

Birmingham Schools Forum

Thursday 11th March 2021
2pm – 4pm
Remote meeting via MS Teams

Present:	<p>Richard Green Primary Forum James Hill Primary Forum Maxine Charles Primary Forum Debbie James Secondary Forum Chair Mike White Academies Representative Jane Gotschel Secondary Academies Representative Nicola Redhead Academies Representative (Alternative Provision) Les Lawrence maintained secondary governor. Karen Mackenzie maintained primary governor. Sara Reece PVI representative Catriona Savage PVI representative (joined the meeting at 2.30) Clare Madden Catholic Senior Executive Leader Lumen Christi Steve Hughes Academies Representative (Special) Denise Fountain Maintained Special HT Claire Henebury Maintained Nursery HT Steve Howell PRU Representative City of Birmingham School David Room Teacher Associations Janet Dugmore Support Staff Union representative</p> <p>Tim Boyes BEP</p> <p>Lisa Fraser BCC Assistant Director for Education and Early Years Cllr Kate Booth BCC Cabinet Member Children’s Wellbeing Yoke O’Brien BCC Interim Finance Manager – Schools John Betts BCC Interim Business Partner with Education and Skills Directorate Cllr Kath Scott BCC Chair of Education and Children’s Social Care Overview & Scrutiny Committee Patricia Harvey BCC Business Analyst, Finance and Governance (supporting High Needs funding)</p> <p>Observer: Cllr Alex Yip Shadow Cabinet Member Children’s Wellbeing</p> <p>In attendance: Janice Moorhouse (clerk)</p>
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1.	Welcome and apologies for absence.	
1.1	<p>The Chair welcomed members and officers to the meeting. <u>Apologies</u>: apologies for absence received from Nichola Jones BCC Assistant Director Inclusion, SEND and Wellbeing</p> <p>Absent: Paul Doddridge Primary Forum and David McCallin Maintained Nursery School governor</p> <p>ACTION: Andy Couldrick Chief Executive Birmingham Children’s Trust to be invited to future meetings.</p>	Clerk

1.	Welcome and apologies for absence.	
2.	Minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 21st January 2021.	
	<p><u>Item 9.3:</u> ACTION: a breakdown on where the £50k additional HNB costs had gone at the next meeting' to be amended to read:</p> <p><u>Item 9.3:</u> ACTION: a breakdown on where the £50m additional HNB costs had gone at the next meeting.</p> <p>With the above amendment, the minutes were agreed as a true and accurate record of the meeting.</p>	
3.	Matters arising from the minutes.	
3.1	<p><u>Item 3.1:</u> ACTION: Members suggestions on governor representatives to fill the outstanding vacancies to be sent to the Chair and the clerk: action on going.</p> <p>Special Schools Formula working group: Steve Howell reported that, despite assurances regarding invitations to meetings, he had not been contacted. He was hopeful of being invited to the next meeting.</p> <p>Pat Harvey stated the first meeting since December had been held w/b 22nd February.</p> <p>Denise Fountain reported it was recorded in the minutes of that meeting that contact should be made with Steve Howell.</p> <p>Steve Hughes reported the ACTION to provide a breakdown on where the £50m additional HNB costs had gone was not yet resolved.</p> <p>The Chair suggested ACTION to be taken as an item to the new High Needs Block sub-group.</p> <p><u>Item 4.6:</u> the on-going concerns related to health visitors raised on several occasions at Early Years Forum to be followed up by Lisa Fraser with Sara Reece and Early Years Forum.</p> <p>Lisa Fraser reported a meeting had taken place and follow up meetings were planned.</p> <p><u>Item 5.5:</u> Mike White to query the difference in Birmingham funding/huge potential variation on the MFG with the DfE.</p> <p>Mike White reported he had contacted the DfE. To date, no response received.</p> <p>ACTION: Mike White to circulate the response to members when available.</p> <p>John Betts reported the issue of increased pressure on the growth fund had been raised with the DfE. No response to date.</p> <p><u>Item 6.6:</u> cuts in place funding AP schools: Nicola Redhead reported a meeting with the LA had taken place and APS schools were in discussion with SENAR.</p> <p>No further action</p> <p><u>Item 6.9:</u> The Chair thanked John Betts for setting up the High Needs stakeholder group.</p> <p><u>Item 7.4:</u> Sara Reece to send funding figures to Lindsey Trivett. Action completed.</p> <p><u>Item 8.5:</u> Nigel Harvey-Whitten to circulate his email address: Lisa Fraser reported Mr Harvey-Whitten did share his email address. Mr Harvey-Whitten was moving on. The work would stay with the commissioning team and the work would be going out to tender.</p> <p>Tim Boyes reported the tender was due to published on Monday 8th March at 12noon.</p> <p>The Chair asked if Mr Harvey-Whitten had been replaced.</p>	<p>Subgroup members</p> <p>Mike White</p>

1.	Welcome and apologies for absence.	
	Lisa Fraser reported interviews for a replacement were taking place. Andy Couldrick to oversee. Lisa Fraser confirmed that Steve Howell would be contacted as the School Forum representative on the evaluation process.	
4.	LA update	
4.1	Lisa Fraser reported schools had welcomed pupils back into school on Monday 8th March and thanked all staff in schools for their support in a very challenging year. Attendance in Birmingham was above that of other urban areas and was in line with the national figures. The Fast Track process was suspended.	LA/LF
4.2	School risk assessments had been updated. There had been staffing changes in Public Health. Staff in special schools had been offered a vaccination against Covid-19.	
4.3	Lisa Fraser reported two weeks of Free School Meal vouchers would be available during the Easter holiday and schools could contact the holiday activity team for information on the holiday activity fund.	
4.4	Sara Reece asked if the BCC emergency bubble closure funding to support out of school providers would be extended. ACTION: Lisa Fraser to follow up and communicate with Sara Reece. The Chair thanked Lisa Fraser for her report.	
5.	Update from High Needs block subgroup	
5.1	Report for information circulated before the meeting. John Betts reported the High Needs Block Subgroup met for the first time on 24 February. The following items were discussed: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Purpose and Terms of Reference • Benchmarking Options for Exploration • Proposed Response to DfE Consultation on High Needs • High Needs budget 2019/20 and 2020/21 	
5.2	Benchmarking Options: it was agreed that any benchmarking information should only be used to support decision making and not to replace it. The statistical comparators put forward by the DfE in the SEND Benchmarking Tool might not always be suitable for Birmingham.	
5.3	Year on Year Spend: an analysis of High Needs block budgets for 2019/20 and 2020/21 were shared. A concern was expressed that the breakdown of spending categories was insufficient. It was agreed that a more detailed analysis was required to enable School Forum members to make meaningful comment on budget proposals put forward by the Authority with further narrative so that the plans and reasons for any changes in spending levels (either investments or reductions) was understood.	
5.4	John Betts reported the DfE consultation on high needs was discussed (agenda item 6)	

1.	Welcome and apologies for absence.	
5.5	<p>John Betts suggested more representatives were required on the group, particularly from the Early Years sector plus another representative from mainstream and one from the post 16 sector. Claire Henebury expressed an interest in joining the group.</p> <p>Mike White thanked John Betts for setting up the group which would continue to meet on a regular basis.</p> <p>Steve Hughes commented on the high contributions for support staff pensions being made in Birmingham. The group to look at the whole landscape on the financial position.</p>	
6.	High Needs Consultation	
6.1	<p>Consultation and proposed LA response for comment and subsequent agreement circulated before the meeting.</p> <p>John Betts reported the DfE issued a consultation on high needs block funding on 10th February to run for six weeks to 24th March. The consultation focused on two specific factors within the formula - historic spend and attainment data. The biggest issue facing High Needs Block funded services related to the totality of resources in the system as a whole and this was outside the scope of the consultation.</p>	
6.2	<p>Members noted that forum representatives or the organisations they represented were able to respond independently to the consultation if they so wished.</p>	
7.	Authority approach to managing school deficits.	
7.1	<p>Report circulated before the meeting for information on the Local Authority's actions in response to a query regarding the Local Authority's approach to both supporting and challenging maintained schools with financial deficits.</p> <p>John Betts reported on 31st March 2020, Birmingham had 198 maintained schools with a total of £60.8m in surplus surpluses. 40 schools had deficits totalling £8.8m. The number of schools in deficit had stayed at 40 while the cumulative value of deficits had increased by £1.6m to £8.8m. Nationally 30% of secondary schools were in deficit. In Birmingham, 11% of secondary schools were in deficit.</p> <p>Nationally 8% of primary schools were in deficit. In Birmingham, 13% of primary schools were in deficit.</p> <p>Nationally 10% of special schools were in deficit. In Birmingham, nearly one third of special schools were in deficit.</p>	
7.2	<p>John Betts reported there were a number of controls in place to promote good financial management in Birmingham Maintained Schools:</p> <p>Maintained schools that could not achieve a balanced budget had to apply for a Licensed Deficit as permission to set a deficit budget. The school then developed and implemented a recovery plan within the conditions set out in the local Scheme for Financing Schools.</p>	
7.3		

1.	Welcome and apologies for absence.	
7.4	<p>Other controls in place to promote good financial management included a requirement for all schools to produce termly financial monitoring returns to the LA, School Audits and the implementation of Interim Executive Boards (IEBs) if there were concerns regarding school governance. This could include protecting the financial interests of the Local Authority. John Betts stated the LA was aware of this being a difficult year in which to approach schools in deficit.</p>	
7.5	<p>James Hill asked if actions taken and controls in places should be reported. For example, the number of IEBs in place, the number of warning notices issued, an overview of the times each measure was used.</p>	
7.6	<p>John Betts acknowledged the point made regarding the escalation of support staff costs and reported that the LA's ability to affect the rates set by the West Midlands Pension fund was limited.</p> <p>John Betts reported that internal reports were made on the financial standing of schools and the surfeits and deficits were published on the DfE website. Reporting names of schools and the extent of interventions would need to be thought about.</p> <p>The Chair stated that details of individual schools was not being asked for but information to show application of the system such as the number of warning letters written in the space of one year.</p>	
7.7	<p>In response to a query from Cllr Scott, John Betts reported deficits were paid from the General Fund. A sum was set aside to meet these costs.</p> <p>A report would be going to Cabinet.</p> <p>Regulations allowed the use of the High Needs Block to cover deficits in special provision. That and the general fund had been used in relation to two special schools with high deficits.</p> <p>Denise Fountain stated she was not comfortable with the use of High Needs Block to pay for deficit budgets. Costs for support staff were escalating and, in a special school, there were a disproportionate amount of support staff to teaching staff. It was now cheaper to employ a teacher than a teaching assistant.</p>	
7.8	<p>Steve Howell reported that the PRU had gone from a position of having a healthy budget into facing a deficit in two years time.</p> <p>Steve Howell stated his concerns regarding the quality of provision for pupils due to having to reduce the number of adults in school and increase group sizes.</p> <p>Steve Hughes commented that the Birmingham pension rate was higher than the West Midland Pension rate.</p> <p>John Betts stated that the fund set the rate. Decisions were made on individual authorities related to the levels of redundancy/retirement.</p> <p>Karen Mackenzie suggested there was a need to look at alternative provision rather than West Midlands Superannuation Fund. Contributions were going up. More transparency was required for schools to understand the problem and make the difficult decisions related to new employees.</p>	
7.9	<p>David Room stated the importance of workers having access to a decent pension fund.</p> <p>Karen Mackenzie stated that BCC paid minimal contributions into the pension scheme.</p> <p>John Betts stated there were a number of items to be investigated and reported back.</p>	LA/JB

1.	Welcome and apologies for absence.	
	Chair proposed ACTION: an in-depth agenda item at a future meeting: aim to understand the high levels of costs, the reasons for the rises, reach an understanding on the basics and the historical details.	
8.	School Forum – powers and responsibilities	
8.1	Paper circulated before the meeting for information. The Chair thanked John Betts for circulating the document that made clear the role of members when certain items applied to some categories of schools, when items required a decision by members and when items were for consultation with the decision remaining with the Authority. Agenda papers/reports to continue to identify their purpose i.e. for information, for decision.	
9.	Any Other Business	
9.1	The Chair reported that, as previously agreed by members, the Vice- Chair would chair the June meeting.	
9.2	The Chair reported ACTION: Jaswinder Didiaily to respond to questions raised in a School Forum meeting related to school sufficiency at the next meeting.	JD/Chair
9.3	Maxine Charles voiced concerns on the late notification of the 2021/22 budget, the number of changes to be dealt with by School Business Managers and the tight turnaround with governors. Mike White reported comments of concern on timescale had been made on the Birmingham Association of School Business Manager’s website Steve Howell stated the early close down and the ban on spending had made the operational running of the school challenging. The Chair stated her Bursar had found the lack of notice on the change to procedure, the third version of the workbook and the late notification of funding difficult and frustrating. John Betts reported the timing and early close down were national issues. The overall process had been brought forward. The early close down process would not change. John Betts acknowledged the LA had not got the process right this year and it would be reviewed.	LA/JB
9.4	Cllr Scott suggested ACTION: to bring Jaswinder Didiaily into the High Needs block subgroup. On behalf of members and officers, James Hill thanked Debbie James for the dedication, support and diplomacy skills she had brought to Schools Forum and wished her all that was good for the future. Members showed their appreciation of Debbie’s time as chair, wished her well and supported James’s comments in the chat facility on the Teams platform.	JB
10.	Dates of future meetings Thursday 24 June 2021	
	The meeting closed at 3.10pm	