

Minutes of a meeting of the North Northamptonshire Schools Forum
Held at 1.00 pm on Thursday 17th March, 2022 as a Remote Meeting via Zoom

Present:-

Members

James Birkett (Chair)
Peter Cantley
Rob Hardcastle
Nikki Lamond
Angela Prodger

Paul Wheeler (Vice Chair)
Laura Clarke
Lee Hughes
Sharon Pinson
Jo Sanchez-Thompson

Officers

Tony Challinor
Ann-Marie Dodds
Neil Goddard
Jo Hutchinson
Nichola Jones
Yoke O'Brien
Raj Sohal

Assistant Director of Commissioning and Partnerships
Assistant Director for Education
Assistant Director for Children's Services
Senior School Improvement Manager
Head of SEND
Strategic Finance Business Partner
Democratic Services Officer

Also in attendance – Councillor Scott Edwards

47 Apologies for non-attendance, Forum membership changes and declarations of interest

Apologies were received from Sandra Appleby and Siobhan Hearne.

48 Minutes of meeting held on 10 February 2022 and points arising/officer feedback

RESOLVED that: The minutes of the meeting held on 10th February were agreed as an accurate record.

49 Early Years Funding 2022/23

The Forum considered a report by the Assistant Director of Commissioning and Partnerships, which outlined Early Years funding. Officers requested Schools Forum members to approve the 5% retention for central costs from the 3 and 4-year budget only.

During discussion, the principal points were noted:

- Members requested that details of central expenditure be made available to the Forum annually. The Assistant Director committed that officers would provide full details of central costs regularly.

RESOLVED that: The Forum approved the 5% retention for central costs.

50 Maintained Nursery Supplement

Several public speakers were in attendance at the meeting, all of whom addressed the Forum in opposition to the Local Authority's proposals to reform the funding arrangements for the four Maintained Nursery Schools (MNS) in North Northamptonshire. The external speakers posited that the Local Authority should seek additional funding from the Department for Education (DfE) and lobby central government for this supplementary funding for the MNS.

The Forum considered a report by the Assistant Director for Education, which outlined each of the proposed options for the distribution of the Maintained Nursery Supplement. Officers clarified that while Forum members would be asked for views on the distribution of the Maintained Nursery Supplement, this decision would ultimately be made by the Executive Committee of North Northamptonshire Council.

The Assistant Director for Education explained that funding was received from central government based upon participation rates by students at the MNS. None of the options presented in the report could increase this level of funding. Therefore, the Assistant Director clarified that Forum members at the meeting should consider how available funding should be distributed, rather than the wider issue of whether the financial amount provided by government was sufficient.

During discussion, the principal points were noted:

- Members emphasised their views that the amount of funding made available through the maintained nursery supplement was not sufficient to support the work of MNS.
- One member queried why local authority officers had not provided the DfE with information concerning the historical funding arrangements of MNS; specifically Pen Green Centre.
- One member expressed concern that they would not be able to take a view on any of the options proposed in the report without further clarification regarding whether the DfE would make additional funding available in recognition of MNS which provided extraordinary services, or if funding would solely be based upon participation rates going forward.
- Members queried whether the recognition of historical payments was included in the hourly rates.
- One member suggested an alternative proposal for 2022/23 to move funding from the Schools Block of the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) to the High Needs Block and from the High Needs Block to the Early Years Block, in order to provide additional funding to support MNS.
- One member expressed concern that certain options outlined in the report would result in the closing of two MNS in North Northamptonshire. They suggested that the local authority should seek to support all MNS and ensure that the decision regarding the distribution of the Maintained Nursery Supplement should benefit them all.

- Members suggested that uncommitted Council reserves could be utilised to support MNS, while the local authority lobbied central government for additional funding.

In response, Assistant Director for Education clarified that:

- There had not been a decision made by the local authority to not provide the DfE with historical information regarding the distribution of funding to MNS. The finance officers of North Northamptonshire Council had not worked on previous arrangements, under the legacy Northamptonshire County Council authority, and were reliant on colleagues in West Northamptonshire Council to ascertain how historical funding was distributed.

The Assistant Director for Children's Services clarified that:

- Since 2017/18 funding levels, in order to calculate future allocations, both participation and historical payments had been considered in forming base hourly rates. The purpose of the grant was to support MNS which provided 15-hour universal provision and within this, also support MNS which had provided other services historically.
- While officers appreciated members' suggestions of transferring funding between Blocks of the DSG, the timeline required to set out transfers within the DSG had passed by the time of the meeting. The High Needs Block was also significantly overspent and any further transfer from this allocation would be over the 0.5% threshold of transfer the Forum had previously agreed upon.
- While the preferred outcome for all parties would be increased funding, the local authority found itself in a position, whereby it would have to decide upon an allocation arrangement moving forward, with the existing funding made available by central government.

The Strategic Finance Business partner provided further information to the Forum, regarding how the allocation of MNS supplementary funding had been calculated by the DfE.

While most Forum members did not feel they could make a formal recommendation to the Executive, regarding the options for the distribution of the Maintained Nursery Supplement in the report, one member of the Forum expressed support for option 2 and two members supported option 4.

RESOLVED that: The Forum could not formally recommend a single option provided in the local authority's report but intended for its comments and the narrative of the debate regarding the distribution of the Maintained Nursery Supplement to be considered by the Executive Committee, when making its decision.

51 High Needs Update

The Forum considered a presentation by the Head of SEND, which outlined the local authority's key priorities, principles and intended response regarding the high needs sector.

During discussion, the principal points were noted:

- Members queried why the maintained nursery sector was not included in the presentation.
- Members queried whether the High Needs Task and Finish Group of the Schools Forum had been established at the time of meeting.
- Regarding issues of high needs capacity and dependence on the independent sector, one member queried what actions the local authority was taking to increase capacity.
- One member supported satellite provision in local mainstream schools and acknowledged that this had worked well previously. The member queried how the local authority intended to move towards locality-based working, when so many high needs students had come in from across the county; both West and North.
- Members requested additional detail regarding the timeframes of implementing the three-tiered response, outlined in the presentation.
- Members queried when High Needs Funding Panels would be reconvened.

In response, the Head of SEND clarified that:

- Local authority officers intended to meet with Early Years leaders and considered the Early Years sector to be the 'cornerstone' of work around special educational needs.
- The High Needs Task and Finish Group of the schools Forum had not yet been established. Nevertheless, the local authority had engaged with local schools and trusts through a broader consultation, regarding high needs block issues.
- Work would need to be done, in collaboration with sector leaders, to reduce dependence on independent providers to meet children's special educational needs in North Northamptonshire. The Council had reviewed how other local authorities had built provision into their budgets for mainstream units and was exploring offering schools the opportunity to develop local mainstream provision.
- Mass applications for limited places had partly arisen due to parent preference and the local authority would have to support families to make informed decisions about their children's specialist provision. Officers had also reviewed costs of mediation and tribunal processes and acknowledged that better communication would be required to support families concerning expectations and available provision.
- A delivery programme of work was being developed, which would clearly determine the timeframes of intended action, to respond to high needs sector issues. The Head of SEND posited that the critical factor going forward would be how the local authority would work with system and school leaders.

- The High Needs Funding Panels had been reconfigured and established two weeks prior to the meeting.

RESOLVED that: The Forum noted the report.

52 Staffing Update

The Forum considered a report by the Assistant Director for Children's Services, which outlined personnel changes within the local authority and updated contact details for officers.

RESOLVED that: The Forum noted the report.

53 Schools Forum Plan 2022/23

The Democratic Services Officer introduced the item and highlighted the following points:

- The next meeting of the North Northamptonshire Schools Forum would be held on 7th July 2022.

RESOLVED that: The Forum noted the report.

54 Urgent Business

There was none.

There being no further business the meeting closed.