



**MINUTES OF THE BUDGET TASK AND FINISH GROUP FOR
CHILDREN’S AND EDUCATION SERVICES
SESSION 1 - 11 JANUARY 2021 held using the Zoom platform**

Attendees:

Cllrs: Mark Pengelly, Richard Levell, Valerie Anslow, Scott Brown, Jim Hakewill, Ken Harrington, Larry Henson, Ian Jelley, Steven North, Malcolm Ward

Executive Members/Officers: Cllr Lloyd Bunday and Scott Edwards – Ann Marie Dodds, Assistant Director - Education, Cathi Hadley, Director – Children’s Services

Finance Officers: Mark Dickenson, Claire Edwards and Yoke O’Brien

Carol Mundy, Senior Democratic Services Officer, Raj Sohal, Democratic Services Officer and Emma Robinson, Democratic Services Support Officer.

1. Overview of presentation

The task and finish group considered a presentation by Cathi Hadley, Executive Director of Children’s Services, and Ann Marie Dodds, Assistant Director for Education, which provided an outline and breakdown of budget areas across children’s and education services. This information had previously been circulated to the task and finish group.

2. Summary of questions and comments including responses

- "Is there currently a high level of exclusion of children from schools?"
 - The Assistant Director for Education explained that the exclusion rate seen across North Northamptonshire was not drastically different to its statistical neighbours.

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- "Regarding capital programme, no capital programme was set out for 2023/24 and 2024/25. Why is there no capital budget for schools across these two years?"
 - The Assistant Director for Education explained that this work had already been committed and that at the time of meeting, there were no commitments to set out a capital programme. Nevertheless, she suggested that the authority could explore this in the imminent future.

- "Is there a dedicated officer in place to look at s.106 finances and determine whether sufficient funding is being received?"
 - The Executive Director of Children’s services explained that there was a dedicated officer, employed within the authority, to carry out this work.

- "There is a lack of educational psychologists within the Authority’s employment. What is happening with the process of recruiting more to this service?"
 - The Assistant Director for Education explain that North Northamptonshire Council employed psychologists and associate psychologists. Therefore, there were no vacancies in this area. However, the Assistant Director acknowledged that fact that demand on education health and care plans had increased.

- "Are we maintaining the level of services, that would’ve previously been funded by what was a 20% cut from central government funding, and are we continuing to increase this ourselves as appropriate?"
 - The Assistant Director for Education explained that this funding covered a wide range of areas and had not directly impacted early years, the funding of which was determined differently. She acknowledged that the authority would need to identify alternative, cost-effective ways to deliver services affected by this cut.

- "On a political side, how does the executive feel we can pass a robust budget?"
 - The Executive Member for Education stated that executive meetings regarding the budget and collaborative work with West Northamptonshire Council had been positive. As a result, he expressed confidence that a strong budget could be passed. The Executive Member recognised that SEND remained an area of concern but

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assured the task and finish group that this has been identified and a plan was in place to move forward.

- "Has there been issues of safeguarding home-schooled children, especially during the pandemic?"
 - The Executive Director of Children’s Services explained that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there had been an increase in the number of home-educated children across North Northamptonshire. There existed good online facilities and groups to offer support, ensuring that there were few safeguarding issues. Children’s services had also spent time working with schools to extend the period of ‘off-rolling’ students towards home-schooling, in order to provide support to parents before students formally left schools.
- “Who is the ‘third party’ that North Northamptonshire Council contributes to, from the education budget?”
 - The Assistant Director for Education explained that these third-party contributions formed North Northamptonshire Council’s funding contributions to the Northamptonshire Children’s Trust.
- "Does the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) increase with inflation to maintain funding levels or are we seeking to reduce our contributions to maintained schools?"
 - The Assistant Director for Education explained that the DSG was determined by the Department for Education and was calculated through pupil numbers in schools and other criteria, to keep funding in line.
- "We all know that NI is set to increase. Are funding lines based upon NI going to increase next year?"
 - The Assistant Director of Finance and Strategy explained that the authority had decided to withhold funding centrally and release it as and when pay increases were to be awarded.
- "Regarding third party funding for independent school placements, does this relate to SEND places?"
 - The Assistant Director for Education explained that third party funding for independent school placements did not relate to SEND places.
- "Regarding school premises, there is a £6m allocation in the budget. Contracts must all have a set figure for the year, but on building repairs and

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maintenance is there an allocation for schools and if more is required, is there a contingency for this?"

- The Strategic Finance Business Partner explained that it was not possible to predict the 2022/23 budget at the time of meeting, as the North Northamptonshire Schools Forum would have to determine this. Schools, alongside individual governing bodies, would decide what this budget would be. The figure listed in the presentation was an amalgamation of funding and could not yet be taken as a confirmed, set amount. If schools were to exceed this budget, then they would either have to draw money from their own financial reserves or find themselves in a deficit position, from which they would be statutorily obliged to produce and submit a deficit recovery plan.
 - The Assistant Director for Education also explained that DfE funding came with special provisions, which would have to be met or funding would not be received.
- "The Executive needs to find a way to maintain funding for early years services. Would there be an opportunity to assess Children’s Trust funding, if they do not spend this provided to employ new staff, and recoup some?"
 - The Assistant Director of Commissioning and Partnerships reassured the task and finish group that the authority closely analysed all funding received by the Children’s Trust. Based upon the existing agreement, the Trust was entitled to retain 25% of underspends, to bolster its financial reserves. However, anything above 25% would have to be returned to North Northamptonshire Council. Nevertheless, the Assistant Director concluded that he felt it would be incredibly unlikely for the Trust to be in an underspend position by year-end.
 - "What would happen if the Schools Forum were to refuse to give an extra £50k to the Central School Services Block?"
 - The Assistant Director for Education explained that if the North Northamptonshire Schools Forum was to agree to the transfer, it would come from schools’ budgets. If the Forum was to disagree, schools would be placed in a deficit position, which they would have to resolve by conclusion of the next financial year.
 - The Strategic Finance Business Partner explained that the DSG was a ‘ring-fence’ fund, governed by legislation. The authority was not permitted to contribute or withdraw from the fund. In the 2022/23 DSG budget, North Northamptonshire would receive £1.682M, a significant portion of which would be transferred to the High Needs block.

The Assistant Director for Education concluded the presentation by explaining that if it was the local authority’s intention to make additional contributions towards SEND provision, there existed alternative avenues for exploration, independent of the Dedicated Schools Grant.