

WIRRAL SCHOOLS FORUM

Tuesday, 13 June 2023

Present:

Adrian Whiteley
(Chair)

Schools Group:

Shaun Allen
Lisa Ayling
Geraldine Fraser
Emma Johnson
Kathryn Kennedy
Jon Lawrenson
Moirra Loftus
John McDonald
Julie Merry
Chris Mervyn
Sue Ralph
Paula Waring

Non-Schools
Group:

Joanne Proctor
Gillian Harris
Julie Hudson

In Attendance:

Sue Ashley
James Backhouse
Asako Brown
Cllr Christopher Carubia
Cllr Chris Cooke
Kate Frost
Sarah Harper
Anju Varughese
Simone White

13 **WELCOME AND APOLOGIES**

The Chair introduced the meeting and welcomed members and attendees. Apologies had been received from Mark Bellamy and Simon Goodwin. The Chair set out the protocol for the meeting and expected conduct for virtual meetings.

14 **MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 17 JANUARY 2023**

It was noted that Emma Johnson and Jon Lawrenson attendance were not included in the minutes.

It was agreed that Agenda item 5 - Energy Update Wirral, would be revisited in Autumn due to the volatility of the market and the significance it has towards school budget setting.

Officers noted that the figures in recommendations 4 and 5 of minute item 9 were recorded incorrectly and be amended to the following:

4. The Secondary Forum Representatives agree a contribution to former Education Services Grant costs of £62,304.
5. The Special School Forum Representatives agree a contribution to former Education Services Grant costs of £90,488.

With the above amendments being made,

Resolved - That the minutes of the meeting of the Schools Forum held on 17 January 2023 be agreed as an accurate record.

15 **MATTERS ARISING**

No matters were raised.

16 **LACES AND LAC PUPIL PREMIUM**

Trish Lewis, Virtual Schools Head, provided the forum with an update for the Wirral Virtual School's LACES and LAC Pupil Premium for the financial year 2023/2024. A number of funding streams that support the offer for young people that the service utilised were outlined.

James Backhouse, Assistant Director of Children, Family and Education, noted that any overspend that may have occurred in the academic year would be met with via the Council's educational reserves rather than from DSG. Whilst the overspend was predicted for the current academic year, members were informed that it was imperative is that support for young people that are looked after was prioritised. Factors behind the expected overspend included the recovery from the pandemic and challenges in the school system surrounding. It was noted, however, it was noted that there would be constant refinement to the service so that it would get back into its budget envelope.

Simone White, Director of Children, Family and Education, stated that the number of Wirral's children in care was decreasing over time and was now in line with the national average.

Resolved – That the report be noted.

17 HOME TUITION UPDATE

The Service was being managed on an interim basis until the end of academic year 2024. There was a planned co-location with the Joseph Paxton Centre from Autumn Term 2023 followed by an amalgamation with JPC from September 2024.

Prior to the amalgamation, the School's Library Service would be required to move out of the building. The Assistant Director for Education informed Forum that updates would be provided on a new location for the service once finalised.

There were no financial changes to be discussed at this time.

Resolved – That the report be noted.

18 EARLY YEARS WORKING GROUP UPDATE

Sarah Harper updated the Forum with an overview of Early Years for children in Wirral. The overview included the support that is available at each stage, imminent changes from government legislation and current data available. A number of changes in the support that parents received for childcare in the coming years were discussed, including:

- From April 2023 two-year olds with working parents would be eligible for 15 hours free childcare.
- From September 2024 wrap around support in school would begin and nine-month-old children with working parents would be eligible for 15 hours free childcare.
- From September 2025 nine-month-old children with working parents would be eligible for 30 hours free childcare.
- From September 2026 all schools would be expected to offer wrap around childcare.

It was noted that the service was still awaiting guidance from the Department For Education on how changes would be delivered. The Forum were informed that the team was undertaking a review around the sufficiency in the summer term into the autumn term.

The Forum recognised the challenges that will be faced when provided this offer due to recruitment issues causing limited staff which will in turn put a cap on the number of children that will be able to access this service as there won't be enough staff to deliver the offer.

Resolved – That the report be noted.

19 HIGH NEEDS WORKING GROUP UPDATE (VERBAL UPDATE)

James Backhouse informed the Forum that there had been an overspend in DSG (Dedicated Schools Grant) of 4.7 million which was attributed mostly to the High Needs Block due to an increase in demand. An example of the increased demands for EHCPS (Educational, Health and Care Plan) and more complex needs was provided. It was noted that a DSG deep dive review was being undertaken which would take approximately 6 months to complete.

The review would be undertaken in 3 parts:

1. An initial examination of the data and finance.
2. Exploration of available options with regard to resources and fitting within the budget into our budget envelope.
3. Developing a programme and plan around delivery within the High Needs Block in relation to what is needed for Wirral's young people.

Whilst it was noted that the review would use significant resources, members were informed it is necessary to make the correct budget decision and to meet the needs of young people.

The Assistant Director outlined that the authority is in trench 3, whilst other Local Authorities had completed reviews earlier whilst in trench 1 and 2, meaning that the authority could learn from good practice models that had gone before.

The Forum expressed concern that the process would take 6 months to complete, which would be after the next Schools Forum meeting on the 26th September, and the impact this would have on budget setting for the forthcoming financial year.

It was proposed to the Forum that a working group could be created where they would be provided with more regular updates, and that the working group could include stakeholders outside of the Forum membership.

Resolved – That the update be noted.

20 **WIRRAL SCHOOLS FORUM MEMBERSHIP**

Anju Varughese provided an update on the membership of the Schools Forum. An overview of the current membership by group was outlined. It was noted that there remained 2 academy vacancies, one being temporarily filled by Lisa Ayling, and a 16-19 representative vacancy. The Forum was informed that the maintained school membership has reduced to 8 and that the secondary school membership has increased to 2.

The Forum had gained 3 new members since the last Schools Forum on 17th of January 2023, these members are Jon Lawrence, Paula Waring and Emma Johnson.

Adrian Whiteley, Chair, highlighted that there was an outstanding vacancy for a Vice Chair. Additionally, a joint training session for new members and a refresher session for current members was suggested to take place directly before the next Schools Forum meeting on the 26th September 2023.

Resolved – That

1- The report be noted.

2 - The membership split between primary, secondary and academy group be monitored closely as schools continue to convert to academy.

21 2023-24 BUDGET UPDATE REPORT

Asako Brown, Senior Finance Business Partner, updated the Forum on the school budget which had been agreed at both Council and Policy and Resources committee earlier in the year.

It is to be noted that there is an error in the report in the agenda pack, section 2.2 was corrected to the following:

- **2.2 DSG Reserve**

The 2023-24 budget reflects an in-year deficit of £213,286 to be added to the High Needs deficit. The actual deficit brought forward at 31 March 2023 is £4,762,638 and this means that the DSG deficit reserve will be increased and around £4.97m at the end of 2023-24.

Resolved – That the report be noted.

22 2022-23 OUTTURN REPORT

Asako Brown introduced a report that outlined the year end position for the 2022-23 Schools Budget. She informed that at this time, the accounts were provisional and subject to audit. Overall, the school's budget had overspent by £3.073m which was an improvement of £0.192m since the position reported at the November 22 meeting of the Forum. At the beginning of 2022-23 the cumulative DSG reserve opened with a deficit balance of £1.690m. As a result of the in-year deficit of £3.073m, the total deficit balance to be carried forward into 2022-23 was £4.763m.

Resolved – That

1. That the report be noted.

2. That schools' balances continue to be monitored.

23 SCHOOL BALANCES UPDATE

Sue Ashley, Traded Services Manager, outlined a report that advised the Forum of overall school balances as of the 31st March 2023 and the actions required for schools with a deficit budget.

Projections from the Period 9 review in February indicated that the school balances would reduce significantly over the next 2 years.

It was noted that the position for the next 2 years would be clearer after the budget setting process which was currently underway. Monitoring budgets had been made more difficult with inflation, utility costs and pay awards being finalised at the end of the financial year.

The forum were informed that the Local Authority would continue to work with schools to support difficult budgets through a list of actions that were followed through to ensure schools got support when working through deficit budgets. The Local Authority was continuing to work with schools that had licensing deficit plans and notices of concern to get the schools back into their balance. There were options whereby the DFE could offer additional support, this process is called SRMA (School Resource Management Advisors), which involved a deep dive into the finances of a school to provide a report outlining options to assist getting schools back within their budget envelope.

A single model approach to manage all Wirral school's budgets was suggested whereby a set of assumptions would be available for all Wirral schools to access, regardless of their academy or maintained status. Adrian Whiteley, Chair, suggested that if all schools used the same model, some training could be provided to assist budget monitoring. This idea will be explored further in the Autumn term.

Simone White, Director of Childrens, Families & Education suggested undertaking a piece of work for the Forum to look at so that they can better understand the position around schools with surplus and schools with a deficit balance, and what options that they have to ensure that schools are using money in the most effective way.

Resolved – That the report be noted.

24 **WORKPLAN**

Members were provided with an overview of the Wirral School Forum's workplan for the next meetings.

Resolved – That the workplan be noted.

25 **ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

Future Meetings

The Chair proposed that the next meeting of the Schools Forum would meet in person. After a consensus was reached, it was resolved that the clerk

would make provisional arrangements for the next meeting to be held at Birkenhead Town Hall, with an agreed start time of 5pm. It was additionally agreed that a training/refresher session would be held before the meeting at 4:30pm.