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WIRRAL SCHOOLS FORUM

Tuesday, 19 March 2024

Present:

A Whiteley (Chair)

Members

K. Kennedy	S. Ralph
L. Prescott	N. Prance
P. Wareing	H. Barker
S. Allen	M. Farrelly
M. Loftus	C. Mervyn
K. Ball	E. Ball
M. Bellamy	S. Goodwin
K. Williams (in attendance from Item 7)	

In attendance:

Councillor S. Powell-	A. Brown
Wilde	A. Varughese
S. White	S. Harper
J. Backhouse	M. Jackson

1 WELCOME AND APOLOGIES

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

Apologies had been received from:

- Joanne Proctor – Catholic Diocese
- Julie Merry – Primary Governor

2 MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 23 JANUARY 2024

Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting held on 23 January 2024 be approved as an accurate record.

3 EARLY YEARS FUNDING RATES AND CONSULTATION OUTCOME

The Early Years Operations Manager presented a report which gave an update on discussions at a recent Early Years Working Group, held on 1st March 2024. The report covered the Financial Incentive Scheme, which the Wirral was provided funding of £210,000 from Central Government as part of a randomised control trial. The amount had been calculated to include payments to the practitioner, national insurance and tax contributions and

funding for the local authority to deliver the scheme and equated to approximately 135 candidates receiving the payment.

The report gave an update on the Working Families Entitlement Expansion, noting that from September 2025 all eligible working families with a child aged 9 months + could receive up to 30 hours childcare provision. This would be a phased approach with eligible families with a two-year-old receiving 15 hours from April 2024 and eligible families with a child aged 9months + receiving 15 hours from September 2024. Both age groups would receive 15 hours from September 2025.

The report went on to give an update on Wrap Around provision, explaining that from September 2026 the government expected that every school would have an offer of wrap around childcare provision between 8am and 6pm term time only, either delivered by the school or an alternative provider. The Department for Education had provided capacity funding for local authorities to deliver this plan and programme funding to support the creation and expansion of provision.

Members discussed how affordable wrap around care would be for parents in future and were assured that work was being undertaken to ensure it remained affordable. They raised a potential issue for larger primary schools if a significant number of parents took up the wrap around care offer, as those schools could be expected to provide this care for 500+ pupils.

Members noted that recruitment for wrap around care was likely to be difficult as there was already a recruitment crisis in the sector.

Members queried whether providers were required to have a secure email system and were informed that many providers did not.

Members discussed when the best time would be to monitor the roll-out of the scheme, the Chair and the Assistant Director for Education agreed that November 2024 would be the most useful meeting of the forum to bring a report to.

Resolved – That the report be noted.

4 DELIVERING BETTER VALUE UPDATE AND HIGH NEEDS FUNDING ARRANGEMENT REVIEW PROPOSAL

The Assistant Director for Education present the report which updated the Forum on the Delivering Better Value (DBV) in SEND programme and notified the Forum that an application had been made with the Department for Education in December 2023 for the DBV grant and Wirral Council had been notified in February 2024 that the application was successful in securing the £1 million grant.

The report noted that the DBV Programme's main objective had been to identify local and national opportunities to improve the outcomes for children and young people with SEND. The programme had designed its support through two key approaches:

1. Short term support: To identify sustainable changes in each Local Authority that can drive high-quality outcomes for children and young people with SEND, and to support Wirral in building an evidence-based grant application to assist the implementation of those changes.
2. Informing Long Term Reform: Build an objective evidence base across a third of the sector, which could be used to:
 - Inform future policy and drive legislative and funding changes
 - Build a national playbook and share best practice
 - Inform future national programmes of similar scale and intent

The local area commenced the DBV programme in June 2023 with colleagues from across the partnership working to compile all the relevant data sets that were required to capture a clear picture in relation to the challenges faced in the high needs block. In addition, deep dives and root cause analysis took place to understand the areas of focus that could be identified.

Wirral completed the DBV programme alongside 54 other local authorities currently facing challenges in their high needs block costs.

Members discussed funding differences between special and mainstream schools and the high number of pupils in special schools in Wirral. They felt that more pupils needed to be brought into mainstream schools and provided the care they needed there. Officers noted that work was underway to address these issues with the graduated approach and significant work on resource provision.

Members clarified that the DBV programme would be more process led than allowing those that shouted the loudest to receive priority provision.

Members noted that within mainstream schools it was teaching assistants that worked with SEND children and there was a risk of losing them.

Resolved – That

- 1. The report be noted; and**
- 2. Schools Forum receives regular reports as the DBV programme progresses and a schools forum member support the DBV in SEND board that will be established be agreed; and**

- 3. A review of the high needs funding model currently in place during the summer term and report is brought back to forum for the September meeting be agreed (by unanimous vote).**

5 SPECIAL SCHOOLS PLACES UPDATE

The Assistant Director for Education presented the report which noted that over the last two academic years several special schools had supported the local area by agreeing to expansion, this was due to the increased number of young people with an EHCP and needing specialist provision.

During the academic years, 2022/2023 and 2023/2024 the following schools had admitted additional pupils above the agreed capacity numbers – Elleray Park School, Meadowside School, Stanley School, Foxfield School, Hayfield School, Claremount School, Orrets Meadow School and The Observatory School.

The report noted that Wirral's maintained special school system was reaching saturation point. Of the 8 schools outlined in the report, 6 of them were reaching saturation point with no further expansion available. Additional provision for young people with an EHCP would be needed to be delivered by significant expansion of resourced provision in the mainstream system.

In order to meet the needs of the increased demand in pupils requiring an EHCP, the special school system had supported the Wirral local area demand and this needed to be reflected in the admission number so the school could access all appropriate funding.

Members discussed the potential growth of provision and were informed that the Council did not yet know the higher needs capital allocation. They noted that the goal was not to grow provision within special schools any further but to move to mainstream provision.

Resolved – That

- 1. The report be noted; and**
- 2. (by unanimous agreement) The Forum supported the increased admission number for the special schools outlined in the report.**

6 DSG MANAGEMENT PLAN - EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Finance Manager presented the report which gave an update to the Forum on the actions the were being undertaken to develop Wirral's Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) Management Plan.

The report noted that the DSG: conditions of grant 2023 to 2024 required that any local authority with an overall deficit on its DSG account at the end of the 2022 to 2023 financial year, or whose DSG surplus had substantially reduced during the year, must be able to present a plan to the Department for Education (DfE) for managing their future DSG spend.

As reported at June 23 Schools Forum meeting, the overall overspend of DSG at the end of the financial year 2022-23 was £3.073m with the cumulative deficit position of £4.763m. To comply with the DSG conditions of grant, the DSG management plan needs to be submitted to the DfE.

The report noted that the Forum was also aware that Wirral had taken part in the Delivering Better Value (DBV) programme. The programme had been established by DfE for 55 local authorities to address the overspend on the High Needs Block. The programme included forecasting future spend, and then identifying a small number of high impact projects. The DfE considered grant applications of up to £1m for one year of transformation funding. A condition of the grant is to submit a DSG management plan to the DfE with support from the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy. Wirral submitted a grant application in December 2023, and it had been confirmed that Wirral had been successful in the grant application for £1m.

The report concluded that Wirral officers would continue to develop the Management Plan and would report back to the Forum.

The Assistant Director for Education noted that he intended to bring a further update to the Forum at its next meeting in June 2024.

The Director for Children, Families and Education noted that an important aspect of the plan was how the service worked with Adult Services and was looking to improve the process.

The Chair noted that Wirral was missing its lower bound target already and that it was heading for a £208 million overspend. He suggested that things needed to be changed rapidly to improve matters. Officers noted that the situation was being monitored closely and if the numbers of children being referred to independent / non maintained special schools had not been reduced in 12 months, then it would make the situation much more difficult.

The Director for Children, Families and Education noted that the support of Members of the Forum was key to getting the message out to schools on what needed to change.

Resolved – That the report be noted.

7 **WORKPLAN**

The Assistant Director for Education noted that a report on Higher Needs funding and a report on Delivering Better Value should be added to the work plan for June 2024's meeting.

Resolved – that the workplan be noted.

8 **SCHOOLS FORUM MEMBERSHIP**

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

It was noted that that Nicky Price and Siman Davies had agreed to cover another term for PVI Early Years.

The Chair noted the need for vacancies to be filled.

Resolved – That

- 1. The report be noted.**
- 2. The changes discussed be agreed.**

9 **ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

The Chair noted that this would be the last Forum meeting that Simone White, the Director for Children, Families and Education would be attending as she was retiring. The Forum thanked her for her work and dedication.