

DUDLEY SCHOOLS FORUM

Tuesday 5th February 2008 at 6.00pm
Saltwells Education Centre, Bowling Green Road, Netherton

PRESENT

Mr Patterson (Chair)
Mrs Griffiths (Vice Chair)
Mrs Blunt, Mr Conway, Mrs Elwiss, Mr Francis, Mrs Garratt, Mr Harrington, Mr Hatton, Mrs Hazlehurst, Mr Hudson, Ms Hughes, Mr James, Mr Leyshon, Mr Lynch, Mr Millman, Mr Mountney, Councillor Nottingham, Mr Ridley, Mr Robertson, Ms Smith, Mr Sorrell and Mr Wassall.

OFFICERS

Mr R Watson – Assistant Director of Children's Services (Resources), Mrs C Peek – Assistant Director of Children's Services (Partnership and Children's Trust) and Ms J Porter – Assistant Director of Children's Services (Early Years, Youth and Education Services) (Directorate of Children's Services), Mrs K Cocker – Children's Services Finance Manager, and Mrs S Coates – Principal Accountant (Directorate of Finance, ICT & Procurement) and Mr Jewkes – Democratic Services Officer (Directorate of Law & Property) - All Dudley M.B.C.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Mr Bell, Ms Cosgrove, Mr Ingram, Mr Timmins, Councillor Mrs Walker and John Freeman – Director of Children's Services.

The following substitutions were also noted: -

Mrs Garratt serving as a substitute for Mr Lloyd, Mr Lynch serving as substitute for Mr Warner, and Ms Hughes serving as a substitute for Mr Temple.

2. MINUTES

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the meeting of the Forum held on 11th December, 2007, be approved as a correct record and signed.

3. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES

In connection with Minute Number 5 – Membership of Schools Forums – Mr Jewkes reported that two new members, Ms Smith and Mr Temple, had been appointed to the Forum to represent the Early Years Provider Reference Group and the local 14-19 Strategic Partnership respectively.

In connection with Minute Number 5 – Membership of Schools Forums, the Chairman advised that the issue of membership would be considered in a report relating to the updating of the Forum's Constitution, which would be submitted to a future meeting.

In connection with Minute Number 6 – 14-19 Reforms, it was noted that as the Local Authority was still awaiting strategic guidance from DCSF, there were no substantial developments to report. In view of this, a report on the issue would be submitted to the next meeting of the Forum.

4. COMMON ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK (CAF) – UPDATE

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted on the progress made regarding the implementation of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) and the funding for related staffing for the 2008/09 and 2009/10 financial years.

In submitting the report, Ms Peek (Assistant Director of Children's Services – Partnership and Children's Trust) reported that, following concerns expressed by members at the last Forum meeting, she had raised the issue of the future funding of the CAF with the other partner agencies, and had sought confirmation from them that they would commit their share of the required funds to the related pooled budget for the next two financial years. Since the last meeting she had received written confirmation from both the Police and the Dudley Group of Hospitals that this would be the case. In addition to this, £33,000 had been secured from the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund, as allocated by the Dudley Community Partnership, meaning that, subject to the Forum agreeing to continue to commit funding on behalf of schools, the required funding had been secured in full. The NRF funding for this financial year covered this year only, so the current financial year is balanced with contributions from all areas. The NRF will not be available or required for financial year 08/09 and 09/10 which the length of commitment required from schools forum as all partners are signed up and agree to the same future two years funding.

Arising from consideration of the report, members raised a number of questions in relation to the role and constitution of the Children's Trust Executive Board, which was responsible, under the relevant legislation, for the establishment and maintenance of a cross-agency coordination framework. In responding to these questions, Ms Peek advised that the Children's Trust, formerly known as the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership, had been established under the

Children Act 2004 with the aim of establishing cross-agency partnership in relation to the well-being, care and education of children and young people. The administration of the body was primarily funded by the Council, and two Dudley Headteachers, Ms Tessa Jordan of Olive Hill Primary and Mr John Howells of Leasowes Community College, served as representatives of schools.

Members also raised questions in relation to the number of staff who would need to be recruited in order for the service to be rolled out, and expressed concern that the Forum was being asked to commit to two years additional funding, given the uncertainty across the Local Authority in relation to education budgets. In responding, Ms Peek stated that a Team Manager and one Township Manager had already been appointed, with another four Township Managers to be appointed as soon as was practicable. The integrated service delivery (locality working) was to be piloted in Halesowen and extended to the other four townships when appropriate. This would put resources on the ground nearer to schools to support the delivery of CAF and Lead Professional (LP). She added that the reason funding was being sought for the next two years was that it was envisaged that this initial period would entail an intensive amount of work which would deplete as time went on. In view of this, the staff recruited so far had only been appointed on two-year secondments, after which they would return to their original posts. It was felt that when the integrated processes of CAF and LP were fully embedded that the secondments would finish, unless the Children's Trust felt that further work was required, in which they would need to review how the work was funded. The development and embedding of these processes would achieve the swift and easy referral required as part of the designation of extended schools and all schools were required to be extended schools by 2010.

Following further discussion on the matter, a vote was taken and it was

RESOLVED

1. That the information in relation to progress made regarding the implementation of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF), as set out in the report submitted, be noted.
2. That, following a majority vote, the proposal that funding be allocated from the Dedicated Schools Grant to the Common Assessment Framework pooled budget for the 2008/09 and 2009/10 financial years, be endorsed.
3. That further reports, providing an update in respect of the implementation of the Framework, be submitted to the Forum during the Autumn and Spring terms of each of the financial years referred to above.

5. SCHOOL FUNDING SETTLEMENT – 2008-11

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted on the School Funding Settlement announcement made by the DCSF on 12th November, 2007, for the forthcoming budget planning cycle for 2008-11.

In submitting the report, Mrs Cocker advised that when the report had been prepared she had been awaiting confirmation of projected pupil numbers for Dudley, which would determine the level of DSG received for the 2008-11 period. Early indications of pupil numbers, derived from the Schools Census data, had now been confirmed, and indicated that the number of pupils attending Dudley schools would fall by at least 710 in the next academic year.

With this information in mind, Mrs Cocker referred to a series of possible budget strategies, set out in a table in paragraph 7 of the report, which she had modelled in anticipation of the Schools Census and SLASC data. The table showed a series of budget scenarios based on the number of children Dudley Local Authority would 'lose', ranging from 600 to 800. In view of the fact that, as reported, the number of children attending Dudley schools would fall by at least 710, she proposed that the budget model based on the 'loss' of 800 pupils be adopted as an interim budget until the next Schools Forum meeting on 18th March, 2008.

In relation to the £436,000 set aside in 2007/08 budgets for the Cradley High School closure and to cover any unforeseen budget changes, it was proposed that the same amounts be set aside for 2008/09 for the same purposes.

At this juncture, Mr Watson updated the Forum on an additional budget pressure relating to the Pay and Grading Review currently being undertaken by the Local Authority, in accordance with legislative requirements. He stated that the Review, the purpose of which was to harmonise the various pay scales in existence across the Council, was likely to have a budgetary impact on the Directorate of Children's Services and within schools themselves. In addition to possible changes to the salaries being paid to staff, there was the potential for retrospective equal pay claims to be made which could prove a significant cost. In order to try and mitigate against any increase in salary costs, it was proposed that £1 million be set aside in the 2007/08 DSG budget outturn. This would cause the DSG to overspend for 2007/08 and, in accordance with DCSF regulations, this overspend would need to be first call on the 2008/09 DSG allocation. Thus the 2008/09 DSG would be top sliced immediately from the 2008/09 DSG when received. The effect of this action would result in a breach of the CEL (Central Expenditure Limit) for 2008/09.

Members agreed that this was a very serious issue, particularly in view of the effect that increased staffing costs would have on the level of support staff schools were able to afford. It was noted that this problem would be particularly damaging to special schools, which naturally employed large numbers of Teaching Assistants and other support staff. Members therefore supported the proposed strategy of setting aside £1 million in the DSG to help deal with any costs emerging from the Review.

RESOLVED

1. That the information in relation to the School Funding Settlement announcement made by the DCSF on 12th November, 2007, for the forthcoming budget planning cycle for 2008-11, as contained in the report submitted, be noted.
2. That the proposal that the Dedicated Schools Grant for 2008/09 be allocated in accordance with the budget model based on the number of children attending Dudley schools falling by 800, as set out in paragraph 7 of the report submitted, be endorsed as an interim budget until the Forum meeting on 18th March, 2008.

6. EARLY YEARS PROVIDER REFERENCE GROUP – UPDATE

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted on recent progress of the work of the Early Years Provider Reference Group.

Ms Coates reported that the Group had now undertaken, in accordance with DCSF requirements, a data collection exercise involving local PVI nursery providers. The data had been gathered by the distribution of questionnaires to all 89 Dudley PVI providers. Of these, 44 (49%) were returned, with 27 (30%) being fully completed and returned within the designated timescales.

A report containing an analysis of this data was appended to the report submitted, and Ms Coates advised that this report now completed would be published as required by the DCSF before 31st March, 2008 and would form the basis of a review of funding for Early Years leading to the introduction of a single funding formula by April, 2010. Further updates would be submitted to future meetings of the Forum.

In responding to a question in relation to the response to the survey, Ms Porter stated that she felt that this was due to the fact that PVI providers had never before been requested to provide the requested information, elements of which were quite sensitive, and were consequently reluctant to share it with the Local Authority. It was her hope that over time a more trusting relationship would be built up between the Local Authority and the external providers which would provide more robust data and enable appropriate improvements to the

funding formula.

RESOLVED

1. That the information in relation to recent progress of the work of the Early Years Provider Reference Group, as contained in the report submitted, be noted.
2. That the proposal that Nursery Education Funding (NEF) in Dudley be increased at the rate of inflation for the 2008/09 financial year, as set out in paragraph 6 of the report submitted, be endorsed.

7. CLOSURE OF CRADLEY HIGH SCHOOL – UPDATE

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted on the 2007/08 funding process, together with the revenue budget position, in respect of Cradley High School.

Ms Coates reported that the current budget position showed a projected overspend of £155,000 for 2007/08. It was noted, however, that this estimate was based on the 48 staff currently working at the school being retained until the end of March 2008 and, as efforts were currently under way to redeploy these staff, this was a worst-case scenario. Further to this, should it prove impossible to redeploy any of the existing staff before the school closed, it was estimated that the total cost of the resulting redundancies would be approximately £475,000, provision for which had been made in the Schools Budget forecast for 2007/08.

RESOLVED

That the information in relation to the 2007/08 funding process together with the revenue budget position in respect of Cradley High School, as contained in the report submitted, be noted.

8. DEDICATED SCHOOLS GRANT (DSG) FINANCIAL MONITORING – SCHOOLS BUDGET – 2007/08

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted on the latest budget monitoring data, correct up to 31st December, 2007, in respect of the Schools Budget for the 2007/08 financial year.

Mrs Cocker reported that the current budget position showed a projected underspend of £154,000 which, subject to any emerging cost pressures in the remainder of 2007/08, would be carried forward to the DSG for 2008/09. She reported that budgets were under spent in a number of areas, and despite projected overspends in relation to the closure of Cradley High School, including monies set aside as a contingency to fund the maximum potential redundancy costs, the budget outturn showed a surplus. In addition, it was hoped that the full £475,000 set aside to fund redundancies arising from the Cradley High closure would not be required, as staff would be redeployed.

It was noted, as discussed earlier in the meeting (Minute Number 5), that £1 million would also be set aside in the DSG to help deal with any costs emerging from the ongoing Pay and Grading Review, which would result in the DSG overspend at 31st March, 2008.

RESOLVED

1. That the information in relation to the latest budget monitoring data, correct up to 31st December, 2007, in respect of the Schools Budget for the 2007/08 financial year, as contained in the report submitted, be noted.
2. That a provision of £1m should now be set aside in the 2007/08 accounts in respect of the likely impact on schools from the Pay and Grading Review, the outcome of which would result in an overspend on the Schools Budget at 31st March, 2008.
3. That a further update on the budget position covering the period from 29th February, 2008, be submitted to the next meeting of the Forum, and that any necessary financial action be agreed at that point.

9. ASTLEY BURF OUTDOOR EDUCATION CENTRE

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted on the current operational situation at Astley Burf Outdoor Education Centre, and the possibilities for addressing the current budgetary shortfall.

Mr Watson reported that following the support expressed by the Forum at its last meeting for the maintenance of the service provided at Astley Burf, the report had been written to provide members with additional information in relation to the funding mechanisms currently in place at the Centre, and the possible courses of action for dealing with the budget deficit it was currently facing. He stated that the main cause of the deficit was the Local Authority's policy of not charging children who received School Meals (FSM), for their use of the facility. In order for this principle to be retained, it would be necessary to identify additional funds from elsewhere in order to bridge the funding gap. It was proposed that this be done either by charging schools for the FSM

children they sent to the Centre, or by top slicing the DSG to make up the annual shortfall.

Arising from consideration of the report, members commented that the charging of schools for their FSM children would be unfair and would ultimately result in less children being able to benefit from the facility. In this regard, it was generally agreed that whilst it was disappointing that the Centre would need to be subsidised each year from the DSG, this was the only fair means of securing the future of the service for the Borough's children.

In the discussion on the matter, a member raised the question of whether or not the additional monies could be devolved to schools as part of their deprivation funding, as it could then be counted in the Local Authority's Deprivation Funding Statement and could contribute to the Council's efforts to meet Government requirements in this area.

In responding, Mrs Cocker stated that while the devolving of the funds in this way would not secure the future of the facility, as schools would not be compelled to use it for that purpose, it would be possible to set aside the required funds as part of the DSG and earmark them for Astley Burf. This way the funding could still be considered direct deprivation funding and would therefore count towards the Local Authority's deprivation return. Members expressed universal support for this course of action.

RESOLVED

1. That the information in relation to the operational situation at Astley Burf Outdoor Education Centre, as contained in the report submitted, be noted.
2. That the proposal that the funds required to make up the annual shortfall in the finances of the Centre be earmarked in the Dedicated Schools Grant under the Combined Services budget on an annual basis, in order that schools will continue to not be charged for their Free School Meals pupils, be endorsed.

10. DUDLEY'S SCHEME OF FINANCING FOR SCHOOLS

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted on the amendments required to Dudley's Scheme of Financing to Schools, as required by the Schools Finance (England) Regulations 2008.

In submitting the report, Mrs Cocker outlined the main revisions proposed. A copy of the proposed revised Scheme was contained in the consultation document appended to the report, and it was noted that the consultation exercise on the proposed amendments, which was already under way, would close on 29th February, 2008.

RESOLVED

That the issuing of the consultation document, 'Dudley's Scheme for Financing Schools – Proposed Revisions', and the period remaining for responses to the consultation, be noted.

11. SCHOOLS FORUMS (ENGLAND) (AMENDMENT) REGULATIONS 2008

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted on DCSF guidance on the Schools Forum (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2008, which would come into effect from 11th February, 2008.

Mrs Cocker reported that further to the discussion at the last meeting of the Forum in relation to the revised Regulations, which governed the operation of Schools Forums, the DCSF had, on 17th January, 2008, written to all Directors of Children's Services issuing guidance on the forthcoming changes, together with a table setting out the powers and responsibilities of Schools Forums. Copies of these documents were appended to the report for members' information.

RESOLVED

That the information in relation to DCSF guidance on the Schools Forum (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2008, which would come into effect from 11th February, 2008, and the powers and responsibilities of Schools Forums, as contained in the report submitted, and Appendices 1 and 2 to the report, be noted,

12. CHAIRMAN'S REMARKS

The Chairman invited members to contact either Mr Jewkes, as Secretary, or himself, should they have any issues they wished to have raised at meetings of the Forum, in order that an agenda item could be included and, where appropriate, a written report produced.

13. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

It was noted that meetings of Schools Forum had been scheduled for the following dates in 2008: -

- Tuesday 18th March 2008
- Tuesday 20th May 2008
- Tuesday 8th July 2008

The meeting ended at 7.45pm

CHAIRMAN