#  MEETING OF THE SCHOOLS FORUM

**Wednesday, 15 January 2025 at 8.30am**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| TYPE | MEMBERSHIP |
| GOVERNORS | Tracy Edwards, Johnson Brock\*, Alan Morton\*; Robin Precey\*, Srividya Srivathsan\*, Laura Worsley\* |
| HEADTEACHERS | Veronica Armson\*; Sarah Bowmer, Dee Bleach\*; Hodo Dirir; Becky Dolamore\*; Zobaidha Elmi\*, Tom Foster, Brenda Landers\* (Chair); Nicholas Langham\*; Danny Lye\*; Jon Ryder\*, Astrid Schon; Shoshannah Thompson\*, Jessica Williams\*;  |
| Non-School Members | Jemima Reilly\* -THEP , Natasha Chaudhury\* – NEU,  |
| OBSERVERS | Darren Rubin, Gillian Kemp, Mike Antoniou |
| Officers in Attendance | Lisa Fraser (Director of Education); Terry Shaw (Head of Schools Finance), Steve Reddy (Corporate Director of Children’s Services), Pauline Maddison (Education Consultant, Catherine Grace (Head of Pupil Access and School Sufficiency), Sara Walsingham (Accountant), Jess Milne,  |

*\*Denotes attendance*

*The meeting started at 08:33 and was quorate.*

**AGENDA ITEM 1: Welcome and apologies**

PRESENTING: Chair

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

Apologies were received and accepted from Hodo Dirir, Tom Foster and Sara Bowmer.

**AGENDA ITEM 2: Minutes of the last meeting – 27th November 2024**

PRESENTING: Chair

The minutes of the last meeting were agreed to be an accurate record.

Action point update on items not in the agenda for this meeting:

* David Waller has been added to the School Business Managers Group.
* The SBM meeting dates are in the process of being added to the workplan.
* The proposal for what information the Schools Forum needed to receive was in progress.
* HR Policies were being updated.

*The agenda items were reorganised in the order below.*

**AGENDA ITEM 3: Early Years Block strategy**

PRESENTING: Jess Milne

Jess Milne summarised key points on Early Years Block funding for 2025-2026.

The DfE funding rules have changed. Members were asked to note the new updated information relating to the provision of funded Early Education and Childcare entitlements, as set by the Department for Education through the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG).

A key change was that LAs could only retain 4% of the budget centrally (historically 5%).

The Schools Forum were asked to agree the new centrally retained funding for 2025-2026 of 4% across all entitlements as set by the Department of Education (DfE), which would subsequently confirm the base rates passported to the sector.

A member asked when the EY Grant will be released to schools. Jess Milne replied that the Schools Finance Team make the payments to schools on a termly basis and the EY team were responsible for making payments to PVI provisions.

A members stated that it would be helpful for schools to have the schedule of payments. Jess Milne agreed to find out and share this information with schools via the Headteacher’ Bulletin. Action.

The Schools Forum AGREED that 4% of the funding be retained centrally.

**AGENDA ITEM 4: Dedicated Schools Grant Monitoring 2024-2025**

PRESENTING: Terry Shaw

The Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) projected forecast for 2024-2025 was shared with the Schools Forum prior to the meeting.

The report set out the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) projected forecast for 2024-2025.

The final position of the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) at the end of 2023-24 was an overspend of £2.8 million from the budget position. The cumulative deficit carried forward is £15.8m. The biggest deficit was in the High Needs Block (HNB).

A member commented that the budget allocated to the HNB was £80m, however the actual expenditure was £85m, and expressed their concern at the variance. What was the possibility that this could happen next year? Terry Shaw replied that nationally, LAs were facing pressure in their HNBs. Generally, the DfE allocation was insufficient for most LAs. The HN subgroup has been set up to reduce the variance.

**AGENDA ITEM 5: Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) 2025-26, including financial settlement and final formula allocations**

PRESENTING: Terry Shaw

The report was shared with all members prior to the meeting.

The Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) allocations for the four DSG blocks were announced on 18th December 2024. There has been a decrease of 1.84% in primary school pupils and a decrease of 1.95% in secondary school pupils between 2024-2025 and 2025-2026.

However, the primary and secondary schools unit of funding has increased between 2024-2025 and 2025-2026 in excess of these percentages, meaning that schools should see increases rather than decreases to their budgets for 2025-2026.

The High Needs Block allocation has increased by 6.58%, even though the number of pupils in special schools and special academies across the Borough has reduced by 4.87%

The High Needs Block carried a deficit balance of £19.1 million at the end of 2023-24. Projections for 2024-2025 are showing an in-year overspend of £5.2 million, thus projecting a carried forward cumulative deficit balance of £24.3 million at the end of 2024-2025 across the High Needs Block.

A member asked if pupil numbers had dropped in special schools. Terry Shaw replied that this was based on pupil allocation in the DSG comparative to last year.

A member asked if the increase in funding included core school budget funds being rolled into the DSG. Terry Shaw confirmed that it did.

A member asked if the increase in funding was good news for schools. Terry Shaw replied that it wasn’t good news because EHCP rates were rising by 12% nationally and any funding below this was a loss for schools.

A member asked if it was true that some grants would not be paid as separate grants. Terry Shaw confirmed that all grants had been rolled into the National Funding Formula (NFF).

A member asked if schools could be informed of their allocation in February as this would impact staffing for the next year. Terry Shaw replied that all schools would be informed by the end of February. The Finance team were working hard to meet that deadline.

A member asked if the Additional Pay Grant was included in the NFF. Terry Shaw replied that this had not been confirmed yet. The change of Government had delayed everything.

**AGENDA ITEM 6: Central Schools and Services Block (CSSB) Budget 2025-2026**

Presenting: Terry Shaw

The report outlined the policy and allocation estimates for the 2025-2026 Central Schools Service Block (CSSB) of the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG).

The overall increase in the CSSB is 0.4%. The budgets for School Admissions, Servicing of Schools Forum and Copyright Licences are proposed to be increased by 2.23% in line with the average National Funding Formula (NFF) per pupil increase of 2.23% in 2025-2026.

A member commented that due to falling rolls, the actual increase to per pupil rates will be as much as 12%.

Historic commitments funding is subject to an annual 20% reduction, encouraging local authorities to cease expenditure. The principal cost is related to ongoing redundancy costs for staff that left schools in 2013-14, although the costs related to these are reducing at a lower rate than the 20% reduction in funding.

A member asked if the CSSB was top-sliced from schools. Terry Shaw replied that this was not top-sliced from schools, the CSSB budget was separate to the DSG budget.

A member asked what would happen if the Schools Forum wanted to reduce the budget allocation for each service. Would the remaining funds be allocated to schools? Terry Shaw replied that this money would remain within the CSSB and could not be distributed to schools.

A member asked if the Mayor’s school uniform pledge was included in this budget. Lisa Fraser replied that this would be funded through the General Fund.

Schools Forum were asked to agree the proposed budgets in principle, allowing budget setting to proceed.

Schools Forum AGREED the proposed budget in principle.

**AGENDA ITEM 7: De-delegated Behaviour Support Proposal**

PRESENTING: Terry Shaw

The report outlined the two options available to schools.

**Option 1** - to uplift the 2024-2025 per pupil rate by the current Consumer Prices Index (CPI) inflation rate of 1.7%. This would increase the per pupil rate from £4.48 to £4.55 for primary schools and from £7.71 to £7.84 for secondary schools.

**Option 2** - to uplift the 2024-2025 per pupil rate by an exceptional increase of 19.03% to cover the increase in the salaries and on-costs of the two Inclusion Support Teachers. This would increase the per pupil rate from £4.48 to £5.42 for primary schools and from £7.71 to £9.33 for secondary schools.

Maintaining the same level of delegation (option 1) would reduce the number of referrals the team could manage and option 2 would allow the service to return to close to previous levels of capacity.

The Chairs of the Primary Consultative and the Secondary Consultative reported that all primary headteachers were in favour of option 2.

The Schools Forum AGREED option 2 for primary schools.

The Schools Forum AGREED option 2 for secondary schools.

**AGENDA ITEM 8: Education Functions and De-delegation Budgets 2025-2026**

PRESENTING: Terry Shaw

A report on the de-delegation proposals for education functions was circulated to everyone.

FSM eligibility

The Chair of the Primary Consultative reported that schools did not feel this service was value for money. Most schools were carrying out FSM eligibility checks themselves. Headteachers would like to understand what this service was providing. A possible way ahead may be for the FSM team to provide an update on what this service will provide. There was no agreement from schools to continue this de-delegation.

Primary schools DID NOT AGREE this de-delegation.

Secondary schools AGREED this de-delegation.

Special Schools AGREED this de-delegation.

Additional School Improvement Grant

This budget will be fully passported to THEP to provide school improvement services.

Primary schools AGREED this de-delegation.

Secondary schools AGREED this de-delegation.

Special schools AGREED this de-delegation.

Trade Union Facilities Time

Primary schools AGREED this de-delegation.

Secondary schools AGREED this de-delegation.

Special schools AGREED this de-delegation.

A member provided a point of information and stated that their understanding was that this budget was ringfenced and it had been underspent for some years. The member asked what had happened to the underspent budget. The Chair replied that this could be addressed under the relevant agenda item later in the meeting.

Contingency Fund

The Chair informed the Schools Forum that a document had been produced by the working group created at the last meeting to consider the Terms and Reference of the Schools Forum.

Currently schools contributed £16.19 to the fund. The purpose of the Contingency Fund was to support unexpected costs, however the Chair stated that this fund had also been used for predictable expenses. This fund has been underspent for some years and the underspend has been used to support the DSG. The document made recommendations for where some expenses should be allocated such as allocating CLEAPSS and Edufocus (EVOLVE) to Licenses as these were annual costs. The per-pupil contribution to the relevant budgets would increase to match this. This was a proposal, and a decision will come back to the Schools Forum.

The Chair asked why historic liability was included in the Contingency Fund. Terry Shaw replied that these were unforeseen costs from previous school reorganisations. Any redundancies were unforeseen and therefore supported from the Contingency Fund. The Chair stated that her understanding was that redundancies were paid from school budgets. Sara Walsingham replied that this was the case currently, however these were historic liabilities from prior agreements when redundancies were not paid from school budgets.

The Chair summarised that TARC (The Anti-racist Curriculum) and Trade Union Facilities Time should not be funded from the Contingency Fund and the underspend should not be supporting the HNB. Lisa Fraser clarified that the underspend did not get allocated to the HNB, it was used to support the DSG which was in deficit, mainly due to an overspend in the HNB. Lisa also added that the HNB supports all schools across the borough.

The Schools Forum discussed this further and AGREED that the current expenses paid from the Contingency remain for the 2025-26 year. The recommendations will be considered, and a new proposal will be shared with the Schools Forum for the 20206-27 year.

The Schools Forum considered the three proposals for the Contingency Plan as outlined in the report.

Option 1 was to uplift the 2024-2025 per pupil rate by the average NFF per pupil increase of 2.23% in 2025-2026and redistribute any underspend to the de-delegated schools on a pro-rata per pupil basis.

Option 2 was to uplift the 2024-2025 per pupil rate by the average NFF per pupil increase of 2.23% in 2025-2026and use any underspend to offset the DSG Deficit at year end.

Option 3 was to reduce the per pupil rate to provide funding only for the £126k projected to be spent from the Contingency Fund.

A member commented that if the budget was overspent it should be charged back to schools.

Primary schools AGREED option 3.

Secondary schools AGREED option 3.

Special schools AGREED option 3.

Education functions

The Education Functions rate for 2024-2025 for maintained schools is £29.44 per pupil. The proposal for 2025-2026 is to uplift the 2024-2025 per pupil rate by the average NFF per pupil increase of 2.23% in 2025-2026to cover increasing costs of delivering education functions.

The Education Functions rate for 2025-2026 is therefore proposed at £30.10 per pupil.

Primary schools AGREED this de-delegation.

Secondary schools AGREED this de-delegation.

Special schools AGREED this de-delegation.

**AGENDA ITEM 8: Growth and Falling Rolls Fund Allocations**

PRESENTING: Terry Shaw

A report on the Growth Fund and Falling Rolls Fund which included the Growth Operational Policy 2025-26 was presented.

The report outlined what the fund could and could not be used for. The fund cannot be used to support schools in financial difficulty; any such support for maintained schools should be provided from a de-delegated contingency. The fund also cannot be used for general growth due to popularity; this should be managed through lagged funding.

A member asked when threshold for drop in the number of children on roll increase from 5% to 10%. Sara Walsingham replied that it had been 10% for some time.

The Chair asked if the LA was able to move forward in its work to support schools with falling rolls. It was agreed that the policy would be discussed further at the June meeting. Action.

Lisa Fraser clarified that the parameters for using the Falling Rolls fund are set by the DfE.

The Growth Fund Policy was AGREED by the Schools Forum.

**AGENDA ITEM 9: Update on School Sustainability Support – 3 year funding plan**

PRESENTING: Catherine Grace

The Chair introduced this item and informed the Schools Forum that it had been agreed at the last Schools Forum and the Consultative Meetings that the Schools Sustainability work will be supported from the Contingency Fund for the next 2-3 years. Each school will be allocated 6 days of support to implement school reorganisation strategies. The Chair asked for more specific figures for this budget. Catherine Grace replied that she could not anticipate what those figures may look like at this point. The schools sufficiency support would continue for 4 years and it was difficult to anticipate what future years may look like at this point.

The Chair commented that it would be difficult for the Schools Forum to agree this budget without specific detail. Catherine Grace replied that any figure she provided would be projected figures and actual costs could be more or less.

Action: Provide greater clarity regarding the costs for School sufficiency work.

**AGENDA ITEM 10: Update on High Needs Block Strategy**

There was no update on this item.

**AGENDA ITEM 11: Update on Trade Unions Facilities Time**

Presenting: Pauline Maddison

Pauline Maddison informed the Schools Forum that following the agreement from the Schools Forum to commission a HR Consultant to produce a report and recommendations, Jacinta Gasson-Mulcahy had been commissioned. Jacinta will be meeting with all the unions individually.

Natasha Chaudhury stated that the decision of the Schools Forum had a caveat that the funding would be allocated subject to agreement from all unions that they would accept the recommendations. Natasha stated that she was concerned that this recommendation had not been communicated properly.

Natasha added that full transparency was needed about what had happened to the surplus arising from the previous underspends in this budget. Pauline Maddison replied that she would discuss this with Natasha after the meeting.

Pauline stated that a separate discussion had taken place with Unison. It was very probable that the recommendations from the review will result in some unions losing funds and some gaining funds, and this may be a challenge. For the 2024-25 year, it is almost certain that some schools have underclaimed.

The Chair stated that she and Pauline Maddison has discussed the caveat, and this was very clear to the LA.

**AGENDA ITEM 12: Update from Working Groups**

There were no updates from working groups.

**AGENDA ITEM 13: Date of Next Meeting**

Laura Worsley requested name cards for all members.

The date of the next meeting was the 18 June2025.

*The meeting ended at 10:20*

Summary of action points

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Agenda item** | **Action** | **Responsible** |
| 3 | Share the schedule for EYFS payments with schools  | Jess Milne |
| 8 | Discuss Falling Rolls Policy in June Schools Forum Meeting. | Clerk and Chair |
| 9 | Provide greater clarity regarding the costs for School sufficiency work.  | Catherine Grace |