

# WIRRAL SCHOOLS FORUM

Tuesday, 23 January 2024

Present:

A Whitely (Chair)

Members

K Kennedy  
Ralph  
Loftus  
Trigg  
L Prescott

H Barker  
Ball  
Jones  
Farrelly  
K Williams

In attendance:

Councillor C Cooke  
S White  
J Backhouse  
A Brown  
A Varughese

S Ashley  
Y Allen  
M Jackson  
A Snow

## 54 WELCOME AND APOLOGIES

The Chair Welcomed everyone to the meeting.

Apologies had been received from:

- Jo Proctor – Catholic Diocese
- Shaun Allen – Primary Governer
- Kate Ball – Primary Headteacher
- Chris Mervyn - Primary Headteacher
- Mark Bellamy – Academy Representative
- Sue Powell-Wilde - Councillor
- Kathy Hodson - Councillor

## 55 MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 21 NOVEMBER 2023

The Chair noted that his name had been misspelled on page one of the minutes and that his first initial had not been included.

With those amendments, it was:

**Resolved – that the minutes of the meeting held on 21 November 2023 be approved as an accurate record.**

## 56 SENSORY SERVICE UPDATE

James Backhouse, Assistant Director for Education presented a report which updated members on the Sensory Service. The report noted that Wirral had 530 children and young people with a significant vision/hearing impairment (0-19

years) who accessed the Sensory Service. They were all assessed using the National Eligibility Criteria for intervention and must have had a clinically diagnosed impairment. This Criteria can be found on the SEND Local Offer. The aim of the Service was to deliver early intervention from birth and then to support pupils more heavily in Key Stage 1 and 2. This was to develop independence skills in Key Stage 3 and 4 in preparation for adulthood. The report broke down the number of children and young people with hearing, visual and multi-sensory impairments, Resource Provision, targeted intervention, staffing comparisons from 2015 to 2023, and gave referral data.

The Chair queried if there was a finite capacity for the service and was informed that space was available at Greenleas Primary School and that the authority regularly met with the headteacher regarding the Resource Provision there. James Backhouse noted that a better approach to provision will be going in to the local offer as well and will keep schools informed.

**Resolved – That the report be noted.**

57 **ENERGY PRICE UPDATE REPORT JANUARY 2024**

Andrew Snow, Energy Conservation Engineer, presented his report which gave a brief update on the procurement of electricity and natural gas on behalf of schools and suggested budget changes for the 2024/25 financial year. The extreme market volatility of the past two years had reduced and the council was seeing a reduction in prices but the future remained unpredictable. The content of the report was only applicable to accounts that were part of the Crown Commercial Service framework agreement. The Council held no information for schools which made their own energy supply arrangements and could not comment on their arrangements. It noted that the information provided was based on market intelligence covering half of the contracted purchasing period which ran from 1 October 2023 to 31 March 2024. Observations on future prices should therefore be interpreted as indicative.

Members discussed the need for caution regarding the forecasting of energy costs, noting that assuming too much of a reduction could have an adverse effect on budgets.

Officers noted work being carried out look into replacing gas boilers at local authority schools with air or ground source heat-pumps. Further work to look at capital allocation of funding for boiler refurbishments being used towards heat-pumps would be reported to a future meeting. It was also noted that any newly built schools would be carbon neutral.

**Resolved – That the report be noted.**

58 **SCHOOLS FORUM SCHOOL BALANCES AND PROJECTIONS JANUARY 2024**

Sue Ashley, Traded Services Manager, presented a report which described the current and projected financial position for schools together with action that was being taken. The position remained challenging due to increased costs during 2023-24, even with additional funding provided for 2023-24 financial year.

The report noted that there were ongoing cost pressures in schools arising from pay awards, utilities, other inflationary pressures, changes in pupil numbers and the continuing effects of COVID. There had been additional funding through the Mainstream Additional Grant for 2023-24, which would be added to the formula budget for 2024-25 (Additional funding for Special schools) and Teachers Pay Additional Grant from September 2023 to cover the additional cost of Teachers Pay awards. There would be further increases in DSG for 2024-25 financial year but at a much lower rate than 2023-24.

The report continued to explain that the deficit position was increasing for all phases but remained particularly difficult for Special Schools. Those schools with small credit carry forward balances in March 24 were most likely to move into a deficit by March 2025. Figures at period were more cautious, so although an increase in deficit budgets was likely, some schools would be able to make savings to stay in credit.

Members discussed the difficulties schools faced to remain on budget and noted that they should not do nothing when they are aware that they are struggling with their budgets. They queried what the cut off was for schools to go into a deficit budget for those with an agreed licence budget. They were informed that it would be as soon as they went into deficit and that the amount would depend on the school and the size of their budget.

The Chair noted that schools were working hard to remain within their budgets.

**Resolved – That:**

- 1. The report be noted.**
- 2. The school budgets continue to be monitored.**

59 **BUDGET MONITORING 2023-24 QUARTER 3**

Asako Brown, Finance Manager, presented a report that provided an overview of the anticipated variations for the current year 2023-24 schools budget. The report noted that the overall the schools budget was forecast to overspend by £5.214m which was mainly due to pressure in the High Needs Block. This reflected a slight increase in the overspend from the position of £4.978m reported at the September 2023 meeting. The 2022-23 financial year closed with a Dedicated Schools Grant reserve cumulative deficit position of £4.763m. The current forecast outturn position meant that the year-end addition to reserve balance would be increased to £5.214m thus delivering a cumulative £9.977m deficit position at the end of 2023-24.

Members noted that the report showed a challenging set of figures for schools. Officers explained that one of the key increases was the increased number of Education, Health and Care Plans which had increased by approximately 23%

over the previous year. They went on to explain that Wirral was seeing slightly higher increases than the national picture, however, Wirral's cost base was slightly better controlled and the increase in cost was likely to be a little lower than the national picture.

**Resolved – That the report and forecast financial position of the Schools Budget for 2023-24 be noted.**

## 60 **SCHOOLS BUDGET 2024-25**

Asako Brown, Finance Manager, introduced a report which outlined the Schools Budget for 2024-25 so that Schools Forum could give their views on the proposals. The report described the financial changes to be considered by Schools Forum and Policy and Resources Committee. The proposed budget totalled £378.55m for Early Years, Maintained Schools, Academies, Colleges, and Providers for the financial year 2024-25.

The budget for 2024-25 was compiled from the base budget for 2023-24, approved by Council on 27th February 2023 and updated with the issues identified in the report. The total 2024-25 projected budget (Dedicated Schools Grant and council funded) was £378.55m.

The Chair noted that this was the first time that Members had been asked to approve a deficit budget and sought assurances that it was legal to do so. Officers assured him that it was. They noted that other authorities had done this before and that they felt it was better to set a realistic budget that acknowledged the deficit rather than setting an unrealistic budget that wouldn't be achieved in reality. They noted that Wirral's Section 151 officer was happy with this approach.

The Chair noted the officers' comments and stated that he had concerns about the amount of deficit they would be agreeing. He noted that schools would have to do everything in their powers to mitigate it as they were setting themselves up for a burden that they would have to deal with for a number of years. He noted that he wished for his personal concerns regarding this budget to be recorded and other Members agreed. He also noted that the Forum was only just quorate, with the minimum number of members in attendance to make it so.

**Resolved (6:0:1) – That:**

**1. In accordance with ESFA guidelines, the reduced Contributions to Combined Budgets of £0.429m in 2024-25 for:**

- **School Improvement**
- **Local Safeguarding Children's Board**
- **School Intervention**
- **PFI Support**
- **PFI CLC**
- **Looked after Children Education Services**

- **Business Rates, and**
- **Governors Forum**

**Be approved; and**

- 2. The Schools Budget and views of the Schools Forum be referred to the budget meeting of the Policy and Resources Committee on 13<sup>th</sup> February 2024.**

## 61 **NOTIONAL SEN BUDGET 2024-25**

Asako Brown, Finance Manager, introduced a report that provided an update on the latest Department for Education (DfE) guidance on the operation of the notional SEN budget within local school funding formulae, and sought the views of Schools Forum on the local authority's approach for calculating the Notional SEN Budget. The report noted that it was a requirement to identify a Notional SEN budget for maintained schools and academies as set out in regulation 11(3) of the School and Early Years Finance (England) Regulations 2023. Additional guidance was published in July 2023 by the DfE in 'The Notional SEN Budget for Mainstream Schools: Operational Guide 2024 to 2025'.

It noted that the notional SEN budget was not a budget that was separate from a school's overall budget. It was an identified amount within a maintained school's delegated budget share or an academy's general annual grant. It was intended as a guide for a school's spending decisions and was neither a target nor a constraint on a school's duty to use its 'best endeavours' to secure special provision for its pupils with SEN. The notional SEN budget was not intended to provide the high needs cost threshold set by the regulations (currently £6,000 per pupil per annum) for every pupil with SEN, as most such pupils' support would cost less than that. Nor was the notional SEN budget intended to provide a specific amount per pupil for those with lower additional support costs, although the local authority may make reasonable assumptions about what those costs might be for the purpose.

**Resolved (9:0) – That:**

- 1. The report be noted.**
- 2. Schools Forum's views were sought on the proposal of calculation methodology for the notional SEN budget for 2024-2025 and the consultation for the future years.**

## 62 **DE-DELEGATION OF SCHOOL BUDGETS**

Yaqub Allen, Principal Information Officer for Schools, introduced a report which sought a decision by Forum representatives of maintained schools on the possible de-delegation of a number of services to schools, where there was a preference to continue a central service. De-delegation was proposed for the following budgets:

- Contingency
- Special Staff Costs
- School Library Service
- Insurance
- Behaviour Support
- School Improvement
- Former Education Services Grant General Duties
- The School Improvement and Monitoring and Brokerage Grant

**Resolved – That:**

1. **The Primary Forum Representatives agreed to de-delegate each of the following budgets for the financial year 2024-25: -**
  - a. **Contingency (2:0)**
  - b. **Special Staff Costs, including TU Facilities Time (2:0)**
  - c. **School Library Service (2:0)**
  - d. **Insurance (2:0)**
  - e. **School Improvement (2:0)**
  - f. **Behaviour support (2:0)**
2. **The Primary Forum Representatives agreed a contribution to former Education Services Grant costs of £305,968. (2:0)**
3. **The Secondary Forum Representatives agreed to de-delegate each of the following budgets for the financial year 2024-25: -**
  - a. **Contingency (1:0)**
  - b. **Special Staff Costs, including TU Facilities Time (1:0)**
  - c. **School Improvement (1:0)**
  - d. **Behaviour support (1:0)**
4. **The Secondary Forum Representatives agreed a contribution to former Education Services Grant costs of £49,765. (1:0)**
5. **The Special School Forum Representatives agreed a contribution to former Education Services Grant costs of £102,505. (1:0)**
6. **As per DfE guidance, the Primary and Secondary Forum Representatives agreed a contribution to replace SIMBG costs of £248,800. (3:0)**
7. **As per DfE guidance, the Special School Forum representatives agreed a contribution to replace SIMBG costs of £24,400. (1:0)**

Anju Varaghese, Finance Business Partner, presented a report describing the current representation of the Forum and membership changes. The report noted that there were 7 vacancies.

Members discussed the need to fill the vacant positions and noted that there was currently a very small secondary school representation. Officers noted that work was being done to encourage more membership.

**Resolved – that the report be noted.**

64 **SCHOOLS FORUM WORK PLAN JANUARY 2024**

**Resolved – that the Work Plan be noted.**

65 **ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

The Chair noted that an additional meeting had been scheduled for Tuesday 19<sup>th</sup> March 2024, to be held at Ganney's Meadows Nursery School again, and that an invite would be sent to members shortly.