

DUDLEY SCHOOLS FORUM

Tuesday 20th March 2007 at 6.00pm
Saltwells Education Centre, Bowling Green Road, Netherton

PRESENT

Mr Patterson (Chairman)

Mr Bell, Mrs Blunt, Mr Conway, Ms Cosgrove, Mrs Elwiss, Mr Francis, Mrs Griffiths, Mr Harrington, Mr Hatton, Mrs Hazlehurst, Mr James, Mr Millman, Mr Mountney, Councillor Nottingham, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Ridley, Mr Sorrell, Mr Timmins, Councillor Mrs Walker and Mr Warner.

OFFICERS

Assistant Director of Children's Services (Resources), Assistant Director of Children's Services (Partnership and Children's Trust), Pupil Access Manager – Directorate of Children's Services, Children's Services Finance Manager and Principal Accountant – Directorate of Finance, ICT & Procurement, and Mr Jewkes – 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 Ingram, Mrs Jessup, Mr Leyshon, Mr Wassall and the Director of Children's Services (Mr Freeman).

2. **MINUTES**

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the meeting of the Forum held on 6th February, 2007, be approved as a correct record and signed.

3. **MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES**

In relation to Minute Number 3 – Matters Arising from the Minutes, the Chairman enquired as to whether a representative of the primary sector had now been appointed to serve on the Redundancy Panel. It was reported that the Chair of the Primary Headteachers Forum had been requested to obtain a nomination and that the Director of Children's Services would be notified of the nominee when determined.

4.

COMMON ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK – UPDATE

In relation to Minute Number 5 – Implementing the Common Assessment Framework (CAF), the Assistant Director of Children's Services (Partnership and Children's Trust) gave an update in respect of the progress of the proposed scheme. She reported that following the Forum's conditional in principle agreement to the proposals, she had received confirmation of the amounts some of the other partner agencies would be contributing. A document containing this information, along with projected costings for the funding of the scheme, was circulated at the meeting. It was reported that once all of the agencies had signed up to the scheme, a pooled budget would be established and the newly created posts would be advertised.

In relation to the costings which had been circulated at the meeting, the Chairman expressed concern that they did not appear to make any provision for the cost of accommodation, ICT or telephones. In responding, the Assistant Director of Children's Services (Partnership and Children's Trust) stated that a surplus of £22,000 had been identified in the costings, from which these additional costs would need to be met.

Members raised a number of issues regarding the proposals. These included the following: -

- concern that the proportion of the funds being provided by schools (60%) was too high in comparison to the other agencies.
- concern that in order to undertake additional work relating to the CAF, staff would have to be freed up from their normal duties, to the detriment of educational standards.
- concern regarding the cost of providing supply teachers to cover staff who were receiving training in relation to the CAF.

In responding to these points, the Assistant Director of Children's Services (Partnership and Children's Trust) advised that the funding amounts requested from the other agencies had been arrived at through negotiation, aside from the further education colleges which had also been requested to contribute approximately £5.00 per student. She stated that schools would be one of the main beneficiaries of the scheme, as it was designed to improve children's home lives by identifying problems early on and coordinating the provision of appropriate support. This in time would foster family stability, with a resulting improvement in behaviour and educational outcomes in schools. Copies of the proposed evaluation framework, which it was proposed to implement in order to monitor the progress of the scheme, were circulated at the meeting.

The Chairman noted that later on in the meeting the Forum would be considering the allocation of the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) for 2007/08. He enquired as to what action the Local Authority would take if the Forum decided that it did not have adequate resources within the budget to allocate the requested funds. In responding, the Assistant Director of Children's Services (Partnership and Children's Trust) stated that under Section 10 of the Children Act 2004, Local Authorities were required to establish a CAF by April 2008. If Dudley failed to meet this requirement, the DfES would take 'higher intervention' measures within the Local Authority. In addition, the Assistant Director of Children's Services (Resources) commented that some of the major cost pressures within the Schools Budget were associated with problems the CAF was designed to minimise; for example, the cost of supporting Looked After Children and the cost of out of Borough provision for excluded pupils. The CAF was designed to target the provision of support services to families in order that fewer children would be taken into care or permanently excluded from school. It was therefore envisaged that in time the scheme would provide savings in these areas of the budget, along with improved educational standards.

RESOLVED

1. That the additional information provided at the meeting in relation to the establishment of a pooled multi-agency resource to create a Common Assessment Framework, the current costings for the proposed scheme, and the proposed evaluation framework, be noted.
2. That a further report on the progress of the scheme, in particular the budgetary situation in respect of the commitment of funds by the other agencies involved, be submitted to the next meeting of Schools Forum.

5. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES – CONTINUED

In relation to Minute Number 11 – Small Schools Protection Review, it was noted that work on the consultations on the discontinuation of Small Schools Protection funding in secondary schools, and the adoption of a new model for the distribution of Small Schools Protection funding in primary schools, was ongoing.

6. CONSISTENT FINANCIAL REPORTING

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted on the benchmarking data submitted for publication on the Audit Commission's website in relation to Dudley schools' financial transactions during 2005/06.

It was noted that the data, which had been circulated in separate booklets with the papers for the meeting, had also been distributed to schools.

RESOLVED

That the Consistent Financial Reporting data for Dudley schools for 2005/06, as appended to the report submitted, be noted.

7. PUPIL RETENTION FUNDING

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted on the current methodology in relation to the allocation of the Pupil Retention Grant (PRG) to secondary schools, and on proposed short-term and long-term methods for tackling the escalation in the cost of placing pupils in alternative provision.

The Pupil Access Manager reported that the arrangements for the funding of provision for permanently excluded children had not been reviewed for five years and that in view of the problems the Local Authority was currently experiencing in relation to the rising cost of alternative provision, a review had been undertaken, the outcomes of which were outlined in the report.

Arising from the review, it was proposed that the charge imposed on schools to fund the process of identifying and maintaining alternative provision for permanently excluded pupils be increased from £3000 to £6000, in order to more accurately reflect the cost to the Local Authority. It was noted that, despite an overall fall in the number of permanent exclusions, these costs had risen dramatically in recent years. This increase in the charge would be an interim measure designed to reduce the overspend which had developed in centrally retained budgets.

It was reported that under the Education and Inspections Act 2006, the Local Authority was required to coordinate, by September 2007, the entering by all secondary schools into 'School Partnerships to Improve Behaviour and Tackle Persistent Truancy'. DfES guidance in relation to these partnerships stated that there should be the maximum amount of devolution of responsibility to schools and Headteachers, alongside a clear service level agreement (SLA). In this regard, Dudley was currently piloting the Hard to Place Pupil Protocol. It was hoped that this would further reduce the number of permanent exclusions, thus relieving the budgetary pressures currently being experienced by the Directorate of Children's Services.

In this regard, a series of proposals for the reform of Pupil Retention Funding, which entailed the redistribution of Pupil Retention Funding to townships, rather than individual schools, had been considered by the Headteachers Consultative Forum Budget Working Group. It was proposed that these possibilities be considered further, with a view to agreeing a longer-term financial alternative to the current arrangements.

Arising from their consideration of the report, Members expressed support for the need to reform the way in which PRG funding was distributed, and for the need to establish effective partnership arrangements, according to DfES requirements, to reduce the number of permanent exclusions. However, it was commented that rather than immediately increase the charges imposed on schools in the event of a permanent exclusion, it would be preferable to first engage in a strategic debate on how to deal with the problem of permanent exclusions and alternative provision costs in the long term. It was requested that full and detailed proposals be put forward on the allocation of the PRG funds along the township model, in order that the Forum could come to a view on the best means of dealing with the root of the problem.

Members also commented that as a consequence of cooperation within the townships and of additional efforts within schools to avoid permanent exclusions, the number of exclusions within the Borough was falling year on year. It was felt that should this trend continue, as was expected due to the increased cooperation arising from the Hard to Place Pupil panels, the current budgetary issues surrounding alternative provision would deplete in coming years.

RESOLVED

That the proposal to increase to £6000 the charge imposed on Dudley secondary schools in the event of them making a permanent exclusion be deferred, pending the submission of a further report to the next meeting of the Forum setting out full proposals for the strategic reorganisation of funding arrangements in relation to the allocation of Pupil Retention Grant funding within the framework of the Hard to Place Pupils Protocol.

8. DEDICATED SCHOOLS GRANT (DSG) 2006/07 OUTTURN

A verbal update was given by the Children's Services Finance Manager in respect of the projected overspend to the 2006/07 DSG on which she had reported at previous meetings. She reported that following the continued imposition of spending restrictions within the Directorate of Children's Services, it was now envisaged that at the close of the 2006/07 financial year, the DSG would be overspent by approximately £100,000. This had been reduced from the previously reported projected overspend of £300,000.

The Chairman congratulated officers within the Directorate of Children's Services on their achievements in reducing the projected overspend to £100,000, particularly in view of the size of the overspend which had been projected earlier in the financial year.

RESOLVED

That the verbal update in respect of the Dedicated Schools Grant 2006/07 outturn be noted.

9. 2007/08 SCHOOLS BUDGET – FUNDED BY THE DEDICATED SCHOOLS GRANT

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted on the budget process and estimated budget position in respect of the 2007/08 Schools Budget.

The Children's Services Finance Manager reported that following the Forum's resolution at the previous meeting that a decision on the final allocation of the 2007/08 DSG be deferred in order that the most up to date pupil number count data could be recorded, she could now confirm the anticipated numbers correct up to 5th March, 2007.

It was reported that 48,379 pupils were expected to be in full time education in Dudley in 2007/08 - a reduction of 635 on 2006/07. This meant that the estimated overall DSG would be £183.147 million, which would represent a cash increase, not taking account of inflation, of 5.28%. £7.384 million of the anticipated additional funds had been earmarked to meet additional budget costs including out of Borough placements, Union duties, specialist support, alternative provision and funding for Connexions to assist school leavers with SEN. This would leave £1.808 million unallocated. It was noted that under statutory provisions the Local Authority was required to give top priority, prior to allocating funds to other areas, to fund the estimated £100,000 overspend in the 2006/07 DSG. This would leave approximately £1.707 million unallocated. The Forum was requested to identify priorities for the allocation of these monies and make recommendations as to how they should be utilised.

Arising from consideration of the report, Members discussed in detail the options, a number of which were outlined in the report, for the allocation of the anticipated surplus funds. Once the Forum had identified the areas in which it wished to allocate funds, the amounts to be set aside for each were also discussed.

RESOLVED

That, in relation to the anticipated unallocated balance in the 2007/08 Dedicated Schools Grant, the following recommendations be made: -

1. That £100,000 be allocated to fund the possible DSG overspend incurred during 2006/07.
2. That £73,000 be allocated to address staffing issues arising from the Primary Schools Review.
3. That £300,000 be allocated to support the closure of Cradley High School.
4. That £236,000 be allocated to fund the Common Assessment Framework (CAF).
5. That £50,000 be allocated as a contingency fund to be utilised in the event of the DfES verification of the pupil numbers for Dudley being less than estimated.
6. That in the event of the contingency identified in resolution 5 not being required, it be added to the funding allocated in resolution 3 to support the closure of Cradley High School.
7. That any remaining unallocated funds be distributed to schools via Age Weighted Pupil Unit (AWPU) funding.

10. SCHOOLS' TRADING ACCOUNTS – 2006/07 DATA

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted on schools' trading account balances, delegated reserves and standards fund roll-forwards in respect of the 2006/07 financial year.

It was reported that with effect from the outturn of the 2006/07 financial year, the DfES would require all school funds to be publicly reported, rather than managed privately by schools as was traditionally the case, for the purposes of Consistent Financial Reporting (CFR) and the Section 52 (S52) outturn statement. In this regard, the estimated financial data relating to schools trading accounts at 31st March 2007 was appended to the report for Members' information, prior to the final information being published at the close of the financial year.

Arising from consideration of the report, a Member raised a question regarding the closing of schools' accounts at the end of the financial year. In responding, the Children's Services Finance Manager advised that accounts would be closed just after Easter and that therefore schools would need to provide the Local Authority with the relevant data relating to their finances shortly before that date. However, the deadline date for the submission of this data would be communicated to schools directly in due course.

RESOLVED

That the information in relation to schools' trading account balances in respect of the 2006/07 financial year, as set out in the report and the appendix to the report submitted, be noted.

11. TRANSPORT BUDGETS 2006/07

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted on budgets held within the Directorate of Children's Services in respect of the provision of transport services for pupils. Details of the various individual transport budgets, including any projected underspend or overspend for the 2006/07 financial year, were appended to the report.

The Children's Services Finance Manager reported that although the budgets discussed in the report were not funded from the DSG and therefore did not come under the remit of the Forum, the data was being submitted for information, following a request at the previous meeting.

RESOLVED

That the information on transport budgets held within the Directorate of Children's Services, as set out in the report submitted, be noted.

12. NURSERY STATEMENTS

RESOLVED

That this item be deferred to a future meeting of the Committee in order that information contained in the report can be updated.

13. CLOSURE OF CRADLEY HIGH SCHOOL

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted on the 2007/08 budget process in respect of Cradley High School. Data setting out the school's budget allocation for the 2007/08 financial year, taking into account the fact that only one year group would be attending the school as of August 2007, was appended to the report.

The Assistant Director of Children's Services (Resources) reported that the school's existing budget deficit, combined with the sharp fall in the number of pupils attending the school from August, had led to a funding gap of approximately £500,000 appearing in the school's budget. In view of this, the Local Authority was seeking to reduce staffing at the school by 75-80% by September in order to reduce costs. Some staff had already secured new positions elsewhere and the Local Authority was working with the remaining staff to support them in applying for jobs and preparing for interviews. In relation to

this, he requested that should Forum members who became aware of suitable positions which were available, either at their schools or others in the locality, ensured that the Directorate's personnel officers were made aware of this in order that where appropriate, staff at Cradley High could be encouraged to apply.

An update was given in respect of the reallocation of the 228 year 7, 8 and 9 Cradley High pupils who would be displaced as a result of the closure. It was reported that of the 228, transfer information had been received for just under 200, with the rest being delayed due to transfer forms not yet being returned. When these forms had all been received, the Local Authority would discuss the allocations with the Headteachers of the receiving schools. In addition, officers were continuing to meet with Centro to make arrangements for bus services in the area to be reconfigured to meet the new demand.

RESOLVED

1. That the information on the 2007/08 budget process in respect of Cradley High School, as set out in the report and the appendix to the report submitted, be noted.
2. That the Directorate of Children's Services be requested to provide regular updates to the Forum in respect of the closure process for Cradley High School.

14. PRIMARY SCHOOL REVIEW (PRIVATE ITEM)

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted on staffing outcomes of the closure of four primary schools resulting from the Primary Schools Review. The report was considered as a confidential item, as it contained personal information relating to several members of staff whose posts had been deleted as a result of the closures. The Forum was requested to recommend that the necessary funds be allocated to terminate their employment on the grounds of redundancy.

RESOLVED

That the Director of Children's Services be recommended to approve the allocation of funds to finance the redundancy packages, as set out in Appendices A and B to the report submitted, in respect of those staff whose posts had been deleted as a result of the Primary Schools Review, and who had not secured redeployment within Dudley Local Authority or alternative employment elsewhere.

15. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

It was noted that the next meeting of Schools Forum would be held on Tuesday 22nd May, 2007.

The meeting ended at 8.10pm

CHAIRMAN