

## **NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL**

### **SCHOOLS' FORUM**

At a meeting of the Schools' Forum held in Committee Room 1, County Hall, Morpeth on Wednesday, 15 January 2020 at 9:30 am.

#### **PRESENT**

C Pearson (in the Chair)  
Trustee, Three Rivers Learning Trust

#### **Headteacher Representatives**

M Deane-Hall, Glendale Middle  
M Hall, The Duchess Community  
High

A Mead, Cramlington Hillcrest  
B Ryder, Berwick Middle

#### **Governor Representatives**

K Faulkner, Morpeth Collingwood  
Special School  
S Harker, James Calvert Spence  
College

S Heminsley, Newbrough C of E  
Primary  
B Watson, St Robert's RC First  
G Wilkins, St Wilfrid's RC Primary

#### **Academies Representatives**

A Thelwell, Bede Academy  
S Wild, NCEA Castle School

D Wylie, Cramlington Village  
Primary

**Early Years' Representative - E Chaplin**

**Trades Union Representative - R E Woolhouse**

**16 - 19 Provider of Education Representative - Not present**

**Northumberland County Council Elected Members - W Daley**

Ch.'s Initials.....

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## OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE

|           |   |
|-----------|---|
| D Jackson | Service Director - Education and Skills |
| K Norris  | Democratic Services Officer             |
| B Parvin  | Education and Skills Business Manager   |
| C Ponting | Senior Manager - Schools HR             |
| A Russell | Principal Accountant                    |
| D Street  | Commissioner for Early Years & Primary  |

**Observers: D Convery Administrative Finance Assistant**

### 32. MEMBERSHIP AND MEMBERSHIP UPDATE

- 32.1 The Education and Skills Business Manager welcomed Andrea Mead to her first meeting of the Schools' Forum as a maintained special schools representative.
- 32.2 Members were advised that the vacancy for an academy representative was still outstanding following the resignation of Kieran McGrane.

**AGREED** that the information be noted.

### 33. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from G Atkins, F Hartland, E Potts, I Walker and S Aviston.

### 34. MINUTES AND MATTERS ARISING

- 34.1 **RESOLVED** that the minutes of the meeting of the Schools' Forum held on Wednesday, 20 November 2019, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record and signed by the Chair.

#### **Matters Arising:**

- 34.2 Minute 24.4: Revised nameplates were now in use and any comments/amendments should be referred to the Education and Skills Business Manager or the Clerk to the Forum.
- 34.3 Minute 26.2: Haydon Bridge - In response to a request for an update, Councillor Daley, Cabinet Member for Children's Services, said that discussions were ongoing to retrieve public money from Bright Tribe and he was due to meet with ministers soon.

Ch.'s Initials.....

- 34.4 The Trade Union Representative suggested that, as part of his discussion with ministers, Councillor Daley should highlight that solutions needed to be in place for Northumberland as it had totally different needs to London.
- 34.5 Minute 26.3: In response to a request for an update on the High Needs Strategy, the Education and Skills Business Manager said a report was being presented to Cabinet at the end of the month and further information would be brought to February's meeting of the Schools' Forum.
- 34.6 Minute 27.6: The Director of Education and Skills advised members that interviews would be taking place the following month in Darlington to determine who would run the new special school in Blyth. Moving forward, a report would be brought to the Family and Children's Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
- 34.7 Minute 28.5: The providers who had submitted successful applications or the new alternative provision framework and discussions were scheduled to take place with Headteachers on 24 February.
- 34.8 Minute 29.9: Funding for the six additional schools identified as meeting the pupil distance criteria for sparsity was required and a case would be made to Central Government that this should be reflected in Northumberland's settlement for next year. Discussion took place about how sparsity was defined and it was agreed that a letter to the minister be sent jointly from the Chair of Schools' Forum, the Cabinet Member for Children's Services and the Director of Education and Skills to support this.

## **35. COMMUNICATION**

- 35.1 The Education and Skills Business Manager referred to the Government consultation response to implementing mandatory minimum per pupil funding levels, a copy of which had been circulated and is attached to the signed minutes.
- 35.2 The Chair referred to page 13, Government response, regarding disapplication and said there had been an acknowledgement of affordability issues. He added that the response was very open about how requests would be considered and Northumberland County Council would need to consider this carefully.
- 35.3 The Education and Skills Business Manager commended all parties who had responded to the consultation and said it was good to see schools taking an active part in it.
- 35.4 It was noted that there had been a 7% increase in the minimum per funding level from £3,500 to £3,750 and there was no flexibility around that.
- 35.6 The Chair said the response referred to exceptional criteria and queried which parts of Northumberland were exceptional.

Ch.'s Initials.....

## **36. 2018/19 SCHOOL BALANCES INFORMATION**

- 36.1 The report provided the Forum with an update regarding the latest 2018/19 information published by the Department for Education (DfE) regarding revenue balances held by local authority maintained schools. (A copy of which is filed with the signed Minutes as Agenda Item 6.) There was no equivalent information published for academies, as academy balances were held and reported on by the Trust, not at individual school level.
- 36.2 A report provided in October had not included individual school data but in December each year the DfE published individual maintained school balances and it was important for schools to be aware that such information was in the public domain.
- 36.3 It was noted that figures would be slightly different to the figures presented to Schools Forum in October 2019 due to some schools having become academies during the year.
- 36.4 The Principal Accountant reported that work was continuing with the 30 maintained schools in deficit at the end of March and officers were confident the situation would be stabilised and were not predicting a decrease in overall forecast figures for March 2020 apart from any cases when funding followed a school which was converting to an academy.
- 36.5 In 2017/18 Northumberland had the lowest average school balance in the North East but since then the position had improved and it now had the 4th lowest. As highlighted in the report, 23% of Northumberland's schools were in deficit and some clearly needed work to ensure that education was sustainable in those schools for the long term future.
- 36.6 In response to a question about sparsity, the Education and Skills Business Manager said revenue balances were still 69% lower than the national average and 56% lower than the North East average. Northumberland had smaller schools so balances would be smaller and this had been used to support the argument around additional sparsity funding.
- 36.7 A query was raised as to where the funding would come from if all schools running the £3 m deficit were academised and in response the Principal Accountant stated this would be from core Council funding.
- 36.8 Discussion ensued about the wider issue of small schools, social structure and how they helped communities. The Education and Skills Business Manager acknowledged this and highlighted the sparsity changes introduced.
- 36.9 In response to a query about projected deficit balances, members were advised that smaller balances were managed on a medium term budget planning basis. With regard to deficits, the Scheme for Financing Schools, approved in July 2019, had extended the potential recovery period from 2 to 3 years, but extenuating circumstances would be considered. A monthly monitoring meeting had recently

Ch.'s Initials.....

been set up and a solid recovery plan devised for schools in deficit. This would be closely monitored and schools in more difficult situations would be addressed on an individual basis.

**AGREED** that the information be noted.

### **37. SETTING THE DEDICATED SCHOOLS GRANT (DSG) 2020/21**

- 37.1 The purpose of the report was to inform the Schools' Forum of the estimated overall Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) for 2020/21 and the proposed formula values for the allocation of funds to schools for 2020/21. (A copy of which is attached to the signed minutes as agenda item 7.)
- 37.2 The Education and Skills Business Manager reminded members that the Forum had agreed to a number of principles in relation to the setting of formula values for 2020/21 at the November meeting. In addition, two specific decisions were now needed and recommendations were set out in paragraph 2 of the report.
- 37.3 Background information was provided and it was stated that the 2020/21 DSG figures had been received from the DSG on 19 December 2019. It was positive news in that the figures had increased in comparison to those forecast, and previous year's figures. This was for several reasons; there had been an increase in the overall number of pupils, there had been changes in the overall pupil profile, with more secondary pupils who attracted higher levels of 'per pupil' funding, and notably an increase of 15% in the amount of deprivation funding received this year. Northumberland had continued to support Free School Meals (FSM) values in excess of the NFF but because of the increase in pupils attracting that funding, it had been necessary had to reduce the figure to £510 per pupil.
- 37.4 Discussion took place about the significance of increased deprivation funding and the social and economic impact. The Director of Education and Skills agreed this was an area which needed to be explored and said it had been discussed at Scrutiny when a member of the opposition had linked it to universal credit. However, no data had been found to support that and the report was available on the Council website.
- 37.5 The Cabinet Member for Children's Services said the rise in numbers were most likely to be the result of a campaign undertaken the previous year to encourage the take up of free schools meals as many of those eligible did not realise they were entitled to them.
- 37.6 In response to questions the Education and Skills Business Manager said figures were measured on a year to year basis to ensure there were sufficient places and projections were based on birth rates. There were sufficient places in Northumberland as a whole but they were not always in the right area, as positions could change over time. It was not necessarily the start of a long term onward trend but it was something which Schools' Forum could look at in the future.

Ch.'s Initials.....

- 37.7 The Director of Education and Skills said the change in pupil profile was also a factor, there were more children at secondary level with less at primary school and pupil projections indicated there would be fewer children in the next 4 to 5 years. Schools would need to plan for that and the Council would support them.
- 37.8 Discussion took place about the implications regarding the size of a school and how micro schools could perform well. There was a grey area in between which made some schools struggle but demographic change was not clear cut and there were variables which placed more responsibility on individual management of schools.
- 37.9 Reference was made to the table in Annex 1 and each block was dealt with separately as set out in the report.
- 37.10 With regard to the 2020/21 School Funding Consultation, 6 responses had been received which was lower than in previous years. It was acknowledged that the timing could be a factor but it could not have been carried out at any other time. Of the 6, there was a clear majority in favour of the decision taken by Schools' Forum although 2 said they preferred a higher AWPU rate.
- 37.11 In terms of the Early Years Block, although there had been an increase of 8p per hour per pupil, the level of funding for Northumberland was still at the national minimum. The Early Years Commissioner stated it was a very difficult financial landscape for providers because we receive the national minimum funding rates. Councillor Daley requested a short briefing note on this in order to take it up with ministers. It was noted this became more difficult when supporting high needs children and Councillor Daley agreed to provide feedback in due course.
- 37.12 With regard to the High Needs Block, it was pointed out that the next meeting of the School's Forum was crucial for agreeing the various budgets within the High Needs Block. In response to a question about funding for sixth form pupils in the high needs block, it was confirmed this was separate funding to standard sixth form funding and was set at £800,000.
- 37.13 Members agreed Recommendation 1 on page 4 of the report.
- 37.14 Figures relating to the Schools Block had been provided at November's meeting and changes were outlined in paragraph 3 on page 5 of the report.
- 37.15 In response to a request for projected figures to show how future years beyond 2020/21 would look, the Education and Skills Business Manager said that this was complicated by the uncertainty around timing of the introduction of the National Funding Formula but agreed to provide some indicative information for February's meeting. It was important that schools continued to work with their accountants and financial advisers to consider the specific implications of this.
- 37.16 In terms of the MFG the minimum level was 0.5% and Northumberland had increased this to 1%. Although this had a relatively small overall financial impact, it could make a difference to some schools. It was feasible that the overall per pupil funding in a school may fall but the overall budget increased which was why when

Ch.'s Initials.....

looking at the MFG certain elements were excluded. Some pupils may be eligible for certain elements such as deprivation funding one year and not the next.

- 37.17 There were some potential implications about the reorganisation of schools in Bedlington and Ponteland, which would result in a shortage of places within the Bedlington Partnership area. To address this, additional places had been created at St Benet Biscop along with a growth fund to ensure that funding would follow the child and work would be done with schools in that regard.
- 37.18 At the last meeting, Schools' Forum had agreed delegated powers be given to the Executive Director of Adult Social Care and Children's Services to decide the final formula values. This had been agreed at Cabinet the previous day and maintained schools would be provided with their 2020/21 budget by the ESFA deadline of 29 February. Equivalent figures for Academies would be included for illustrative purposes only and it would be highlighted that they would be informed separately.
- 37.19 A decision was required around De-Delegation for maintained schools. Per pupil rates had been frozen at the same level as 2019/20 figures for all de-delegated budgets, the rates of which were outlined in the final column of the table in Annex 1.
- 37.20 Maintained school representatives were invited to vote on Recommendation 2 as set out at the end of section 8 of the report. At that point the Trade Union Representative declared an interest and did not take part in the vote thereon. The Chair asked if there were any objections to the Recommendation and, as there were none, the Recommendation was agreed.
- 37.23 In terms of the Central Schools Services Block, it was noted there had been a 20% decrease in the historic commitments element of the funding, and while the ESFA had previously indicated an intention to reduce this, there had been no indication as to the extent or impact of this.
- 37.24 Some discussion took place about prudential borrowing and how it could become a challenge over the long term. The Director of Education and Skills said he had not been asked to make cuts to reflect this drop in the CSSB at this stage.

**AGREED** that

1. Schools' Forum agree that the various budgets within the High Needs Block be set at the meeting on 12 February 2020.
2. School Members of the Schools' Forum representing maintained mainstream schools agree on a phase by phase basis to the de-delegation in respect of the five services listed in section 8 of the report, using the per unit values and estimated overall values as set out in the final column of Annex 1.

Ch.'s Initials.....

**38. 2020/21 WORK PROGRAMME AND MEETING DATES**

38.1 Reference was made to the above (a copy of which is attached to the signed Minutes as agenda item 9). For information, dates were provided until July 2021.

38.2 It was noted there was a gap in meetings after February until July and the Director of Education and Skills pointed out this could be an opportunity to consider some more general issues. Discussion ensued and it was agreed that an extra meeting late in April would be beneficial in this regard.

**AGREED** that the information be noted and an extra meeting of the Schools' Forum be arranged for late April.

**CHAIR**\_\_\_\_\_

**DATE**\_\_\_\_\_

Ch.'s Initials.....