

Minutes of the Schools Forum

29 January 2021

-: Present :-

Stewart Biddles (Chairman), Primary Academy Head; **Lisa Finn (Vice-Chair)** Secondary Academy Rep; **Adam Morris**, Primary Maintained Head; **Ken Kies**, Primary Academy Head; **Tim Stephens**, Primary Academy Governor; **Alex Newton**, Secondary Maintained Head; **Steve Margetts**, Secondary Academy Head; **Clive Star**; Secondary Academy Rep; **Jim Piper**, Primary Academy Deputy Head; **Dan Hallam**, Post 16; **Mike Lock**, Special Schools Head; and **Jayne Jones**, Early Years Rep

-: Also in attendance :-

Rachael Williams, Assistant Director for Education, Learning and Skills; **Martin Phillips**, Head of Finance; **Rob Parr**, Principal Accountant; **Dan Hamer**, Head of Vulnerable Pupils; **Dorothy Hadleigh**, Head of SEN; **Nancy Meehan**, Director of Childrens Services; **Michael Freeman**, Clerk

1. **Apologies/Changes to Membership**

Apologies were received from Maurice Codd and Sally Timmins. After a review of the terms of office at the last meeting, there have been some changes to the membership. Daniean Rees and Lindsey Kings have both stood down from Forum. Members were pleased to welcome both Steve Margetts (Secondary Academy Head) and Alex Newton (Secondary Maintained Head) to their first meeting.

2. **Minutes of the last meeting**

Minutes of the last Schools Forum were agreed. Rachael Williams, assistant director for Education, Learning and Skills, gave updates to the following items:

From item 5 of the agenda, Special Schools funding, Rachael will be meeting with Steve Margetts to discuss the Torbay Promise Initiative shortly, and will provide an update at March Forum.

Item 6, Management plan update – Rachael has met with the Senior Leadership Team on 27th January, and was pleased to announce that £200k will be given to Schools Forum as part of a wider COVID grant. It is felt that this may offset some of the current pressures on the budget.

There has been further changes to the ESFA Higher Needs recovery template, which will now require the support of the HNRG (Higher Needs Recovery Group) to repopulate. Rachael has asked for some business support to help with this. Whilst this delay was frustrating, it was felt that this was for the right reasons.

3. Schools Forum Terms of Reference

In a change to the order of the agenda, The Forum next discussed the membership of Schools Forum. An updated Terms of Reference as agreed at the previous meeting was shared with Forum, and discussion centred on whether members representing schools in the same academy trusts would present a possible conflict. Members also asked that the ToR be updated to include one Secondary Governor seat from non-selective schools. A vote was held on the two proposed changes as follows:

To amend the Terms of Reference to state that no more than one representative from a single academy trust can join Schools Forum, unless there are no other nominations from that particular sector:

For: 12
Against: 0
Abstain: 0
Motion carried

To update the membership of the Secondary Sector to include one representative from selective schools:

For: 12
Against: 0
Abstain: 0
Motion carried

Members felt that these changes would lead to a fairer representation of schools, and requested that the Terms of Reference be updated.

Action – Clerk to update Terms of Reference.

4. Financial Report

Rachael shared with members an updated financial report. The deficit position has increased by £105k since November, leading to a forecast overspend of £2.60m. Pressures continue to be due to children moving into Torbay, and the additionality that these bespoke packages require. £2.2m of in pressures has led to a current cumulative overspend on the DSG budget of £3.778m

Early Years census returns are now in, and spring headcount data is now being processed. The DfE have now clarified that all children, including those not currently attending, are included in the headcount, which will not negatively impact on the funds that would have been received. It was pleasing to note that COVID discretionary grants are available to the Early Years sector. Whilst it was

recognised that this doesn't cover all funds that settings have lost throughout the pandemic, it will be of help to the sector.

The Higher Needs block continues to be an area of concern, anxiety around returning to school has led to some children requiring bespoke packages to be maintained. These are however being reviewed on a half termly basis. Two further independent special school places have now been put in place, leading to an unanticipated £118k increase on the budget.

Members noted the findings of the report and agree to continue the work of the Higher Needs Recovery Group to enact the financial recovery plan.

5. DSG Allocation 2021-22

As requested by Schools Forum, Rob Parr, Principal Accountant, provided a breakdown of the DSG budget position and a comparison of the allocation with the previous year. The budget for 2021/22 stands at £119m, an increase of approx. £8.3m from 2020/21. It is anticipated that in year pressures will lead to a deficit position of £2.6m on the budget.

Members discussed the need for a robust and achievable recovery plan moving forward, and the reasons for the ESFA rejecting the recovery plan submitted by the Forum last year. It was recognised that such a deficit is not unique to Torbay, with 109 LAs reporting an overspend this year, and Rachael explained that Torbay is looking at models from other LAs further ahead in the process for guidance.

Members expressed frustrations with the situation, and feel that the problem will not be resolved without government help. Independent auditors brought in to address the deficit have only been able to identify savings of £250k. Whilst the members felt that the Forum has got better at identifying pressures, any steps taken only tries to keep the overspend from increasing as slowly as possible, rather than address the initial deficit.

Members thanked officers for the update.

6. SEND Covid-19 update

The Forum heard from Dorothy Hadleigh, Head of Service for SEN, who provided an update on the pressure the SEN department are facing in the COVID pandemic.

Dorothy was pleased to report that the team has been proactive in seeking to end expensive out of area placements by moving children back into Torbay, however large numbers of families continue to move into the area. Whilst packages are being continued in these circumstances, these placements are under constant review.

It was noted that exemptions to EHCP (Education, Health and Care Plans) timescales are no longer in place, unlike the first national lockdown. Current

legislation is focused only on timescales, and more KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) are being introduced to monitor the Annual Review process.

There has been an increase in schools asking for top ups to existing element 3 funding. Whilst the SEN team are obligated to pay for provision even if remote learning is in place, the SEN monitoring team are working with schools to find a solution.

The team has seen greater pressure on bespoke packages, as children are not coping in the current situation. These packages are under close scrutiny, with caseworkers assessing the impact they are having on the child every 5 weeks.

Analysis is now complete on the 19/20 pathway plans. The Post 16 team are in the process of writing the report, this will be shared with the HNRG and Schools forum when available. 20/21 pathway plans are now underway. The team are unable to cease plans at present, as COVID has led to a lack of employment opportunities, however where plans are being maintained staff are being asked to evidence value for money.

Members noted the findings of the report and gave thanks to Dorothy and her team for their ongoing work.

7. Items for next meeting

- Update to Terms of Reference
- Update on Torbay Promise Initiative
- Early Years update

8. Future meeting dates

- Thursday 11th March, 09:00
- Thursday 6th May, 09:00
- Thursday 17th June, 09:00

- Thursday 14th October, 09:00
- Thursday 25th November, 09:00