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Council

Minutes of a meeting of the Schools Forum

Held as a Remote Meeting via Zoom at 2.00pm on Thursday 4th November, 2021

Present:-

Members

James Birkett (Chair)
Sandra Appleby
Rob Hardcastle
Pat Kelly
Angela Prodger

Paul Wheeler (Vice Chair)
Peter Cantley
Siobhan Hearne
Nikki Lamond
Ron Whittaker

Officers

Ann Marie Dodds
Cathi Hadley
Helen Hudson
Jo Hutchinson
Yoke O'Brien
Raj Sohal
Chris Wickens

Also in attendance –

Councillor Scott Edwards
Richard Kempa
Richard Poole
Rachelle Wilkins

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

No apologies for non-attendance were received.

2 Minutes of meeting held on 22 July 2021 and points arising/officer feedback

RESOLVED that:

The minutes of the meeting held on 22nd July 2021 were approved as a correct record.

3 2022-23 National Funding Formula for Schools and High Needs

The Forum considered a report by Yoke O'Brien (Strategic Finance Business Partner), which presented updates on the national funding formula.

RESOLVED that:

The report be noted.

4 2022-23 NNC Schools Funding Consultation

The Forum considered a report by Ann Marie Dodds (Assistant Director for Education), which provided an update regarding the provisional Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) funding settlement for 2022/23 and the schools funding consultation.

The Forum would vote on approval for the consultation document. The options would follow in the December meeting, once all the outcomes from the consultation had been received.

During discussion the principal points were noted:

- Members expressed concern that the High Needs Block deficit could increase, if imminent action was not taken by the authority – schools questioned whether a clear outline could be provided of such key actions to ensure that this would not occur.
- Members also expressed reluctance to continue transferring funds from the Schools Block to the High Needs Block, to mitigate this deficit.

In response, the Assistant Director for Education clarified that:

- The authority was in a position where it faced a number of challenges in tackling the High Needs deficit and that this complex issue would require systemic reform rather than a handful of actions.
- Measures that had already been taken by the authority included the establishment of a Special Educational Needs (SEND) accountability board, which had brought key partners and stakeholders together to assess all SEND services across North Northamptonshire.
- Financial officers had also begun the process of closely examining all High Needs spending, to gain a clear view of the deficit.
- This work would take time and if the deficit was to increase, the authority would be required to submit a deficit recovery plan, regarding High Needs spending, to the Secretary of State.
- Nevertheless, the Assistant Director assured the Forum that all options would be exhausted to ensure that this would not occur.

The Chairman of the Forum suggested including information regarding systemic reform on the consultation document, to provide a recognition of the issue concerning High Needs and state the authority's intention to overcome it.

RESOLVED that:

The report be noted.

5 LA Commissioned Outreach Services

The Forum considered a report by the Assistant Director for Education, which set out the provision made by North Northamptonshire Council specialist services.

The Assistant Director explained that if the authority was to follow DfE guidance, it would ask for contributions from schools directly for the provision of specialist services. Historically these discussions hadn't taken place however, the authority would present three options, for consultation, regarding contribution towards the maintenance of these services. There was no option to continue with the existing arrangement due to financial pressures.

During discussion the principal points were noted:

- Members expressed concern that if the authority was to take contributions directly from schools that were already under severe financial strain, the consequences could adversely affect vulnerable students, dependent on specialist services.
- Regarding costs, Members questioned how much of the £2.4M High Needs deficit would be funded through the Council's general fund and how much would be funded by the High Needs Block of the DSG.

In response, the Assistant Director for Education clarified that:

- North Northamptonshire Council had not yet made a final decision regarding whether specialist services would continue to receive local authority funds. The options for future arrangements would be put to schools through the consultation and if none of these were supported, the authority would further explore alternative arrangements.
- The authority could not use High Needs funding to deliver specialist services.

RESOLVED that:

The Forum approve the document for consultation.

6 Split Site Funding Policy

The Forum considered a report by the Assistant Director for Education, which set out the proposed split site policy, funded by the Schools Block of the DSG. No proposed changes to this policy were recommended.

RESOLVED that:

The Forum approve the document for consultation.

7 Pupil Growth Fund

The Forum considered a report by Chris Wickens (Capital Programme Manager), which outlined the authority's intention to consult on the establishment of a Pupil Growth Fund.

The Capital Programme Manager explained that a Pupil Growth Fund was the mechanism by which any local authority would provide revenue funding to schools, to employ the necessary staff to allow for the provision of new school places. A Pupil Growth Fund would be key in ensuring that North Northamptonshire Council could fulfil its statutory obligation to provide a sufficiency of school places. The Fund would be established through the Schools Block of the DSG.

During discussion the principal points were noted:

- Members questioned what proportion of the Pupil Growth Fund would be attached to providing a pre-opening grant to support the work being done leading up to the opening of a new school.
- Members also questioned what proportion of the funding the local authority would reasonably expect to recoup from the DfE, at a later date.

In response the, Capital Programme Manager clarified that:

- It was made clear in the specification for the new school opening that the pre-opening grant would amount to £90k, which would cover the cost of a head teacher, a business manager, certain other key members of staff and wider infrastructure. This grant would cover the period of the 1st April to the 31st August, prior to the school opening. If costs were to increase, the authority could explore at increasing this amount provided, as the Schools Forum had not previously set a figure for pre-opening costs of new schools.
- The authority would not be able to recoup pre-opening costs from the DfE.

RESOLVED that:

The Forum approve the document for consultation.

8 Permanent Exclusion Clawback Policy

The Forum considered a report by the Assistant Director for Education, which outlined the new exclusion clawback policy, to replace the previous Council's policy position.

RESOLVED that:

The Forum approve the document for consultation.

9 Central School Services Block

The Forum considered a report by the Assistant Director for Education, which explained that the Central Schools Services Block of the DSG had been decreasing every year and that the authority would therefore, need to review the activity funded through this block.

The Assistant Director explained that the purpose of the report was to present the local authority's proposals for central expenditure on education functions for 2022/23.

RESOLVED that:

The Forum approve the document for consultation.

10 De-delegation for Trade Union Facility Time

The Forum considered a report by Helen Hudson (HR Policy and Projects Advisor), which outlined the recommendation for trade union facility time and a pooled arrangement within schools.

The HR Policy and Projects Advisor explained that the alternative to the pooled arrangement was for individual schools to arrange their own trade union facility time. Past arrangements were set out in the report.

Richard Poole, Richard Kempa and Rachelle Wilkins were also in attendance as trade union representatives, who maintained that keeping the existing arrangement was reasonable and supported the work being done in schools.

The Forum would vote on this at the next meeting, once responses had been received from the schools consultation.

RESOLVED that:

The Forum approve the document for consultation.

11 De-delegation for School Effectiveness

The Forum considered a report by Jo Hutchinson (Senior School Improvement Manager), which set out the future priorities of the School Effectiveness team, which was funded from the Central Schools Services Block of the DSG.

RESOLVED that:

The Forum approve the document for consultation.

12 De-delegation for Redundancy Costs

The Forum considered a report by the Assistant Director for Education, which explained that the authority maintained a central fund, which supported schools to make redundancies. The proposal set out that schools could access up to 25% of redundancy costs and use the fund where they could not afford these costs themselves. The redundancy costs for maintained schools de-delegation enabled maintained schools to collectively manage redundancy situations that were unaffordable for individual schools.

The Strategic Finance Business Partner explained that for 2021/22, the Schools Forum had previously agreed that de-delegated redundancy costs would be reduced from £5 to £1.50. This was due to unused carry-forwards from previous years. The cost contributions were therefore decreased. Going forward, this would need to be brought back to its original level, to meet the imminent amalgamation of redundancy costs.

During discussion the principal points were noted:

- Members questioned which type of establishment would anticipate future redundancies (e.g. primary schools/secondary schools).
- Members expressed concern that even at the rate of £1.50, there was still significant carry-forward and that an increase would not be required.

In response, the Strategic Finance Business Partner clarified that:

- De-delegated redundancy costs only applied to maintained primary schools. In the decisions that were taken, the secondary sector did not participate. The authority anticipated a draw on the redundancy fund due to likely upcoming redundancies in the primary sector.
- The consultation would be the start of the conversation regarding these rates and the authority would be open to feedback from schools, to determine whether such an increase would be necessary.

The Chairman of the Forum also explained that maintained secondary schools did not participate in the scheme due to the low number of maintained secondary schools across North Northamptonshire.

RESOLVED that:

The Forum approve the document for consultation.

13 Remote Meetings

The Forum considered whether it would continue with virtual meetings via Zoom, or return to in-person meetings.

Members agreed that the Forum should continue to monitor the circumstances regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and re-assess the situation at future meetings. In the meantime, the Forum would continue with virtual meetings.

RESOLVED that:

The report be noted.

14 Schools Forum Plan

The next meeting of the North Northamptonshire Schools Forum would be held on 16th December 2021.

At this meeting, the consultation responses would be brought back to Forum and final votes would be taken.

RESOLVED that:

The report be noted.

15 Urgent Business

There was no urgent business.

Chair

Date