

Minutes of the Schools Forum

14 October 2021

-: Present :-

Stewart Biddles (Chairman), Primary Academy Head; **Lisa Finn (Vice-Chair)** Secondary Academy Rep; **Tim Stephens**, Primary Academy Governor; **Alex Newton**, Secondary Maintained Head; **Clive Star**; Secondary Academy Rep; **Jim Piper**, Primary Academy Deputy Head; **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**, Chief Accountant; **Rob Parr**, Principal Accountant; **Dan Hamer**, Head of Vulnerable Pupils; **Dorothy Hadleigh**, Head of SEN; **Michael Freeman**, Clerk

1. Apologies/Changes to Membership

Apologies were received from Sally Timmins, Steven Hulme, Ken Kies, Adam Morris, Steve Margetts and Nancy Meehan.

Rachael informed the meeting that nominations have been sought for a Primary Governor to replace Maurice Codd. Our outstanding Post 16 representative is being appointed by South Devon College; it is expected they will be in post ready for Novembers meeting.

2. Minutes of the last meeting

Members agreed that the minutes of the last meeting held 17th June were a true and accurate reflection of the meeting.

Rachael explained that it was not possible to meet in September, however a workshop has now been set up on the 15th November to discuss ongoing developments. The legal information on recharging will be posted with the minutes, whilst the Element 3 banding due to be on today's agenda will now be looked at in Novembers meeting.

3. Financial Report

Rachael presented to members the latest Financial Report. There remains a significant overspend on DSG funded activities, currently forecasted at £2.992m.

Cumulative overspend now stands at £5.826m, with a forecast outturn position of £8.818m by the end of 2021/22.

The two areas of significant volatility remain the Higher Needs and the Early Years blocks, with the biggest change being the number of EHCP in-year adjustments which has led to an overspend of £516k. It was explained that as the Early Years census is currently taking place, and update on this block will be reported to members at November's meeting.

It was asked if there was any update on the planned SEN review. Rachael explained that there has been no comment on this from the DfE, it is not anticipated that the review will be launched in the near future.

Members noted the findings of the financial report and agreed to continue to work with the LA and the Higher Needs Recovery Group to reduce budget spend.

4. Feedback on ESFA meeting

Local Authority officers have recently met with colleagues from the ESFA, to discuss Torbay's current deficit position. Discussion was based around two main issues, namely how can the local area get to a balanced budget position, and what can be done to reduce the current deficit.

The ESFA gave the examples of both Plymouth and Lincolnshire councils, who have both successfully managed to reduce their spend. Rachael will contact colleagues from these authorities for their suggestions. Nancy has also recently visited Croydon Council, who have managed to reduce their budget. Rachael will ask Nancy to provide feedback from this visit at the next School Forum.

The number of requests for EHCPs in Torbay continues to rise. The ESFA have asked why this is, and queried whether schools are being inclusive enough. Members acknowledged that we are seeing a large number of requests for special school places, and agreed that this does need to be looked at. Members also felt that we need to look at how schools are using money delegated for SEN support.

It was noted that both the examples given by the ESFA, Plymouth and Lincolnshire councils, are run as Community Interest Companies, and have the backing of school groups. Members asked whether or not this could be an option for Torbay. It was felt that further conversations with school colleagues around inclusivity was needed before exploring this. Torbay currently refuses 26% of all RSAs (Requests for Statutory Assessments), which could be seen by the DfE as further evidence of schools not being inclusive. It was noted however, that requests come in from all sectors, not just schools, and that parental requests are being refused for similar reasons.

Members thanked officers for their feedback, and requested that detailed updates on EHCP rates, rather than just the total figures, could be presented at future meetings.

Action – officers to produce more detailed analysis of EHCP figures ready for the next meeting.

5. Feedback on Overview and Scrutiny Presentation

Rachael gave feedback to members from the Overview & Scrutiny meeting held on the 13th October, which was attended on behalf of Schools Forum by Rachael Williams and Martin Phillips. The presentation that was presented to councillors at the meeting was shared with the forum, outlining the steps taken to reduce the deficit position, and the reasons for the current position.

Rachael felt that the presentation was well received and helped to make councillors aware of the current issues. Further clarity on the future of the Statutory Override process is being sought, as members expressed concerns that the planned removal of this in 2023 would impact on schools budgets.

It was noted that the minutes and papers of the Overview & Scrutiny meeting are available on the Torbay Council website.

6. Future Budget Indications

Members were shown a comparison of the 21/22 and 22/23 DSG funding allocations. There is an increase of 2.62% on the Schools block and an increase of 9.59% on the Higher Needs block. Minimum per pupil funding has increased to £4,265 for Primary pupils and £5,525 for Secondary pupils. Early years allocations for 22/23 have not been released yet.

If Schools Forum proceeds with the virement of 0.5% from the Schools Block to the Higher Needs block, this figure would be £459k. Rob Parr informed members that any disapplication for movements above 0.5% would need to be submitted to the Secretary of State before the 19th November 2021. Members asked whether we were in a position to agree to the virement today, however it was agreed that colleagues outside of Forum should be given the opportunity to discuss first.

As the next Schools Forum takes place after the deadline for disapplication, members agreed to hold an extraordinary meeting on the 15th November to discuss this in further detail.

Action – Clerk to set up extraordinary meeting and invite members.

7. Covid Impact Report

Members were shown a report detailing the impact that the COVID pandemic has had on children and young people, and how the Covid Outbreak Management Funding allocated to schools has been used to support them.

A total of 10 Primary and 5 Secondary impact reports were returned to the LA, demonstrating a wide range of interventions that schools have been able to put in place. Whilst many children have struggled with returning to school after lockdown, it was positive to note that attendance had largely increased, and that many schools were now able to implement some 1:1 work with those children struggling the most.

Members were pleased to be able to evidence the positive impact the funding has had on children's wellbeing and engagement with learning, and thanked Rachael for this information.

8. Items for next meeting

- De-Delegation
- Deficit recovery plan update
- EHC figures
- Information from other Local Authorities

9. Future meeting dates

- Thursday 25th November, 09:00
- Thursday 20th January, 09:00
- Thursday 10th March, 09:00
- Thursday 5th May, 09:00
- Thursday 16th June, 09:00