

WIRRAL SCHOOLS FORUM

Tuesday, 9 July 2024

<u>Present:</u>	Chair	A. Whiteley	
	Members	M. Loftus P. Wareing M. Farrelly H. Barker C. Mervyn J. Proctor S. Allen	K. Kennedy S. Ralph L. Prescott J. Whisker E. Ball L. Jones K. Williams
<u>In attendance:</u>		M. Jackson E. Hartley J. Backhouse A. Brown	A. Varughese S. Harper S. Ashley J. Hudson

10 WELCOME AND APOLOGIES

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

Apologies had been received from:

- Kate Ball
- Julie Murry
- Mark Bellamy

11 MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 19 MARCH 2024

Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting held on 19 March 2024 be approved as an accurate record.

12 HOME TUITION UPDATE

The School Improvement – Teacher introduced a report which noted that the Home and Continuing Education Service (HCES) was an Alternative Provision for health needs. HCES delivered part of Wirral's statutory responsibility to provide a suitable education for children who could not attend school because of their medical needs. It noted that the great majority of pupils suffered with poor mental rather than physical health and many had both. Many of the children had Emotionally Based School Avoidance. The report noted that the service was an intervention and not a destination.

The Service was being managed on an interim basis until the end of academic year 2025. There was a planned co-location with Joseph Paxton Centre from January 2025 followed by an amalgamation with JPC from September 2025.

There were proposed financial changes to charges for pupils who had an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) to be discussed at this time.

Members asked whether children were likely to be within a school setting before coming to the Home and Continuing Education Service and were informed that they would, and would stay enrolled at their current school while at HCES.

Members queried who would pick up the costs if a child with an EHCP went to HCES and what support their might be. The Assistant Director of Education stated that if the child were move school, the funding would follow the child.

Resolved (12:1:2) – That

- 1. From September 2024 it be agreed that the 12 weeks initial period be disapplied when a child has an EHCP, and for any additional funding to be transferred to the Home and Continuing Education Service during the period the child attends; and**
- 2. the Home and Continuing Education Service be agreed to continue to provide a short-term intervention for children who have medical needs which prevent them attending their own school and require the support the service offers.**

13 EARLY YEARS WORKING GROUP UPDATE

The Early Years Operation Manager introduced the report which updated the Schools Forum on recent Early Years performance and service updates.

The report gave an overview of discussions with the Early Years Sub-Group, take up of funding entitlements, childcare sufficiency, business support and performance, Early Years special educational needs and disabilities, and quality, training and practice improvement.

The Early Years Operation Manager noted that there were no current concerns in terms of sufficiency but was expecting issues by 2025.

The Chair noted the difficulties the council faced in recruiting to childcare roles and asked what steps were being taken to prepare for September 2025.

The Early Years Operation Manager responded that there was work being undertaken with the Job Centre and other services as well as a lot of work

with the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority in preparation for September 2025.

The Chair noted that the number of providers for childcare were falling. The Early Years Operation Manager stated that the authority currently had enough childcare providers but that the number was dropping. They stated that a contributing factor was that a low number of students were taking up childcare training.

The Assistant Director Education noted that there was a need for work on opportunities for post 16 students in childcare with joint working with partners within the sector and noted that some schools had provision.

The Chair noted that this was something that would need to come back to the Schools Forum to look over options for September 2025.

Resolved – That the report be noted.

14 DELIVERING BETTER VALUE UPDATE (VERBAL)

The Assistant Director Education delivered a verbal update on Delivering Better Value.

15 2023-24 PROVISIONAL OUTTURN REPORT

The Finance Manager (People) presented the report of the Director for Children, Families and Education. The report outlined the year end position for the 2023-24 Schools Budget. At the time of the meeting, the accounts were provisional and subject to audit.

The report noted that overall the schools budget had overspent by £8.226m which had an adverse movement of £3.012m since the position reported at the January 24 meeting of the Forum.

At the beginning of 2023-24 the cumulative Dedicated Schools Grant reserve opened with a deficit balance of £4.763m. The in-year deficit of £8.226m meant that the total deficit balance to be carried forward into 2024-25 was £12.989m. The schools block and the de-delegated budget had been adjusted to reflect the changes due to 6 schools academy conversions in December 2023 and January 2024. The early years budget had been adjusted to the expected revised budget based on the January 24 census. The Dedicated Schools Grant Income had been reduced by the corresponding amount.

The Chair clarified with the Finance Manager (People) that special staff costs highest overspend was on maternity leave and that the cost would be included in the deficit balance.

Members of the Forum expressed their concern at the amount of overspend on Higher Needs and whether this would have an adverse effect on the main school block. The Assistant Director Education noted that there was a statutory override in place that allows the Council to treat the deficit as separate but would not be able to do this after 2025-26. He noted that Delivering Better Value was helping to ease the growing spend, he did not want to have to go down the route of going into Safety Valve, with the Department for Education giving clear restrictions on spending.

The Assistant Director Education noted that the Higher Needs block was continuing to grow and the costs for this were higher than inflation. He noted that if the Council could control independent non-maintained schools, then the costs could be made more manageable.

He considered that the best way to mitigate the rising costs was through embedding better ways of working and developing and making improvements as well as trying to get as much information on Early Years factors as possible, stating that the more the service knew, the more it could do earlier.

Members reiterated their concern regarding the current overspend and queried how big a gap there was between the people writing reports and the people spending the money.

Officers noted that the main cause of the increase was due to a rise in Education Health Care Plans.

Resolved – That

- 1. The report and the financial position of the Schools Budget for 2023-24 be noted, subject to confirmation of the final grant allocation for 2023-24; and**
- 2. The Dedicated Schools Grant for 2023-24 be agreed to include a cumulative surplus of £214,662 of ring-fenced Early Years Disability Access Fund and £17,674 carried forward 2023-24 Falling Rolls and Growth Fund.**

16 2024-25 SCHOOLS BUDGET UPDATE REPORT

The Finance Manager (People) presented the report of the Director for Children, Families and Education. The report provided an update on the Schools Budget for 2024-25 for changes that had been made since it was reported to Schools Forum on 16th January 2024.

The report noted that the Schools Budget for 2024-25 covered Early Years, Maintained Schools, Academies, colleges, and providers and reflected the following views and formula proposals agreed at the January 2024 meeting:

- A Minimum Funding Guarantee of 0.5% for Wirral mainstream schools
- The Contributions to Combined Budgets reduced by 20% to £428,708.
- The deficit of High Needs funding of £10,916,561 was transferred to the DSG reserve.
- Headroom in schools funding after applying the National Funding Formula (NFF) to be transferred to a falling rolls/growth fund.

The Schools Budget for 2024-25 was agreed by the Policy and Resources Committee at its meeting on 13th February 2024 and by Council at its meeting of 26th February 2024.

Members queried the full extent of the deficit and whether it would be even higher than initially predicted.

The Assistant Director Education noted that the increased deficit of £23m was now considered more accurate due to Delivering Better Value feedback.

The Chair stated that the Forum were gravely concerned about the forecast deficit and the uncertainty schools are facing. He highlighted that the forum had not been happy about setting a deficit budget without a recovery plan.

Members added that the ability to spend more did not equate to there being more to spend.

Resolved – That the report be noted.

17 **SCHOOL BALANCES UPDATE**

The Traded Services Manager presented the report of the Director of Children, Families and Education. The report advised the Forum of the level of school balances as at 31st March 2024, the decrease in balances and actions required for schools with a deficit budget.

The report noted that School balances at 31st March 2024 had reduced to £10.5m. This was a reduction of £2.4m after the 2022-23 balance had been adjusted for 9 academy conversions during the 2023-24 financial year.

The report explained that there were 17 schools that had ended the financial year with a deficit balance (compared to 14 in 2022-23, adjusting for academy conversions during the year). The overall value of the deficits had increased by £1.1m to £3.6m.

The report noted that the following action had been taken to date:

There had already been meetings with some schools and governors to review and consider the financial position going forward, with more planned.

Where schools were reviewing staffing levels this was, in a number of cases, leading to reduction of fixed term staff or even the consideration of redundancies.

LMS and HR continued to work with schools to balance budgets and plan any reduction in staff numbers or hours.

LMS Bursars through the Financial Support SLA were working with Headteachers and governors to provide more detailed projections, particularly where schools have falling rolls.

The Chair queried what progress had been made regarding the Clawback Mechanism. The Traded Service Manager noted that schools had been contacted, asking for their plans.

The Chair noted that everyone in the school sector was working really hard to balance their budgets and were running under significant financial pressure. They were doing their best to balance budgets that had not increased for some time. He noted it was a challenging environment for schools and this good news was a reflection of the hard work from schools.

Members asked how Clawback has worked. The Assistant Director Education stated that schools that had excess balances had been identified and were required to provide a plan. It would be maintained school forum reps to review the plans and decide what to do with the funding to be clawed back.

Members asked a question on shared parental leave and the increased cost to schools when teachers on maternity leave returned to work during school holidays.

The Assistant Director Education stated that the costs would need to be modelled and the amount per pupil costed. Members requested an additional report to come to Forum in January to look into what the scenario has cost across maintained schools to work out cost increase per pupil.

Resolved – That

- 1. The Forum noted the report;**
- 2. Schools' balances be agreed to continue to be monitored; and**
- 3. That a report exploring the potential additional cost per pupil in the scenario that a teacher on shared maternity leave returns to work during a school holiday be agreed to be brought before the Forum in January 2025.**

18 **SCHOOLS FORUM MEMBERSHIP**

The Senior Accountant - People presented a report describing the current representation of the Forum and membership changes. The report noted that there were 6 vacancies.

Resolved – that the report be noted.

19 **WORKPLAN**

The Chair noted that there was a pressing need to elect a new president on the Higher Needs Working Group. The Assistant Director Education requested that this be someone that had previously attended the working group.

The Chair noted that he would be happy to continue in the role of Chair of the Higher Needs Working Group for a short period until someone was available.

Resolved – That the workplan be noted.

20 **ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

The Chair noted that this would be his last meeting at the Forum and confirmed that Moira Loftus would be taking the role of Chair at the next meeting in September. He thanked Members and officers for their support over the years he had been Chair.