the 2024/25 High Needs Block of the DSG had been allocated an additional £3.578M (3.8%). For comparison purposes in 2023/24 the High Needs Block of the DSG was allocated an additional £8.782M (10.4%), in 2022/23 £9.957M (13.47%) and in 2021/22 £8.246M (12.4%). He pointed out that this clearly demonstrated there had been a drop-off in additional funding for High Needs which was surprising given the context around High Needs funding nationally.
- 7.4 He emphasised that given the on-going significant funding pressures in the High Needs block and the current budget deficit, the allocation for 2024/25 would be problematic. The Forum would receive details on the proposed High Needs 2024/25 budget at the March meeting; consideration would need to be given to the amount of inflationary increases to be made, for example to top-up funding for special schools. He made members aware that even a reasonable increase would likely absorb a large proportion of the additional 2024/25 High Needs funding.
- 7.5 The Head of Education Strategy and Development explained that the level of funding Gloucestershire received and the overall inequity of High Needs funding was a concern. He emphasised that the key issue with the High Needs funding formula was that the historic spend factor was still a significant element of the formula which was preventing Gloucestershire from receiving an equitable funding allocation.
- 7.6 He presented information which displayed how Gloucestershire compared to a broadly comparable local authority in terms of the population factor. It was clear that the historic spend factor and the funding floor allocation provided a significant increase to the funding the comparable local authority received. The widely held view was that a fully functioning High Needs formula should not need to operate using historic spend and protection factors. Until such time as the High Needs formula was reviewed and the impact of historic funding levels reduced, this inequity would remain in the system. He was hopeful that there would be a full review of the funding formula by government within the next 12-18 months.

- 7.7 It was reported that since November 2023, forecasts had increased expected spend in High Needs by £627k. Members were informed of the key changes. This meant that the local authority was currently forecasting to exceed the planned budget spend by £3.081M, which was £15.692M over the funding allocated through the High Needs block for 2023/24. This would increase the total DSG deficit to over £44M.
- 7.8 The Forum noted the current High Needs forecast expenditure of £108.924M for 2023/24.
- 7.9 The Head of Education Strategy and Development reported that the local authority, as at the 1st December 2023, was supporting 5,777 EHCPs, this was an increase of 464 from the 5,313 EHCPs that were supported in December 2022. The latest data from the EHCP Team showed that there were currently circa 500 plans going through the EHCP assessment process.
- 7.10 Members were informed that the rate of permanent exclusion had increased which had for the first time in a number of years, created pressure on places in Alternative Provision. Officers were exploring the reasons behind this spike. Prior to the pandemic exclusion numbers were reducing and significantly reduced during the pandemic. Since the pandemic there had been a period of stability, but in the last 6 months, there had started to be a steady increase particularly in primary exclusions for children with SEND. As part of the planning for the High Needs budget for 2024/25 the local authority would need to consider how the partnership and outreach work was to be secured and protected, whilst ensuring that the right number of places could be delivered for permanently excluded children. The Forum would consider recommendations on how this pressure would be addressed in the 2024/25 High Needs budget, at the March 2024 Forum meeting.
- 7.11 It was reported that 60% of primary school-aged children in Alternative Provision had an EHCP, either at the point of permanent exclusion or which they had obtained afterwards.
- 7.12 One member questioned whether there was any scope for the setting up of studio schools in Gloucestershire for pupils aged 14-18 years old. In response, the Head of Education Strategy and Development explained that the studio school model was linked to University Technical Colleges (UTCs), which delivered technical education and core curriculum subjects. Whilst UTCs could be a good option for children and young people who were at risk of permanent exclusion, many UTCs were struggling financially and it was clear that the model could never be financially sustainable in the long-term. Gloucestershire did not have the capacity nor the resources to invest in this type of school. He added that it was important that the local authority was clear on what the vocational offer was within its Alternative Provision Service.
- 7.13 The Forum received the latest SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan which was overseen by the SEND and Inclusion Local Area Partnership; and the SEND plan on a page, which had been recently developed by the Integrated Care Board. It was reported that the Improvement Plan had now been updated to

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include both the Delivering Better Value Programme and Change Programme and provided an update on progress against each of the workstreams. Officers were working to ensure that there was a strong degree of alignment between the various activities taking place.

- 7.14 The Head of Education Strategy and Development presented an overview of the DfE Change Programme roadmap which outlined a draft timeline for each of the reform areas. He explained that officers had been working with the DfE to test the reforms, provide feedback, and pilot some of the work. The Forum would receive further information on the progress of the Change Programme in due course.
- 7.15 One member questioned whether there was any indication that as part of the reforms limits would be placed on local authorities around the number of agreed EHCPs in the system. In response, the Head of Education Strategy and Development explained that at no stage within the DfE's Delivering Better Value Programme was there an intention to change the offer for children and young people. The focus was on identifying the best ways to achieve better value for money in the system whilst ensuring the children received the support needed. He added that it was clear that the need for EHCPs could be reduced if there was effective early intervention within Early Years and the primary school stage.
- 7.16 The Forum was informed that in terms of the local improvement plan and its impact for 2024/25, the key focus ahead of the March 2024 Schools Forum meeting would be to agree a funding model to support schools with disproportionately high levels of need. This was to replace the current 1 in 30 model. A working group session had been arranged to take place on the 22nd February 2024 to consider proposals for the new model. He emphasised that at this stage there were no plans to reduce the amount of funding going into this area. The focus would be on developing a more sustainable model. The working group would look at how the schools which are to receive the funding could be identified and how the funding would be allocated. A detailed briefing paper would be circulated ahead of the meeting setting out a range of the potential options for consideration by the Group.

8. F40

- 8.1 The Head of Education Strategy and Development gave an update on recent f40 Group activities. He reported that today, in the House of Commons, the f40 Group would be facilitating a debate on challenges within the SEND system. He was aware that the debate had received a huge amount of interest with 28 MPs due to speak. This was an important part of the work of the f40 Group in making sure there was a greater understanding within government of the issues around SEND.
- 8.2 On the 9th January 2024, the f40 Group had presented evidence to the All-Party Parliamentary Group for SEND and Disabilities, around the importance of investment in early identification and support for SEND. He presented a series of slides from the event and gave an overview of the f40 Group's core messages. He reported that:

- England was behind competitor nations on funding education.
- Too many education and service budgets were under pressure, impacting on the quality of early intervention and support for children and young people with SEND. Additional funding, resources, training and a coherent strategy needed to be in place to ensure intervention and support was provided at the earliest opportunity to reduce higher need later on.
- There had been a significant increase in spend in Early Years, nationally, over the past 20 years through the extension of free entitlement. However, whilst the extension was positive, the funding level remained too low. There needed to be less focus on expansion and more focus on high quality provision for those that needed it the most.
- Between 2010/11 and 2019/20 official education spending fell by over 15% in real terms. Since then, it had started to rise again but in 2022/23 remained 12% below the levels in 2010/11. The 2024/25 funding allocation was a backwards move again towards a real-term cuts situation. Further Investment in mainstream education was needed to strengthen the inclusion and universal offer.
- Ofsted research had shown that 80% of primary headteachers and 72% of secondary headteachers made changes to support provided to pupils with SEND due to financial pressure. Investment in mainstream education was needed to enable the delivery of a high-quality inclusive education and to reduce the numbers of children needing to access specialist provision.
- The f40 Group and other organisations believed that based on demand and inflation from 2015 - 2023, £4.6bn was needed for SEND funding over that period. As a consequence of the funding not keeping pace with the level of demand, it was expected that the national High Needs deficit would be at £3.6bn by March 2025. Around two thirds of local authorities were in DfE intervention programmes (Safety Valve and Delivering Better Value).
- Significant investment in High Needs funding was needed with a full review of the formula, and consideration of how early intervention funding could be ringfenced.
- Cuts and pressures to local and wider multi-agency services created barriers to early intervention.
- In conclusion, a coherent strategy was needed, which aligned with the funding policy, to deliver early intervention and support effectively.

8.3 The Head of Education Strategy and Development explained that following the event it was felt that the SEND issues were now becoming a higher priority for the Government. He anticipated that over the next 12-18 months there would be stronger national attention around education funding.

9. SCHOOLS FORUM WORKPLAN

9.1 The Head of Education Strategy and Development explained that an additional meeting had been arranged to take place on the 18th March 2024. Officers would look at whether a Forum meeting in March needed to be factored into the workplan long-term.

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9.2 Members noted the Forum's key priorities and Workplan for 2024.

10. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The Forum noted that the next meeting would take place on Monday 18th March 2024 at 2:00pm. The meeting would be held remotely.

Chairman

Meeting concluded at 3.45 pm

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