

Schools Forum Task & Finish Group

Notes of key points raised at the meeting held on 2 March 2016

In attendance

Bill Dowell (Chair of Schools Forum) [BD], Nick Bardsley (Deputy Portfolio Folder, Children's Services) [NB], Mark Rogers (Headteacher, Oxon CE Primary) [MR], Phil Adams (Headteacher, Corbet School Technology College) [PA], Kay Redknap (Head of Service, TMBSS) [KR], Sandra Holloway (School Business Manager, Meole Brace CE Primary) [SHol], John Hitchings (Vice Chair of Schools Forum) [JH], David Minnery [Portfolio holder – Children's Services] [DM], Sabrina Hobbs (Principal, Severndale Academy) [SHob], Yvette McDaniel (Headteacher, Prees CE Primary School) [YM].

Local authority officers:

Karen Bradshaw [KB], Tina Russell [TR], Gwyneth Evans [GE], Stephen Waters [SW], Phil Wilson [PW] and Julia Dean [JD].

1 **Welcome**

BD welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2 **Apologies**

Apologies had been received from Ruth Thomas, Pete Johnstone and Alan Parkhurst.

3 **Notes from the meeting held on 13 January 2016**

The notes were agreed as a true and accurate record of the meeting.

4 **Update on the national position**

PW circulated a copy of the 'Fair Funding PR Strategy 2016', drawn up by f40 in preparation for the launch of the fair funding consultation. The indication is that the consultation will be launched shortly and, due to political pressures, may be in 2 stages. The first stage will deal with the principles of fair funding and not the impact analysis on individual LA funding.

The second stage will probably follow the London Mayoral election on 5 May and is likely to see the widening of the scope of the consultation to include the impact analysis of national funding on individual authorities.

There are strong indications that the commitment from Government to the deadline of introducing national funding in 2017-18 remains, though it is clear that delivery will be extremely tight. There are suggestions that September 2017 rather than April 2017 might be the start date.

5 Work undertaken since the last meeting

High Needs Budget Analysis 2016-17

PW circulated and took the Group in detail through the paper 'High Needs Budget Analysis 2016-17' and explained that further detailed analysis would be undertaken to confirm the current estimated costs. The paper demonstrated that it was possible to release up to £600k from this budget to support the pressures on Early Help that had been highlighted at the meeting on 13 January.

The paper also proposed the re-establishment of the High Needs Task & Finish Group to undertake a review of the current application of resources and the arrangements for reporting and monitoring spending. The group will draw on representation from the pre and post 16 specialist providers, the primary and secondary mainstream settings and local authority SEN officers.

MR reported that Shrewsbury headteachers feel they have been misled and are not happy that there is an underspend in High Needs funding when they are being told that children cannot get ECHPs because there is not enough funding available.

JD advised that Shropshire has a very high percentage of statements, well above the national average. Ofsted will be challenging this. There is no evidence that Shropshire has a higher percentage of High Needs children.

SHob reported that there have been significant changes in the types of pupils her school is seeing. She stated that children should not be in alternative provision if they can be in mainstream schools. By not being placed in mainstream funding for pupils will be diverted to cover transport costs rather than provision. Her view was that support should be provided in a mainstream environment.

KB added that local hubs have been developed by the local authority. However, there is only a certain level of capacity in alternative provision. She felt that SENCos needed earlier and more consistent support in schools and that schools were potentially losing out through not being able to access an SEN adviser. It was noted that the role of a SENCo can be hard and lonely.

MR advised that he had explained to Shrewsbury headteachers that if they wanted more funding to be targeted towards High Needs it would need to be drawn from the Schools Block and therefore their

school budget shares. This highlighted a gap in the understanding among some school leaders on how school funding operates.

JD made the point that the issue was not only about the funding but about how support is being provided for young people.

PA asked how schools access additional funding for pupils who need greater support. He advised that secondary headteachers had similar concerns to their primary colleagues.

JH asked if the proposal was a short term measure. BD confirmed that it has to be a short term measure and needs to be reviewed, hence the proposal to re-establish the High Needs Task & Finish Group. He went on to advise that there are legacy issues within how the funding has historically been applied and that the increased scrutiny being employed will bottom out how to most effectively utilise the resources for the benefit of our children and young people.

JH suggested this was a decision of principle and questioned whether cross subsidisation is ever a good idea. A one step short term solution is always a concern.

YM asked if the proposed £600k wasn't committed to Early Help what other pressures could it be spent on.

At this point PW circulated a paper and attachment on Early Help, highlighting how the targeted element of the work is funded and the areas that are currently receiving support via the 'Contribution to Combined Budgets' line within the Central Provision within School Budget part of centrally retained DSG.

TR provided an overview of the Early Help service and the support for children and families. The local authority budget is reducing and so the focus has to be on the delivery of statutory services and not necessarily what is already in place. As a consequence there is a need to look to DSG, CCG and other sources for contributions towards the costs of non-statutory work.

JD added that the strong Early Help work is having an impact on reducing challenging behaviour in the classroom.

YM enquired whether headteachers are asked for their opinion on Early Help services. TR advised that the service had undertaken a number of surveys with schools which highlighted the general effectiveness of the provision.

MR stated that he had not been aware that Early Help was already receiving funding from DSG which he felt was positive. He asked how much funding was centrally retained in total. SW estimated that about £3.7m was retained out of a total budget of £155m.

There was some discussion on the percentage top-slice converting academies receive. It was confirmed that academies receive £140 per pupil on top of their budget share and so reference to a percentage top-slice is not relevant.

KB stated that there was a need for shared responsibility between the local authority and schools.

PA said that schools are facing unprecedented pressures dealing with the costs of the living wage, National Insurance contributions, pensions and the lack of funding for pay progression.

BD advised that the Council's Leader is putting pressure on the government for an improved funding settlement for Shropshire.

KR asked if the £600k was not put into Early Help, what would the consequence be. KB advised that the Early Help service would have to reduce.

BD advised that it is proposed that a separate Task & Finish Group be set up to review Early Help. KR added that there was a need for better collaborative working to support children. PA stressed that there was an urgency in getting the group up and running.

MR asked if other local authorities are using DSG to support Early Help. KB confirmed that they are. MR advised that it would be useful if the practice in other local authorities was better understood and shared. PW referenced that some interesting work is taking place in Derbyshire.

SH felt that the retained model potentially represented better value than if the funding was delegated.

MR asked if academies would contribute and GE confirmed that they would.

MR asked what the whole £6 million Early Help budget covered. TR advised it includes services like short breaks for children with disabilities and targeted special youth support.

JH referenced the need for Schools Forum to better understand the detail of the centrally retained budgets. He was dismayed that school leaders don't fully understand the high level finances. BD suggested that he and JH get together to work up a communications strategy.

6 Ways forward

BD summarised the meeting by proposing that the Task & Finish Group take forward the following recommendations to Schools Forum on 17 March 2016:

- The urgent re-establishment of the High Needs Task & Finish Group to review of the current application of High Needs resources and the arrangements for reporting and monitoring spending
- The release of £600k in 2016-17 from the High Needs Block of funding to support Early Help
- The urgent setting up of an Early Help Task & Finish Group to undertake a review of the current application of resources to support Early Help and to determine how the additional £600k DSG funding released in 2016-17 will be applied to existing contracts and services, to review how it will be used 2017-18, and to look at improvements in provision going forward through co-commissioning and exploring opportunities for pooling resources.

7 Any other business

There was no further business and so BD thanked all attendees for their time and contributions to the meeting.

8 Next meeting

No date was set for the next meeting. This will be determined by the timing of the launch of the consultation on national fair funding.