

Slough Schools Forum- Meeting held on Tuesday, 6th July, 2021

Present: John Constable, Langley Grammar School (Chair)
Ben Bausor, Always Growing Ltd
Peter Collins, Slough & Eton Church of England Business and Enterprise College
Philip Gregory, Baylis Court Nursery School
Valerie Harffey, Ryvers School
Kathleen Higgins, Beechwood Secondary School
Navroop Mehat, Wexham Court Primary School
Eddie Neighbour, Upton Court Grammar School (Observer)
Carol Pearce, Penn Wood Primary School
Jon Reekie, Phoenix Infants
Jo Rockall, Herschel Grammar School
Jamie Rockman, Haybrook College
Neil Sykes, Arbourvale School
Maggie Waller, Holy Family Primary School
Nicky Willis, Cippenham Primary School

Officers: Catherine Cochran, Michael Jarrett and Funmi Olagbaiye

Apologies: Angela Mellish and Johnny Kyriacou

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting, in particular Ben Bausor from Always Growing Ltd, newly appointed PVI Provider representative.

Prior to asking any questions, attendees were asked to introduce themselves.

The meeting was held remotely and would be recorded: it was confirmed the recording would be deleted upon the production of accurate minutes.

Apologies:

Apologies for absence had been received from Angela Mellish and Johnny Kyriacou, SBC. No apologies for absence had been received from Coral Snowden or Maxine Wood.

848. Any Other Business

The following item was tabled: Section 114 Notice and possible implications.

849. Declarations of Interest

There were none.

850. Minutes of Previous Meeting held on 13 May, 2021

The Minutes of the Schools Forum meeting held on 13 May 2021 were agreed as a correct record.

Matters Arising from those Minutes:

Nothing was noted.

851. Schools Forum Membership Update

The Clerk confirmed that, following due process the following members had been reappointed for a further two-year term of office: Valerie Haffrey, Jo Rockall, John Constable, Maggie Waller, Carol Pearce, Navroop Mehat and Angela Mellish.

There remained vacancies for an academy primary Headteacher and an academy secondary Headteacher. Nominations would be invited in the Autumn term.

On behalf of Schools Forum, the Chair took the opportunity to thank Kathleen Higgins and Nicky Willis for their contributions as members of Schools Forum and in other forums: both would be leaving their posts at the end of this academic year and all present wished them well for the future.

9.08am: Funmi Olagbaiye was admitted to the meeting

852. Update on National/Local Funding Issues

Funmi Olagbaiye reported that there was nothing to update at this meeting although updated information was due to be issued by the DfE.

9.11am: Neil Sykes was admitted to the meeting

853. Annual DSG Report 2020/21 (including impact)

Due to a number of changes within SBC, the draft Annual DSG Report had been circulated to members the day before this meeting. The Chair thanked Funmi Olagbaiye for all her work in completing the report. Due to late circulation, members agreed 5 minutes should be allowed to read the report.

9.15am: the meeting adjourned

9.20am: the meeting resumed

Funmi Olagbaiye took members through the key points in the report, explaining that the balance sheet showed an accumulated deficit of £18.6m of which £19.4m was the High Needs Block (HNB) of the DSG, based on the overspends and underspends in Schools Block and the HNB.

Schools Block: at the beginning of the year there had been a slight balance brought forward of £289,000 underspend to which the DSG Settlement of £138.9m had been added. £102m had been recouped to the academy and all £36.9m had been allocated out to schools. The small overspend was due to the actual Growth Fund paid out which would be corrected in 2021/22.

CSSB: it was noted the small overspend was due to license costs being higher than anticipated. A transfer of £255,000 from HNB had been made to support in-house services. The Slough Growth Project had been restricted due to Covid, so there was a small underspend as well as an underspend on vacancy factors. Therefore, there would be a small carry forward into the next year in reserves of £29,000.

Early Years: the final settlement for the year had been £15.5m. The main areas of underspend had been due to growth and in-year issues mainly due to Covid. There had been less uptake of places for 3-4 year olds, resulting in a total underspend of £0.148m within maintained and £0.76m within primary with an increase in those

eligible for Pupil Premium and deprivation, resulting in a small underspend. However, private sector take up had increased by £1.2m. This amounted to a total carry forward underspend of £833,000 which would be adjusted by the DfE in July.

High Needs Block (HNB): it was noted that work was ongoing through the DSG Management Plan to address this area. There had been an overspend of £5.35m in HNB this year, which had increased the accumulated deficit to £19.4m. In the previous year, £18.4m had been allocated from the DSG, with some funds transferred to the CSSB. This year the budget had been aligned to fund maintained schools, which had left approximately £3m for central support and out of borough places. There was an overspend of £2m on the independent sector, overspending on out of borough special schools accounting for £1.7m.

The deficit was rising year on year and the finance team continued to work hard to bring it under control. The Chair thanked Funmi Olagbaiye for all the work which was being undertaken.

Michael Jarrett explained that none of the savings proposed related to any aspects of the HNB because it was a needs-led service, and it was difficult to manage exact amounts of expenditure. In some measure the HNB had to be treated as a separate entity as the requirements of the child came first, to ensure a child was placed appropriately. Ongoing work was required to mitigate the pressures and bring the HNB in line with budget: if spend continued on the same trajectory, the projected overspend for 2024/25 was £43m. It was added that vulnerable needs still had to be met despite SBC having been served the Section 114 Notice.

The meeting moved to agenda items 8 and 9:

854. DSG Management Plan (to include High Needs update)

As noted at previous meetings, the DfE required SBC to deliver a DSG Management Plan (the Plan). This involved a great deal of background work with the production of data, and population of the Plan, from a number of departments.

SBC had to submit the finalised HNB Recovery Plan to the DfE on Friday 9 July and a further meeting with the DfE Policy Team was scheduled for Monday 26 July, at which time there would also be a thorough examination of the Plan. It was hoped the DfE would appreciate the work which had been going on. It was stressed the Plan was not connected to the Section 114 but that the Council's financial position impacted on the Plan.

Future trends had been reviewed; it would be necessary to manage projected deficits and to work differently.

855. DSG Pressures/Options

It was explained that although the pressure was on all four blocks, the DSG should be seen as one overall block when reporting to the DfE. In the Autumn, following further meetings with the DfE, it might be necessary for Forum to consider some transfers between blocks.

It was confirmed the Plan was a public document which could be shared with schools.

Michael Jarrett explained that, due to challenging circumstances the Section 114 had been served on Friday 2 July, before the DfE had chosen to step in. It was one of the highest Section 114 Notices ever to have been served. SBC's Chief Executive had issued a response, making plans clear as to where savings were to focus including the sale of buildings and assets to offset budget pressures. There was now a moratorium on all spending, a process had been introduced for placing orders and Expenditure Control Panels had been set up in all five Directorate areas. A business case would be required for any spend, apart from areas deemed vulnerable. There were five Directors who would rotate across the group in order to ensure objectivity. All grants and financial amounts coming into SBC would be subject to some level of scrutiny in line with the Section 114.

There were currently approximately 360 staff vacancies at SBC, with the majority filled by temporary staff. These roles might need to be frozen in the short to mid-term, with any requiring supporting business cases. The Council was unable to approve anything unless it had been cleared by the panel which would meet three times a week.

It would not be possible to offer support services as it had in the past and some would have to close, with SBC only being able to meet statutory requirements. Some contracts had been immediately stopped as of Friday 2 July and it would be necessary to change how Children's Services were offered.

A meeting was scheduled for Thursday 22 July with full Council and lead Members in order to discuss financial assurances to the auditors and to deliver a plan which would satisfy the requirement to remove the Section 114: if not, it would be necessary to apply for another one. There would be a great deal of partnership working, including discussion with Schools Forum.

It was confirmed the Council would communicate with schools prior to September and share the implications of cost savings on services, enabling schools to make plans. It was explained that all work was being carried out based on worst case, mid-case and best-case scenarios. More would be known in mid-August when there was more information available about capitalisation.

It was further confirmed that EHCPs and similar requests would be made to a Director Control Panel, but children would still be entitled to EHCPs etc going forward. Cases would need to be rigorous. Although Child Protection services were statutory, spend would also have to go through the Control Panel. A member commented that they could foresee an increase in tribunals which would be costly, and it was acknowledged this was a process which had to be followed: the child would continue to come first. There was an assurance SBC would do all they could to support vulnerable children. A forward agenda plan was to be issued.

The Chair thanked Michael Jarrett for being so transparent about the situation and Forum asked to be kept fully apprised of the situation.

The meeting returned to the running order of the agenda:

856. Early Years Update (to include MNS)

It was reported there were a number of positive things happening across the sector despite the Plan and three nurseries experiencing financial pressures. It was felt it was beneficial to have colleagues on Forum who were familiar with the sector.

An Early Years Review was being conducted and work was being undertaken with a number of departments to ensure there was sufficiency going forwards. It was noted that Michael Jarrett had met with the governing boards of all nurseries within the Authority.

Work was also ongoing with the DfE and the three nurseries. A report had been drawn up making recommendations for the future: this had to be finalised and shared with the DfE for ratification. It was stressed the Council could not accept any deficit budgets and had to be in a position to change the financial certainty of the nurseries concerned, with any actions needing to be addressed with speed.

All Slough nurseries were experiencing challenges due to financial pressures and those of Maintained Nursery School (MNS) funding, which had been drawn to the attention of SBC a number of years before. It was pointed out that the paper provided showed two nurseries were having to use carry forward funds to set their budgets.

Phil Gregory, Headteacher of Baylis Court Nursery confirmed that he would be retiring at the end of the Autumn term 2021.

857. SEND Update

It was reported that SEND services had moved to a more stable position. Two permanent appointments had been made, with more permanent staff due to start within two weeks of this meeting, bringing the department up to its' full complement. SEND services were included in the Plan and were also having to monitor all expenditure.

It was suggested Schools Forum should allocate more time to discussion about the Plan and MNS.

It had been necessary for a number of other councils to meet with the DfE. The DfE acknowledged it would not be possible to reduce the High Needs deficit to zero but wanted to be assured the Authority could stop the trajectory and manage the funding. As yet, it was unknown how they would react following the serving of the Section 114, but it was positive that there now appeared to be a link across government.

858. Update from Task Groups: Early Years, HNB and 5-16 (to include review of Terms of Reference)

As previously noted, the Early Years Task Group had met. It was added that this had been before the rates were set.

The High Needs Block and 5-16 Task Groups had not met.

Forum **APPROVED** the Terms of Reference for the Early Years, HNB and 5-16 Task Groups for the academic year 2021/22.

859. Academies Update

There were no updates for this meeting.

860. 2021/22 Proposed Forward Agenda Plan/Key Decisions Log

The Key Decisions Log was noted.

As previously minuted, due to the ongoing situation, the Proposed Forward Agenda Plan 2021/22 would be issued under separate cover, following consultation with SBC finance colleagues.

The provisional date of the next Schools Forum meeting was noted:

Wednesday 6 October 2021 at 9.00am (to be held remotely)

Schools Forum members would be advised of the final arrangements or any changes.

861. Election of Chair and Vice Chair

The Chair had completed one year of the two-year term of office in the role. Forum endorsed the appointment for the second year.

Expressions of interest in the role of Vice Chair were invited. Anyone wishing to find out more about the role should contact the Chair or the Clerk.

862. Any Other Business

Section 114 Notice: dealt with under agenda item number 9.

The Chair thanked everyone for their contributions and wished all an enjoyable summer break.

(Note: The Meeting opened at 9.00am and closed at 10.25 am)