

SCHOOLS FORUM

Date of Meeting: 22 June 2022

Venue: Virtually via Zoom

Chair: Fanoula Smith

TYPE	MEMBERSHIP
GOVERNORS	Alan Morton (AM); Jo Falkner (JF); Pip Pinhorn (PP); Abdul Chowdhury (AC)
HEADTEACHERS	Fanoula Smith (Chair), Brenda Landers (BL), Liz Figuerelo (LF); Paul Woods (PW), Maria Lewington (ML), Astrid Schon (AS), Kevin Jones (KJ)*, Becky Dolamore (BD), Veronica Armson (VA), Danny Lye (DL) and Graham Clifford (GC); Jemima Reilly (JR); Dee Bleach(DB)
Non-School Members	Kim Arrowsmith (PVI EYs Providers); Alex Kenny (NEU Trade Union Rep); and Tracy Smith (THEP).
OBSERVERS	Suhal Kadir
Officers in Attendance	James Thomas (JT); Kay Goodacre (KG); Farhad Ahmed (FA); Jess Milne (JM); Pat Chen (PC); Jess Milne; (JM); Sara Walsingham (SW); Steve Nyakatawa* (SN); Nikki Parsons(NP); John O'Shea (JO)

The meeting started at 08:3.

AGENDA ITEM 1: Welcome and apologies for absence

PRESENTING: Chair

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting. Apologies were received from Astrid Schon, Danny Lye and Paul Woods.

AGENDA ITEM 2: Minutes of the last meeting

PRESENTING: Chair

2.1 The minutes of the last meeting held on 9 March were agreed as an accurate record.

2.2 Matters arising

There were no matters arising.

AGENDA ITEM 3: Education update

PRESENTING: Steve Nyakatawa

Steve Nyakatawa gave a verbal update on Education and made the following salient points:

- There are at least 14 manifesto pledges of the new administration which relate to education. These are being considered and costed, and recommendations are being made to the Lead Member for Education.

AGENDA ITEM 4: Biannual review of the de-delegation budget

PRESENTING: Steve Nyakatawa

Steve Nyakatawa gave an update in the absence of Pat Chen and made the following points:

- A paper has been drafted on the Trade Union Facilities Time and has been sent to the Trade Union Forum. A meeting has been scheduled for 30 June where the facilities time will be finalised. A note will be sent to all with details of what was agreed.

A Member asked if the paper had been circulated with everyone and shared concerns that the paper addresses all relevant points. The Chair stated that the decision of the School's Forum was that facilities time needed to come in within budget and within the ACAS Guidelines, and requested that the paper is circulated to all members of the Forum.

Action Point: Circulate the paper on Trade Union Facilities Time to Schools Forum members.

AGENDA ITEM 5: Maternity Scheme Consultation Outcome

PRESENTING: Nikki Parsons

Nikki Parsons reminded members that the Maternity Pooling Arrangements were discussed at the last School's Forum meeting, and it had been agreed that a four-week consultation with schools would take place on the proposed withdrawal of the LBTH Schools' Maternity Pooling Arrangements from the 2023/24 financial year.

The consultation has taken place and headteachers and School Business Managers were consulted. Only one response was received which was against the proposed withdrawal but did not include any supporting arguments.

Details of a not-for-profit organisation which offers a similar scheme for schools was passed onto the Chair of the School Business Manager's Forum.

Schools Forum was requested to approve the withdrawal of the Maternity Pooling Scheme from the 2023-24 financial year.

The Schools Forum RESOLVED to withdraw the Maternity Pooling Scheme from the 2023-24 financial year.

A member requested that information about the not-for-profit organisation is shared with schools in the Headteacher's Bulletin.

Action Point: Share details of the not-for-profit Maternity Pooling organisation with schools in the Headteacher's Bulletin. Nikki Parsons

AGENDA ITEM 6: Finance Timeline

PRESENTING: Nikki Parsons

A paper on the Finance Information Timeline was shared with everyone prior to the meeting. Nikki Parsons informed the Forum that this paper sets out the timeline and

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flow of financial information in respect of schools funding for the remainder of the 2022/23 financial year.

The Chair stated that the final payment passported to schools is often made quite late in the year and schools do not always have the time to spend that money by the end of the year, and this may be contributing to the carry forward. NP replied that schools receive their budget share in monthly payments and in March a mop-up payment comprising of all grants received late by the LA is made to schools. Schools should be expecting that money and can make plans to spend that. Any final adjustments to SEN and EYFS are also made towards the end of the year and information regarding any adjustments is made as soon as possible.

KG informed members that a schedule of grants is available on the SLA portal and further added that as schools will know how much funding they will be receiving they will be able to progress on works when the ability is there to spend the money without going into deficit.

AGENDA ITEM 7: Provisional School Balances

PRESENTING: Kay Goodacre.

Kay Goodacre presented the paper on Provisional School Balances 2021-22 which was shared with everyone. The report informed Schools Forum of maintained school provisional balances as at 31st March 2022. The report also highlighted the schools to be reviewed under the balance control mechanism.

KG summarised key points and said that overall, the school revenue balances at the end of the 2021/22 financial year have increased by £3.7m (12%) to £34.3m. One concern to note is that primary cumulative surpluses have dropped significantly. Schools which have had a significant drop will be monitored. Secondary school balances have increased significantly. The team will consider if payments made late in the year are a contributing factor to these balances. Schools with balances over 12% will be contacted.

A Member asked if the carry forward balance is £34m? KG replied that £34.3m is the revenue balance only. The capital balance is approximately £2m. The Member commented that the data is presented such that it suggests that schools have lots of money, however this is not true. The Member stated that it is probable that only a small number of schools have significant carry forwards and presenting the data in this way suggest that schools in Tower Hamlets are very rich. KG acknowledged that the figures could suggest a picture which is misleading however balances have to be presented in a specific format in accordance with DfE guidelines. KG said that Tower Hamlets is unusual in the high number of maintained secondary schools it has, therefore the balance for secondary schools looks high in comparison to other LAs who have fewer maintained secondary schools. KG stated that there has been a significant degree of caution in some messages received from central government on whether the funding will go down and this is one of the reasons why it has been agreed that control mechanisms will only be considered on balances over 12%.

A Member stated that due to reporting deadlines it seems as if there are 2 month which are not accounted for. In schools most of the building work happen in the summer holiday and a lot of the work comes in over budget; a degree of flexibility is

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therefor needed. The Member stated that it is worrying that the balance for Tower Hamlets looks higher than other local authorities, particularly when it is not a true reflection. When presenting school balances is it possible to add additional information about what the reality is. Schools are being very cautious, and schools rolls in some areas have been fluctuating. KG responded that these factors are taken into account. It is difficult to compare with other LAs as there are not many which are similar to Tower Hamlets, however, those LAs which are similar to Tower Hamlets sometimes have balances which are at a similar level.

The Chair responded that she had looked at some other LAs and verbally shared the data for some of these with everyone. The Chair added that there is a variation of £4.5m in what has been reported this year. KG responded that Schools Finance Team did not believe there to be an error. The Chair replied that she has received year ends from schools which varies from what is presented by the Finance Team and it may be necessary to investigate the process.

A Member stated that it is important to carry out some work on how school balances are presented and the process, as the LA will be asked why the balances are so high. The Member agreed with the earlier point made that this figure is not an accurate reflection for most schools.

The Chair stated that at the last Consultative meeting headteachers had expressed concern about the reported carry-forward. The Chair proposed that a working group is set up to look at the process of how schools' balances are reported and benchmark against other LAs.

A Member asked who this data is presented to and what the outcome is. KG replied that the information is presented to the Schools Forum and in the statement of accounts. KG stressed that this is an accounting method of presenting balances, and not a presentational method. The DfE will use the information for benchmarking and will identify schools with excessive balances and those with deficits and will ask what the LA is doing to manage those balances. KG acknowledged the issues around committed funds. The Schools Finance Teams is working to identify and monitor issues and predict trajectories, in order to put support mechanisms in place. The Member asked how the DfE views the comparatively large surplus balance. KG replied that the DfE does not necessarily look at the surplus balance when allocating funding. The Member further commented that Academies are applauded for holding onto to large balances. KG stated that the LA would defend the position that the surplus balances have built up as a result of caution on the part of schools in response to concerns about changes to the National Funding Formula.

The Chair stated that at the Consultative meeting the concern was about discrepancies between different parts and what is counted in the figures. The Chair stated that commitments are not included in the end of year balance, and read out the definition of a commitment as:

'A commitment is an order placed for goods or services not yet received and no money has changed hands and the order can be cancelled.'

A creditor is defined as:

'Goods or services which have been received within the financial year and the invoice has been received and dated before 31 of March but the timing of it

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means that it may not be paid within the financial year is not counted within the end of year balance.'

KG stated that a creditor is an accrual. Accruals are all goods or services received over the threshold of £10k for which payments have not been made. All schools were asked to clear all invoices before the end of the financial year if there are no issues and most schools were able to do this. KG emphasised schools accounting was a major issue picked up by the external auditors when they audited the LAs accounts.

A Member stated that the LA has put a lot of work into engaging with schools and setting up a working group with School Business Managers (SBMs) in order to make the year-end process smoother. A series of workshops were organised for SBMs, and also for schools using Sage as a system however not all schools engaged in the workshops. This year, earlier targeted sessions will be organised to support schools so that they can be better prepared before the year-end. The Chair thanked the Member and commented that some of the trainings she had attended had been very good. The Chair further commented that she is proposing a discourse about the process and how things are done.

The Forum discussed the membership of the working party to look at the end of year process and KG stressed that it is important that the LA continues to present accounting data following accounting guidelines and it may be helpful to have accountants on the group. The Schools Finance Team is working with the Financial Improvement Scheme and with the Central Accounting Team. KG stated that she would be happy to attend the Consultative meeting to address the concerns raised by headteachers.

The Schools Forum agreed that the Chair would work with headteachers group to seek representation in the working party to review the year end process.

AGENDA ITEM 8: High Needs

PRESENTING: John O'Shea and Kay Goodacre

Kay Goodacre stated that new members are needed to join the High Needs working group to review the process of distributing funding. Although funding is significantly improved, there are still significant deficits. The Chair stated that the group was made up of school representatives and therefore the successors of previous school members would replace them. KG added that it is also important to have members who have an interest in the group. The Chair added that there is an outstanding piece of work started by the group on children who do not have an EHCP but may require some transitional funding. JO added that Jess Milne would be useful to include in the group to support conversations about funding for nursery schools.

JO informed everyone that there is increased interest in resource base provisions and in setting up provisions in schools. JO is working on information for schools to support setting up provisions.

The Chair asked about key performance indicators for any satellite type provisions. JO replied that any school interested in setting up a resource base provision will be given a criterion which they must meet. The provisions which have opened more

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recently have fixed SLAs with a clear set of agreed KPIs based on the needs and circumstances of the provision. KPIs are usually around outcomes, attendance and the support provided to children and families. The Chair asked about outreach services from provisions with developing specialisms. The Chair stated that when this was reviewed a few years ago the funding differential for provision bases was quite different and there is a discrepancy between different bases in the LA. This will need to be revisited at some point. JO confirmed that this is correct and that one of the areas of work achieved by the working party was to review the funding received by the special schools and this work will now progress to looking at resource bases.

The Schools Forum resolved that the following members would form the working group: Jemima O'Reilly, Alan Morton, Veronica Armson (to be confirmed as VA was absent), Jo Faulkner, Astrid Schon and Fanoula Smith as well as Kay Goodacre and John O'Shea.

AGENDA ITEM 9: Forum Membership

PRESENTING: Farhad Ahmed

Farhad Ahmed gave an update on membership. There are currently 9 vacancies. The Headteacher vacancies will be addressed at the Headteacher's Consultative meeting next week. There are 3 Governor vacancies and all governors have been invited to nominate themselves and some expressions of interest have been received. There are also some Academy Headteacher positions which have been difficult to fill. There is also a vacant position for a non-executive member of the Council which has been vacant for some years, and it may be useful to review this position.

Action Point: Contact the Lead Member for Education to fill the non-executive position in the Schools Forum. SN.

FA invited nominations for the positions of Chair and Vice-Chair.

FA informed everyone that Brenda Landers has agreed to be nominated if there is no other nomination for the position of Chair.

A Member nominated Fanoula Smith for the position of Chair.

The Forum resolved that Brenda Landers would Chair the Schools Forum on the condition that Brenda Landers is re-elected as a secondary school headteacher representative.

Nominations for the position of Vice-Chair were received for Kevin Jones and Graham Clifford.

The Forum resolved to appoint Kevin Jones and Graham Clifford as joint Vice-Chairs.

AGENDA ITEM 10: Workplan 2022-23 and future items

10.1 Future items

1. Falling rolls
2. De-delegation
3. Central Services Grant

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10.2 Workplan

The workplan and finance timeline 2022-23 was shared with all members prior to the meeting.

The meeting ended at 9:55

Summary of action points

Action Point: Circulate the paper on Trade Union Facilities Time to Schools Forum members. Pat Chen.

Action Point: Share details of the not for profit Maternity Pooling organisation with schools in the Headteacher's Bulletin. Nikki Parsons

Action Point: Contact the Lead Member for Education to fill the non-executive position in the Schools Forum. Steve Nyakatawa.