

## Minutes of a meeting of the Schools Forum

Held as a Remote Meeting via Zoom at 1.00 pm on Thursday 10<sup>th</sup> February 2022

### Present:-

#### Members

James Birkett (Chair)  
Sandra Appleby  
Rob Hardcastle  
Nikki Lamond  
Angela Prodger

Paul Wheeler (Vice Chair)  
Peter Cantley  
Siobhan Hearne  
Annabel Moore  
Jo Sanchez-Thompson

#### Also in attendance

David Akinsanya  
Ann Marie Dodds  
Neil Goddard  
Nichola Jones  
Kelly Mills  
Simon Rielly

Tony Challinor  
Charlotte Franks  
Jo Hutchinson  
Nick Mantle  
Yoke O'Brien  
Raj Sohal

#### 41 **Apologies for non-attendance, Forum membership changes and declarations of interest**

Apologies were received from Sharon Pinson and Lee Hughes.

#### 42 **Minutes of meeting held on 20 January 2022 and points arising/officer feedback**

RESOLVED that: The minutes of the meeting held on 20<sup>th</sup> January were agreed as an accurate record.

#### 43 **Early Years Funding**

The Forum considered a report by the Assistant Director for Commissioning and Partnerships, which outlined proposals for the early years funding of non-maintained schools.

The Interim Director for Education clarified that funding was allocated to providers on a formulaic basis. Capital was retained, which had historically been passed to providers, on the basis of additional need. He explained that the non-statutory application for additional high needs funding was not sustainable, within the broader budget. Therefore, officers sought to provide the maximum amount, through the formulaic allocation to providers - hence the 16 pence increase in the base rate and the protection of the 8 pence notional SEND rate. £160k would be put into the inclusion fund, through consultation with the Schools Forum high needs Task and Finish Group.

During discussion, the principal points were noted:

- Regarding the notional SEND funding and the proposal to increase this amount, members of the Forum questioned whether there was protection for settings where SEND needs were disproportionate. One member expressed concern that while the idea of increasing this funding might enable another area of the budget to be bolstered, it could be challenging for some settings to meet the needs of SEN children, with a disproportionate number of pupils requiring specialist support.
- Another member expressed concern that the 4% increase to the base rate of early years funding would not be sufficient to cover increases to National Insurance and pay rises, as settings would not be covered by additional pay grants. The member posited that the early years sector was experiencing an increased level of need.
- The Forum acknowledged that there had been a significant increase in the number of children with special educational needs across North Northamptonshire and recognised funding issues concerning specialist support services. Members queried what work was being done by the local authority to raise such funding issues with central government and lobby for additional funding for specialist support services.
- The Forum queried what the indicative Early Years Block funding allocation, from the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG), would be for the 2022/23 financial year.
- Regarding Block transfers, members questioned whether it was possible to transfer funding between the Schools Block and the Early Years Block of the DSG.
- One member of the Forum requested additional information regarding the costings of the centrally retained budget, as they suggested that it would be good practice by the local authority to demonstrate significant central expenditure annually, for transparency of information. The member also sought information concerning an increase to the Disability Access Fund and how many families within North Northamptonshire had been able to successfully apply for this fund.
- Regarding the Disability Access Fund, members queried whether the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) informed the Department for Education (DfE) of how many children within North Northamptonshire were in receipt of funding, which then determined the funding allocation received by the local authority
- The Forum queried where surplus allocated capital for the Disability Access Fund would go when applications were not made for the full allocation received by the local authority.

In response, the Assistant Director for Commissioning and Partnerships clarified that:

- Officers proposed a freeze on the notional SEND element and the aim of the consultation was to gather ideas as to how the local authority could assist these settings. The 8 pence rate had been frozen to create a small inclusion fund of

£160k, which would be used in a more targeted way, through the period up until the end of August 2022.

- Funding could not be transferred between the Schools Block and the Early Years Block of the DSG. Only transfers from the Schools Block to the High Needs Block were permitted. However, the local authority would be able to transfer from the High Needs Block to the Early Years Block. While this had been the historical approach taken by the local authority, the High Needs Block was significantly overspent and there existed no remaining resources to transfer. The only funding transfer proposed by Officers for 2022/23 would be from the Schools Block to the High Needs Block.
- Additional information regarding central expenditure would be provided to Forum members.
- There had been issues concerning payment of the early years pupil premium due to the fact that it was based upon data from the DWP, which the local authority did not have control over. He further explained that this was an information issue.
- The criteria for application for the Disability Access Fund was published online. Once applications were made, funding had been awarded. The local authority was not made aware in advance how many children resided within North Northamptonshire, who were eligible for this funding. The allocation received by the local authority was determined by a DfE formula and if surplus funding remained by year-end, it would return to the DfE.

The Interim Director of Children's Services clarified that:

- Regarding specialist support services, the local authority had moved away from a referral system towards a consultation system, which had meant that conversations with families and settings, who required support, were able to begin immediately. Waiting times had halved through this consultation process. Officers also sought to identify an appropriate mechanism whereby conversations could be had with central government representatives, to raise awareness of issues concerning the funding of such services. This would also be raised with the political leadership of North Northamptonshire Council.

The Strategic Finance Business Partner clarified that:

- The DfE had announced a Schools Supplementary Grant, to address the Health and Social Care Levy and increased National Insurance pressures schools would face. Funding allocations from this grant would be announced in Spring 2022.
- The indicative 2022/23 DSG allocation for the Early Years Block would be significantly lower, as child participation rates had decreased across the early years sector. However, a final forecasted estimate would not be available until the January 2022 census had been received.

- DfE guidance stated that the Schools Supplementary Grant would only be payable to public sector employers, which meant that further education colleges, sixth form colleges and independent learning providers, as well as private and voluntary sector early years providers, would not be eligible to receive this funding.
- The Disability Access Fund existed as part of the Early Years Block of the DSG, which was governed by strict eligibility guidance. The local authority's allocation for this funding was calculated depending on set criteria, to then be distributed to eligible providers.

RESOLVED that: The Forum noted the report.

#### **44 Maintained Nursery Supplement**

The Forum considered a report by the Interim Director for Children's Services, which outlined the funding of the maintained nursery supplement for North Northamptonshire Council maintained nursery schools, including Croyland, Highfield, Pen Green and Ronald Tree. The proposal put forward in the report sought to distribute funding in line with DfE guidance.

During discussion, the principal points were noted:

- A member of the Forum clarified that due to the Pen Green Centre's unique model and the breadth of its work, both central government and the local authority had previously acknowledged that the Centre should receive core funding, for its integrated model. In addition to this, maintained nursery schools also received supplementary funding, in recognition of their statutory responsibilities.
- Members posited that maintained nursery schools should be funded sufficiently and expressed concern that since the local authority had adopted the single funding formula for early years, there had been a demise in this funding. The Forum recognised that this was a national problem and queried what the local authority had done to support the budgets of maintained nursery schools.
- The Chair of the Forum also acknowledged that there existed a national issue of funding around the maintained nursery sector. He suggested that the maintained nursery supplement should be equitable and distributed equally, based upon participation rates, but also that additional funding would need to be made available, to support additional services provided by early years settings, such as Pen Green.
- The Vice Chair of the Forum stated that clarification from the DfE regarding funding arrangements for the maintained nursery sector would assist the Forum to make an informed decision on this matter.
- One member of the Forum urged colleagues to make contact with maintained nursery schools, to understand the circumstances in which these settings were operating. She posited that this would help both the Schools Forum and local authority to shape its challenge to central government and the DfE.

- Finally, the Chair suggested that the consultation should include the caveat that members' views on the suggested proposals should consider the assumption that DfE guidance would be aligned with the principles of the proposals.

In response, the Interim Director of Children's Services clarified that:

- The local authority received DSG funding, to be distributed in line with central government recommendations. Officers had written to the DfE and asked for detail of any potential additional funding to support the unique structure of Pen Green. She assured Forum members that the local authority continued to pursue an alternative supplementary arrangement, which would set the funding of Pen Green outside of DfE regulations on the DSG.
- It was the local authority's understanding that funding should be distributed in accordance with DfE regulations, which was to be split equally based upon participation rates. If an agreement could be reached with central government concerning the additionality/'special case' of Pen Green, to be funded outside of the DSG, then this capital would be independent from the distribution of the maintained nursery supplement.
- The local authority required assurance that it was following DfE guidance to the letter of the law, regarding the distribution of funding. Officers also sought to ensure transparency of decision-making. She emphasised that North Northamptonshire Council needed to ensure that there would be parity and that settings were funded in line with the spirit of guidance.
- The maintained nursery supplement consultation would go out first to the heads of the maintained nursery schools across North Northamptonshire. The wider consultation would then be made available to the entirety of the sector. Officers would continue to liaise with the DfE and seek guidance. Feedback from the consultation would be compiled into a report, to return to the next meeting of the Schools Forum.

The Strategic Finance Business Partner clarified that:

- The maintained nursery supplement was awarded to the authority by the DfE at a rate of £4.73 an hour and was based upon part time equivalent, which was determined by the participation of children in maintained nursery schools. At the time of meeting, this figure was 346.17 part time equivalents, which equated next year's allocation of £933k. Officers sought to follow the DfE guidance as to how supplementary funding should be distributed amongst maintained nursery schools.

RESOLVED that: The Forum noted the report.

## 45 **Schools Forum Plan**

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 17<sup>th</sup> March 2022.

RESOLVED that: The Forum noted the report.

**46 Urgent Business**

There was none.

There being no further business the meeting closed.