

# **NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL**

## **SCHOOLS' FORUM**

At a meeting of the Schools' Forum on Wednesday, 22 November 2023 at 9.30 a.m. held virtually.

### **PRESENT**

Alan Hardie, NCEA  
(Chair, in the Chair)

### **Headteacher Representatives**

M. Deane-Hall, Wooler and Glendale  
Middle School

A. Mead, Hillcrest School

### **Governor Representatives**

B. Mansfield, Newbrough CE Primary  
School

G. Wilkins, St Wilfrid's RC Primary  
School

B. Watson, St Robert's RC First  
School

### **Academies Representatives**

G Atkins, Hadrian Learning Trust

B. Reed, Gilbert Ward Academy

**Roman Catholic Diocese – Vacant Post**

**Church of England Diocese –**

**Pupil Referral Unit Representative – R. Carr**

**19-19 Provider of Education Representative – W. Stephenson**

**Trades Union Representative – Vacant Post**

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## OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE

S. Aviston	Head of School Organisation and Resources
M. Finlay	Head of Inclusive Education Services
A. Kingham	Executive Director - Children, Young People and Education
B. Parvin	Education and Skills Business Manager
A. Russell	Principal Accountant – Non-Team Leader
D. Street	Director of Education, SEND and Skills
A. Todd	Democratic Services Officer
L. Walker	Media Communication Officer

### 23. MEMBERSHIP AND MEMBERSHIP DETAIL

Nothing to note.

### 24. APOLOGIES

- 24.1 Apologies were received from N. Rodgers, A. Brown, N. Threlfall, K. Dickinson, Councillor Renner-Thompson and Councillor Wearmouth.

### 25. MINUTES AND MATTERS ARISING

**RESOLVED** that the minutes of the meeting of the Schools' Forum held on Wednesday, 27 September 2023, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record and signed by the Chair subject to the following amendment to item no.12.1 'It was acknowledged that **Graham** Wilkins would remain...'.

Members were reminded to actively promoted the existing vacancies within Schools' Forum to interested parties through their networks.

### 26. COMMUNICATIONS: HN Committee 25 October 2023 Draft Minutes

- 26.1 Members' attention was drawn to the main discussion points that were discussed at the High Needs Committee on 25 October 2023 (a copy of the draft minutes had been filed with the signed minutes).
- 26.2 The Chair of the HN Committee reported that all members found the meeting informative and thanked officers for the information presented.

**RESOLVED** that the information be noted.

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## 27. FINANCIAL MONITORING 2023/24

- 27.1 A. Russell, Principal Accountant presented the report which sought to ensure that the Schools' Forum was informed of the current financial position of the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) against the Budget for 2023-24. (A copy of the report has been filed with the signed minutes).
- 27.2 Members were advised that the forecast position overall was a £0.550 million overspend. The report detailed the projected position at the end of September 2023 within each service area. The main factors contributing to the overall position were reported to Schools' Forum as follows:
- In the Central Schools Block there was a forecasted underspend of £0.050 million on the cost of independent school placements for young people without an EHCP.
  - The Early Years Block had a forecasted underspend of £0.022 million on the Early Years Central Team due to a staff vacancy within the team.
  - There was a forecasted overspend of £0.791 million in the High Needs Block. Factors including pupil transport, the increase of permanent and fixed term exclusions and the cost of independent special school placements were discussed.
  - There was a forecasted underspend of £0.149 million on the Trade Union Facility time budget within the Schools Block.
- 27.3 It was noted that the gap between funding levels and expenditure had widened significantly during 2023-24 causing additional pressure on the High Needs Block which was not sustainable on a long term basis.
- 27.4 The current financial forecast demonstrated the extreme pressure the High Needs Block was facing and the potential impact on the DSG reserve.
- 27.5 A. Kingham, Executive Director - Children, Young People and Education advised that there continued to be significant pressures within High Needs. The HN Committee were aware of the issues and would continue to monitor. She stated that Northumberland was in a better position than other authorities, but it would be a very challenging time ahead.
- 27.6 D. Street, Director of Education, SEND and Skills spoke about pupil placement, formula values and the funding available if learners stayed within a mainstream compared to a specialist setting.

**RESOLVED** that the financial performance to the end of September 2023 and the projected year end position on the DSG at the present time.

## 28. SEN UPDATE

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- 28.1 M. Finlay, Head of SEND presented to Schools' Forum an update on SEND for the academic year 2022-23, including challenges faced and action taken to date or planned. (A copy of the report has been filed with the signed minutes).
- 28.2 It was reported that since the introduction of the 'free on demand' delivery model by the SEND Service in September 2020, referrals had continued to increase year on year. In order to ensure demand could be met without requiring increased funding, the service had undergone delivery transformation throughout 2022-24. The SEND Service were confident that these models were sustainable for projected demand over the next two academic years (to August 2025). Increases in EHCP numbers witnessed locally, and nationally, continued to put pressure on the High Needs Block through top up and associated demand for special school places.
- 28.3 It was noted that over the last four years there had been a 73% increase in the number of EHC plans since 2020. The case workers currently had roughly 200% of the average NE caseload, and this impacted on other services such as Educational Psychology. This had also led to a decline in the number of EHCP's issued within the 20 week limit.
- 28.4 G. Atkins thanked M. Finlay for all the work he and his team had achieved for the young people who had special educational needs in the county. He suggested that the local authority and schools work more closely together on SEN by pooling support, resources and expertise on all matters.
- 28.5 The Chair also praised M. Finlay and team for their dedication and commitment to SEN in what was a very demanding time.
- 28.6 G. Atkins queried if any modelling had been done to map out future costs, implications for budgets and how the system could be sustained if numbers of young people with SEND continued to rise year on year. In response it was reported that forecast had been carried out, so the SEND service knew potential numbers coming through. However, the population was changing. Modelling work had been carried out on short term capacity, but it was believed that in the longer term a different approach would be needed. Mental health was one of the leading factors within the presenting needs of young people. SEN place planning had taken place and the authority was in the top five for first choices when applying for a primary secondary school place. But more was still needed. The decisions taken needed to be of sound testing and evidence based. Each case was unique, and it was about meeting a young persons need not just now but in the future.
- 28.7 M. Deane-Hall spoke about the High Needs deficit and the sustainability of SEND services in the future. He sought assurance that the concerns of the Schools' Forum, HN Committee and the local authority regarding the rise in SEN and funding available were being shared with colleagues both regionally and nationally. In response it was confirmed that at every opportunity the concerns of colleagues were raised with local counter parts, politicians, Regional Directors from the Department of Education, and the local authority had also hosted visits

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from education officials. These concerns were also championed through the F40 Group to central government.

28.8 Members reiterated the comments made about the transformation of the SEND Services Team and the valuable support being provided to schools by M. Finlay and staff.

28.9 D. Street, Director of Education, SEND and Skills shared a powerpoint presentation with the Schools' Forum that he had also delivered to the recent meeting of the HN Committee (a copy of the powerpoint slides have been filed with the signed minutes). The presentation covered the following issues:

- HNB and Capacity Summary.
- Budget 23/24 breakdown.
- DfE Safety Value/Better Value Agreements.
- Reduce growth/cut EHCPs.
  - Strengthen provision at SEND support.
  - Lower expectation of EHCP for lower level needs and younger learners.
  - Reduce the financial benefits of EHCP status.
- Reduce the growth/cut top up values.
  - Remodel the top up system.
  - Review whole school balances.
  - Review EHCP's provision sections.
- Reduce demand/cut specialist placements.
  - Develop further parental confidence to stay in the mainstream schools.
  - Develop further inclusive cultures and expectations in mainstream schools.
  - Develop further specialist training and support in mainstream schools.
  - Further reduce out of county placements.
  - Develop more lower cost provisions.
  - Develop gateway control strategies.
- Increase income/funding.
  - Transfer more from other blocks.
  - Lobby central government.
  - External funding streams.
- Consultation.
  - Consult with schools to seek their views.

28.10 B. Reed commented on some of the good practices already in place in specialist placements and welcomed the proposals suggested within the reduce demand slide of the powerpoint presentation. He felt that if colleagues in mainstream schools worked together and supported one another this would lead to more parental confidence and demonstrate the specialist expertise available in mainstream schools.

28.11 It was noted that work was taking place to find better ways to communicate with the public. This would help publicise positive examples of SEN support and promote what was available throughout the county.

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- 28.12 G. Atkins, commented on how challenging it was for schools particularly as the levels of SEN continued to rise. He felt a better solution was needed to meet present and future demand.
- 28.13 A. Mead commented on the complexity of SEN now being seen within schools which had previously not been. Schools were struggling with demand with violence towards staff also on the increase.
- 28.14 The Chair commented that current funding for SEN was not adequate. It was important to forecast and prepare for future demand, particularly in relation to top up funding linked to EHCP's. He hoped that schools would respond to the consultation ahead of the final budget setting report to Cabinet as more informed decision could be made if they did so.

**RESOLVED** that Schools' Forum:

- a) Considers the implication of information presented in relation to relevant financial reports
- b) Makes comment on data and activity detailed within it.

## **29. NATIONAL FUNDING FORMULA AND SCHOOL FUNDING CONSULTATION**

- 29.1 Members were provided with further additional information in respect of the continuing implementation of the National Funding Formula, the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) and associated 2024/25 Schools Funding information. This included formal consultation with Schools Forum in relation to funding for 2024/25. (A copy of the report has been filed with the signed minutes).
- 29.2 B. Parvin drew members' attention to the main points of the report.
- 29.3 It was reported that the provisional 2024/25 allocations based on October 2022 data were detailed within the report. It was noted that as in previous years, the figures would be updated with reference to the October 2023 School Census data when the final figures were released in late December.
- 29.4 As discussed during this meeting and at the HN Committee there was a projected year end deficit on the High Needs Block. Therefore, Schools' Forum was requested to support a 0.5% transfer from the Schools' Block to the High Needs Block for 2024/25.
- 29.5 In relation to the disapplication request in respect of James Calvert Spence College Schools' Forum was asked to support the submission based on the reasoning detailed within the report. B Parvin also reported that subsequent to the report being circulated, all 6 schools involved and returned written agreement to the proposals.

**RESOLVED** that Schools' Forum:

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- a) Agree to a transfer of up to 0.5% (approximately £1.148 million) from the Schools Block to the High Needs Block for 2024/25.
- b) Agree that the funding values for 2024/25 be set in line with the principles outlined in the report; and agree for these to be the basis for the wider consultation with schools.
- c) Support the disapplication request arising from the requirements of the Coquet schools in relation to their reorganisation with effect from September 2024.
- d) Note the delegation of final decisions on the values to the Executive Director of Children’s Services, in consultation with the lead member for Children’s Services once final funding becomes known in December 2023, in order to enable the required Cabinet report to be prepared and submitted to the 16 January 2024 meeting, and the submission of the necessary return to the ESFA by 22 January 2024.
- e) Receive a further report to the Schools Forum meeting on 17 January 2024 on the outcome of the consultation with schools and final funding values to be used for 2024/25.

**30. 2023/24 WORK PROGRAMME AND MEETING DATES**

30.1 The schedule of dates had been circulated with the agenda papers and a copy filed with the signed minutes.

**RESOLVED** that the information be noted.

**31. DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

**RESOLVED** that the next scheduled meeting of the Schools’ Forum will be Wednesday, 17 January 2024.

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

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

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