

SOUTHWARK CHILDREN'S SERVICES - SCHOOLS FORUM

THURSDAY 29th SEPTEMBER 2022

14.00 to 15.30

Via Zoom

DRAFT MINUTES

- 1. Attendance and Apologies:** - See Annex A
- 2. Quorum:** The Clerk confirmed that the meeting was quorate
- 3. Election of Chair**

The clerk had received a nomination for Pia Longman, there being no other nominations Pia Longman was duly elected as Chair for the 2022/23 academic year
- 4. Election of Vice Chair**

The clerk received a nomination for Janice Babb, there being no other nominations Janice Babb was duly elected as Vice Chair for the 2022/23 academic year
- 5. Thanks to Outgoing Chair**
 - 5.1 The Schools Forum expressed their thanks to Sister Anne Marie, the previous chair, who had held the elected post since 2010 and been a member for longer. The Director said that she would write to thank her for all her years of service to the Schools Forum.
- 6. Declaration of Interests**

Members were asked to declare any pecuniary or other interests they might have that were greater than the interests of other members of the Schools Forum in any matter on the agenda for discussion. None were declared.
- 7. Virtual or In Person Attendance for Future Meetings**
 - 7.1 There had been a survey amongst members with a mixed response as to whether to hold future meetings virtually or in person. There is a notable increase in attendance when held by conference link. Overall, though, members had preferred that meetings should be by dual media, i.e., in person at a suitable venue as well as by conference link for those wishing to attend that way.
 - 7.2 There are technical and venue issues for doing both at the same time. Both the chair and the vice chair believed the issue was that members should receive a briefing prior to the meeting on often what are long and complex issues, as many feel ill prepared. And, that in order to get feedback from their constituents before the meeting, briefings should be open to a wider audience, something that Headteachers had asked for previously.
 - 7.3 It was acknowledged that sometimes the difficulty with getting papers circulated the 7 days prior to the meeting was often due to the DFE changing their deadlines on having to receive responses from Schools Forums. It was suggested that perhaps a webinar approach was taken, whereby Headteachers could dial into the officers briefing to Schools Forum members prior to the meetings.

7.4 The Local Authority (LA) undertook to keep this under review and hold their pre-meeting briefings for the Chair and Vice Chair. The Schools Forum decided that they would also keep the method of attendance under review but future meetings will at least be available by conference link although this does cause an issue as Schools Forum meetings are required to be available to the public. A solution to the latter issue will be looked at by the clerk and the LA.

8. Minutes of the Meeting of 16th June 2022

8.1 These were agreed for accuracy.

8.2 Matters Arising:

8.2.1 Charging for Family Early Help Service – The LA reported that a letter was in draft awaiting clearance, ready to be sent to those academies who had not been paying for the service – the LA undertook to provide feedback to the Schools Forum on the outcome.

8.2.2 Maintained Secondary School Improvement Service – The LA reported that there are only two secondary schools that are LA maintained, the rest are academies or converting to academy status and who make their own arrangements for receiving support for School Improvement. The LA has opened discussions with the remaining LA school as to the service to provide.

8.2.3 Maternity Reimbursement Scheme – progress of return of funds to schools – see item 9

8.2.4 Balance Control Mechanism Thresholds- See item 10

8.2.5 Terms of Reference of the Panel for reviewing schools' balances - The process is set out in Item 11

8.2.6 Publication of the Strategic Plan on Surplus Places – This is behind schedule but is due to go to Cabinet on the 18th October 2022 and will then be public.

8.2.7 Outcome of External Audit of 2021-22 Dedicated Schools Grant Outturn – the LA reported that this is just starting.

9. Dedicated Schools Grant 2022-23 Budget Monitoring and Financial Update

9.1 This report had previously been circulated with the agenda and gave details of the financial position as at 31st August 2022 which showed a net in year deficit of £2m making a total projected outturn deficit of £23.65m again caused by the pressures on the High Needs Block.

9.2 The de-delegated maternity fund budget underspent by £180k in 2021-22 and the Schools Forum agreed that this should be returned to the schools that bought into the Fund.

9.3 The Schools Forum asked that with the falling rolls in both primary and secondary schools in the borough, why does the DSG still retain monies for a Growth Fund?, the LA said that was in case there was in fact an increase demand in a certain geographical area that required a bulge class though that seems less likely now.

- 9.4 There was concern expressed at both the funding and cost forecast for 2023-24 especially the low figure of 6.5% inflation used by the DfE when schools are already experiencing higher inflationary costs. This could mean every school having a net 6% reduction in its funding for 2023-24.
- 9.5 Following a question, the LA confirmed that the maternity scheme was run on a financial year basis and should maintained nursery schools wish to buy into it in 2023-24 then they would be asked at the December 2022 or January 2023 Schools Forum meetings.
The rest of the report was noted.

10. Safety Valve Intervention Programme (DSG Management Plan)

- 10.1 This report with its appendices and annexes had been circulated earlier and outlined the Safety Valve Intervention Programme and the Council's response to the invitation to participate in the programme. This intervention is the Department for Education's (DfE) response to the significant accumulation of Dedicated School Grant (DSG) deficits by most English Local Authorities (LAs), almost in entirety because of continuing to meet statutory responsibilities for children and young people (CYP) with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).
- 10.2 Southwark Council is currently involved in discussions with the DfE to secure £23m in 'Safety Valve' funding to eliminate the cumulative DSG deficit in return for delivering a more efficient and effective high needs service.
- 10.3 Although the majority of the deficit in the High Needs Block is historic, COVID has impacted by increasing the number of EHCPs and now with high inflation there is still a pressure on the High Needs Block.
- 10.4 The LA in conjunction with the High Needs Group have worked to reduce costs and was achieving an in-year balance. The Safety Valve Programme will, if the LA meets specific milestones set down by the DfE, attract £23m over the 5 year plan. Details of the actions required to get the High Needs Block balanced each year have been identified by the LA and are set out in the various appendices.
- 10.5 At the same time the DfE are changing the rules on where this deficit sits in a LA's accounts- from being in the DSG to being in the council's overall accounts i.e., the general fund making it a clear council responsibility to get out of deficit.
- 10.6 The steps required include securing provision in-borough for those children that currently go outside the borough to high cost provision – this will involve capital funding.
- 10.7 Included in the Plan is the freezing of the top up fees paid to providers – including EHCPs in mainstream schools, in resource bases and special schools. Currently the initial benchmarking shows that Southwark's top up rates are one of the highest. The LA will carry out a full benchmarking exercise to understand more how Southwark compares. It was agreed that members of the Schools Forum from all type of provider would be involved in this exercise.

- 10.8 Another element of the Plan is the LA reinstating its need to come to the Schools Forum each year to request a 0.5% transfer of the Schools Block of the DSG to the High Needs Block.
- 10.9 It was noted that to deliver a lot of the savings will require other partners in EHCPs to co-operate, especially Health and Social Care - the LA said it will be looking towards getting the Health, Education and Social Care Board back up and running to address this. It was also asked as to what if the milestones are not met?, the LA said that they were seeking clarification themselves on this from the DfE.
- 10.10 However, key is that if the savings identified are not met then alternative measures must be identified that do achieve the required level of savings to get the budget back into balance.
- 10.11 The LA appreciate a lot of information has been circulated in what is quite a large complex document and with a short time to comment on, therefore the LA will arrange a webinar for Monday 3rd or Tuesday 4th October for Schools Forum members to enable them to be able to submit comments to the LA before the submission is due with the DfE on the 6th October.

11. Balance Control Mechanism

- 11.1 This report set out the details of those schools who at the 31st March 2022 had exceeded the balance control mechanism capping limit and to advise the LA on whether their excess balances should be removed.
- 11.2 The process is one that has been in operation for some time with schools having to justify their level of balances and recently having some of those balances “held by the LA in trust” until the relevant invoices are received for the work done.
- 11.3 As a follow up to a question at the previous Schools Forum meeting the thresholds of 5% for secondary and 8% for primary set down by the DfE are in fact only guidance and the LA, in practice uses a higher rate of around 14%. The Schools Forum felt that as this is contentious with schools that there should be simple Terms of Reference in place for the Decision Panel especially where there is an Appeals process that is final.
- 11.4 The Schools Forum supported the LA’s recommendation that the balances of the six schools specified in the report be capped.

12. Redeployment of School Staff

- 12.1 This information report gave the current redeployment options used by the council and its latest advice for schools.
The report was noted

13. LA Central Retention of Budgets Review – Preliminary Findings item deferred

14. The Schools Forum Sub Group – Report Back - item deferred

15. Any Other Business

15.1 Updating the SEN 'Ready Reckoner' – this is used for determining the costs of support staff who support children with special/additional needs. The LA agreed it was out of date and inaccurate partly due to outstanding pay awards and that schools often use different spine points. This will hopefully get picked up by the benchmarking to be done for the Safety Valve Programme especially as the proposal is to freeze top up rates.

15.2 Requests for Statutory Assessment – in response to a question as to whether successful applications are backdated to the date of application and are these subsequently included in the additional funding paid to schools by way of the EHCP Inclusion fund money. The LA clarified the position in that the SEND Inclusion Fund is only applicable for pre-school settings and nurseries and that for mainstream funding, this comes from the High Needs Block - in most cases there is only a few weeks delay with no provision to backdate.

16. Dates of Meetings for 2022/23 - Virtual

8 December 2022, 12 January 2023, 15 June 2023.

**Annex A
SCHOOLS FORUM ATTENDANCE SHEET**

29th September 2022

VOTING MEMBERS

NAME	CONSTITUENCY	PRESENT
Janice Babb	Primary School Headteacher (RC)	Yes
Susannah Bellingham	Primary School Headteacher (Com)	Yes
Pia Longman	Primary School Headteacher CofE	Yes
Vacant	Primary School Headteacher (Com)	
Vacant	Primary School Governor (Com)	
Vacant	Primary School Governor (VA)	
Rebecca Sherwood	Nursery School Headteacher	Yes
Heid Tully	Special School Headteacher	Yes
Nicola Howard	Early Years – Private/Voluntary and Independent Settings	Yes
Steve Morrison	Academy	Apologies
Nick Tildesley	Academy (Primary)	Apologies
Declan Jones	Academy	Yes
James Wilson	Academy	Yes
Steph Lea	Special School Academy	Yes
Yomi Adewoye	Pupil Referral Units	Yes
Vacant	Secondary School Headteacher	Yes
Vacant	FE SEN	Awaiting nomination from LA
Catherine May	Diocesan Boards	Yes
Betty Joseph	Trade Unions	Yes

Senior Officers in Attendance

Nina Dohel	Yes with colleagues
E Nolan	Yes
Yvonne Ely	Yes
Dave Richards	Yes

Nina Dohel	Yes with colleagues
Kate Bingham	Yes
Nikki Tilson	Yes
Richard Hunter	Yes
David Cross	Clerk

DRAFT