

WIRRAL SCHOOLS FORUM

Wednesday 8 October 2008

Present:

Schools

Group

A Baird	M Bevan
I Cubbin	B Cummings
S Dainty	I Davies-Foo
N Dymont	K Frost
S Hyden	N Greathead
R Longster	M Kophamel
E Renshaw	S Wall
J Weise	G Zsapka

Non-school

Group

S Davies	P Hogan
J Kenny	D MacDonald
G Peters	N Reilly

Apologies

A Hardy	J Levenson
P Sheridan	V MacDonald
Councillors	S Clarke, F Doyle

1 WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

The Clerk asked Steve Dainty, as the out-going Chair, to take the chair for the first two agenda items.

The Forum welcomed members attending their first meeting: Margaret Bevan and Irene Davies-Foo, primary governor representatives, and Denise McDonald and Simon Davies, representing PVI early years providers.

Apologies were as set out above.

Chris Batman, Head of Branch (Planning and Resources), pointed out to all members of the Forum that they were representatives of the groups from which they had been appointed and that they should consider how best to keep their constituents informed.

2 ELECTION OF CHAIR

Resolved – That Richard Longster be appointed Chair for the year 2008/09.

Richard Longster took the chair and, on behalf of the Forum, thanked Steve Dainty for his hard work as Chair since September 2006.

3 ELECTION OF VICE-CHAIR

Resolved – That Steve Dainty be appointed Vice-Chair for the year 2008/09.

4 MINUTES

The minutes of the previous meeting, held on 11 June 2008, were accepted as a correct record.

5 MATTERS ARISING

There were no matters arising out of the minutes.

6 THE OBSERVATORY SCHOOL

Further to minute 9 (11 June 2008), Peter Edmondson, Head of Participation and Inclusion, sought approval for a proposal to increase the admission number at the Observatory School from 40 to 50 and to consider the feasibility of investing in earlier intervention. He explained that the successful operation of the School had resulted in the reduction in the number of SEBD day placements; however, there was continuing pressure for the placing of pupils with SEBD statements. The Observatory School already had 43 pupils on roll (and Kilgarth had 51, one over its admission number).

While longer-term changes would be necessary to prevent increasing admissions to SEBD schools, in the shorter term additional places were required, hence the current proposal. Based on current trends, that requirement was likely to be repeated in future years and therefore it was also proposed that consideration be given to additional financial investment in order to provide an earlier level intervention and preventative work.

Resolved – That

(1) the Forum agrees to

(a) consult schools on the proposal to increase the funded places at the Observatory School by 10 with effect from September 2009;

(b) consider at a future meeting proposals, from the working group, for further investment of resources that will assist schools through early intervention and preventative work;

(c) consider at a future meeting, funding arrangements for the Pupil Referral Unit.

(2) the Director submit a full breakdown of special needs provision, including out-of-borough placements, to a future meeting, together with a progress report on the operation of resource bases.

7 SPECIAL EDUCATION NEEDS WORKING GROUP - FEEDBACK

This item was covered in minute 6, above.

8 **TRADED SERVICES WORKING GROUP - FEEDBACK**

Chris Batman reported on deliberations by the Trading Services Working Group. He explained that services to schools were provided by either the local authority or third parties. The authority also supported schools in relation to procurement, for example by organising an annual trade fair that brought together purchasers and suppliers. Also, a group of headteachers had been formed to oversee each service and to ensure that providers were kept informed of schools' developing needs. Currently there were some 12 such groups, and although they operated at varying levels of involvement there was a large commitment overall in terms of headteachers' time.

The working group had been examining best practice in other authorities: in Blackpool, for example, one group of headteachers covered all services and was required to give its seal of approval before arrangements were implemented. The working group felt that that was a good idea in principle. Mr Batman also pointed out that there were different expiry dates for current contracts, some of which were due to end on 31 March 2009, and it had therefore been suggested that they be extended for one year, to 31 March 2010, to allow more time to develop a standards approach.

Ken Frost queried why the proposed new services group should consist only of headteachers and suggested that governors might also contribute to the process.

Resolved – That the proposals emerging from the working group be supported and the group be asked to consider the question of governors' involvement.

9 **NEW SCHOOL LUNCH GRANT**

David Armstrong, Strategic Service Manager (Assets and Finance), reported that the Wirral School Food Reference Group had made a recommendation in relation to the distribution of the new School Lunch Grant among schools. Wirral's allocation for 2008/09 would be £544,690. The group had considered three options – based on the number of pupils on roll, the number receiving free school meals or an equal share for each school. The group had concluded that an equal share was the fairest way of allocating the funding, as a result of which each service provider would receive £4,065 for each school to which they provided those services, with the money to be used for continued development. He accepted that that might appear to be over-generous to smaller kitchens, but it was necessary to ensure their viability.

Ken Frost asked, if the money was being paid direct to the service providers, whether schools would be able to see the difference. He was advised that providers had an obligation to spend the money appropriately. Steve Dainty, who had served on the group, added that there would be a duty on providers to demonstrate exactly where improvements had been made.

Neville Reilly queried whether, in the case of the PFI provider covering nine secondary schools, a sum of approximately £36,000 might be lost amidst rising food costs and a reduction in take-up. David Armstrong clarified the position of the PFI provider (Scholarest): it had other schools as clients in addition to the PFI schools).

Resolved (Simon Davies and Steve Hyden abstaining) - **That the formula for the distribution of the new School Lunch Grant for the three years 2008 – 2011, namely, an equal sum per school to be paid to the service providers, be endorsed.**

10 **EARLY YEARS FORMULA UPDATE**

Moira Curran stated that, now that the Forum had Early Years representatives, the working group ought to be in position to commence operation. Some analysis of costs had already been undertaken, with an hourly rate for each sector proposed as a basis for comparison for future funding. A date for the first meeting would be fixed in the near future. A series of regional meetings was also being held on the issue, and a pilot scheme was to be operated in Rochdale MBC.

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

11 **FINANCIAL ISSUES**

The Director of Children's Services submitted a brief paper that would form the basis of consultation on a number of financial issues affecting school budgets:

- (i) arrangements for pupils with special educational needs;
- (ii) arrangements for the use of WASP and home tuition;
- (iii) adjustments between schools in the calculation of insurance premiums;
- (iv) arrangements for the allocation of Central Government grants, including a School Development Grant and funding for 16 to 18 -year-olds;
- (v) buy-back arrangements for free school meals.

Resolved – **That the current and future areas for consultation on financial issues be noted.**

12 **ARRANGEMENTS FOR SCHOOL BALANCES**

Chris Batman reported on the issue of school balances. He explained that six schools had had deductions in respect of excess balances at 31 March 2007. With regard to the position at 31 March 2008, twenty schools had balances in excess of the permitted 5% or 8% thresholds, totalling £1.4m. Of that sum, £743,000 had been identified as being required to contribute to capital schemes, £464,000 to allow for falling rolls and £107,000 for ICT replacement. That left approximately £117,000 in respect of four schools that had submitted plans to spend their surplus balances outside of those areas. However, discussions would continue before any final decision was made on the removal of any balances.

Mr Batman suggested that it would be helpful to remove the element of judgement from the process, in favour of a formulaic approach. He submitted an extract from a scheme currently operated by Lancashire County Council (and reported to its schools forum). The main principle of the scheme was that deductions were made on a gradual basis, over three years. He suggested that the formula be reported to all schools for comment. He also emphasised that any sums removed from individual schools' budgets should remain in the overall schools budget and be redistributed.

Neil Dymont asked whether the situation might be complicated in relation to foundation schools. Chris Batman thought not. In answer to Ken Frost's query, David Armstrong emphasised that it would not be possible for schools to reserve funding for capital projects unless those projects had been included in the Capital Programme or the Asset Management Plan, as an agreed priority, in which case it was likely that the scheme would also be dependent on funding from other sources.

The Forum voted separately on each recommendation within the report.

Resolved (Margaret Bevan and Simon Davies abstaining) – That

(1) the balances deducted to date be noted;

(2) no action be taken on excess balances from 31 March 2008 until the figures have been finalised;

(3) the scheme operated by Lancashire County Council be used as a basis for consulting with schools on a revision of the current arrangements.

13 **DATES FOR FUTURE MEETINGS**

Moira Curran pointed out that, since the Forum had already agreed many issues on the basis of a three-year budget (2008-2011), it was likely that fewer meetings would be required.

Resolved – That the following dates be agreed for meetings for the next year (all Wednesdays at 6.00pm):

21 January 2009

24 June 2009

30 September 2009 (provisional).