

## Minutes of the Schools Forum

Thursday 7 May 2020

-: Present :-

**Stewart Biddles (Chairman)**, Primary Academy Head; **Lisa Finn (Vice-Chair)** Secondary Academy Rep; **Adam Morris**, Primary Maintained Head; **Ken Kies**, Primary Academy Head; **Maurice Codd**, Primary Maintained Governor; **Tim Stephens**, Primary Academy Governor; **Lindsey Kings**, Secondary Academy Deputy Head; **Daneian Rees**, Secondary Academy Rep; **Julie Chubb**, Secondary Academy Representative (replacing Clive Star); **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; **Dorothy Hadleigh**, Head of SEN; **Rob Parr**, Principal Accountant; **Dan Hamer**, Head of Vulnerable Pupils; **Michael Freeman**, Clerk

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### 1. Apologies/Changes to Membership

Apologies were received from Sally Timmins and Clive Star. The Forum welcomed Julie Chubb as Clive's replacement.

### 2. Minutes of the last meeting

Minutes of the previous meeting, held 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2020, were approved with one amendment.

Under Item 5, ESFA / School Minister Visit, the second bullet point has been amended to say that Torbay has received additional Higher Needs funding, rather than Special Schools funding as originally recorded.

Rachael Williams, Assistant Director of Education, Learning and Skills, informed the Forum that work on changes to the current 6 day provision model in managing exclusions, as voted by members under item 6 of the minutes, was ongoing.

### 3. Financial Report

Rachael presented members with an updated financial report. At present, DSG funded activities is currently overspent by £1.122m. Demand led pressures in both the Early Years and Higher Needs blocks were felt to be the areas of most concern.

Spring census data has now been collated and the Early Years budget currently indicates an underspend of £365k. This is largely down children claiming fewer hours than funded through the Early Years census. However, members were asked to note that officers' estimate there will be a negative adjustment in the summer of 2020, calculated to be approx. £220k. Further details will be provided to Forum once the DfE has made this adjustment, but it was felt that the current underspend should be kept in contingency to mitigate against this.

Significant pressure on the Higher Needs block remains, due to the large number of children in Torbay with Education, Health and Care Plans and also the large number of children moving into the area. The LA has also seen an increase in the number of tribunals because of the demand for Special School places. Members were pleased to note that the work of the LA on allocations of funds above £6k were beginning to have an impact, and that additional contingency funds in this year's budget have not been fully used.

However, officers explained that all calculations on these budgets were made prior to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, and in light of this the current financial position may be subject to change. Rachael has held talks with the DfE and the Regional Schools Commissioner and have asked them to reconsider the deficit budget, however local authorities are still being asked to take action to reduce spend. Members felt it disappointing that there is a lack of flexibility given the current situation.

The Forum noted the findings of the financial report and agree to continue working with the LA to enact the financial recovery plan.

Dan Hamer, Head of Vulnerable Pupils, then spoke to members on recoupmnt, in particular queries that schools have been raising with regards to the validity of the recharging process. Dan outlined a proposal to charge schools in half term, rather than at the end of term, making it easier for schools to budget for. Members agreed to trial this approach, Dan will now send out reminders to schools prior to invoices being sent out.

#### **4. Covid-19 - Impact**

Rachael gave an update on the current COVID-19 pandemic, and the work the local authority is undertaking on managing this.

Increased demand is expected on all budgets, with the Higher Needs block expected to see the greatest impact, as more transitional support will be required, as well as additional requests for element three top ups. Concerns were raised of the risks of family breakdown, domestic violence and the impact that lockdown is having on SEN Children. The LA is working closely with MTS to cope with this demand, modelling is ongoing.

Rachael has now joined a joint incident management team along with colleagues from Devon, Torbay and Plymouth. The Chief Executive for Torbay has also been meeting with Kevin Foster MP to discuss support.

The Forum asked whether the LA has seen less requests for top-up due to schools being closed. Dorothy Hadleigh, Head of SEN, stated that although there have been less requests through the Annual Review process, new plans are still being issued as normal. New SEND legislation has been issued last week, requiring the LA to ensure they are making reasonable endeavours to ensure the needs of every child with an EHCP are being met. Dorothy warned colleagues that they are expecting an increase in complaints as a result of this legislation.

Members then shared their concerns about the Edenred voucher system, and that the system is at breaking point. Officers reassured members that Torbay is aware of the issues, and have complained to Kevin Foster MP. Torbay Food alliance is also aware of the current problems, however it was noted that there is no pressure on food banks at the moment despite this.

Rachael explained that 565 laptops are now on order for Social Care children. Delivery of these is expected the first week of June. There has been some problems in obtaining 4G routers, further guidance is being sought. It is anticipated that the LA will not be asking for the laptops back, therefore agreements around guarantees, breakages etc. will be the responsibility of each school.

Members noted the updates, and were in agreement that further clarity on the COVID crisis is needed. Rachael assured colleagues that the LA is continuing to seek a response from the ESFA.

## **5. ESFA and Higher Needs Recovery**

The planned visit from the ESFA in March was cancelled due to the COVID-19 crisis. A video conference has now been scheduled for Thursday 14<sup>th</sup> May. The Local Authority are keen for this to be seen as an opportunity to talk about the wider budgetary issues, in particular processes for DSG recovery, rather than just COVID-19.

Work on the Higher Needs recovery plan continues, with Panels now meeting remotely. Members were informed that there has been an increase in SEN tribunals, and were asked to note that the current situation has made it difficult for the LA to put its views across.

Officers are continuing their work on Element 3, however banded review proposals have stalled at present due to staffing issues. It was disappointing to note that after visiting Leeds Council the LA did not feel that the model employed there offered a viable solution to the Higher Needs issues. The visit did however offer both authorities the opportunity to share exemplars of good practice.

With regard to commissioning, Officers have been working to reduce costs on Post 16 provision by block booking provider sin advance, Members were pleased to note that there has been no increase in costs on bespoke packages or residential placements at present.

The forum gave thanks to the LA and partners for their ongoing work.

**6. Items for next meeting**

- Update on the financial impact of COVID-19

Please note that the following items have been deferred from this meeting given the current pandemic, and will be discussed at a future meeting when appropriate:

- Audit Action Plan update
- Verbal update on the work of the P16 team
- Verbal update on the managing exclusions trial.

**7. Future meeting dates**

Proposed meeting dates are as follows:

- Thursday 11<sup>th</sup> June 2020
- Thursday 8<sup>th</sup> October 2020
- Thursday 19<sup>th</sup> November 2020
- Thursday 14<sup>th</sup> January 2021