

DUDLEY SCHOOLS FORUM

Tuesday 22nd May 2007 at 6.00pm
Saltwells Education Centre, Bowling Green Road, Netherton

PRESENT

Mr Patterson (Chairman)
Mrs Griffiths (Vice-Chairman)
Mrs Blunt, Mrs Brock, Mr Conway, Mr Francis, Mr Harrington, Mrs Hazlehurst, Mrs Jessup, Mr Leyshon, Mr Lloyd, Mr Millman, Councillor Nottingham, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Rhind-Tutt, Mr Ridley, Mr Sorrell, Mr Timmins, Councillor Mrs Walker, Mr Warner and Mr Wassall.

OFFICERS

Assistant Director of Children's Services (Resources), 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. **ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN**

RESOLVED

That Mr Patterson be elected Chairman of the Forum for the 2007/08 financial year.

2. **APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIRMAN**

RESOLVED

That Mrs Griffiths be appointed Vice-Chairman of the Forum for the 2007/08 financial year.

3. **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Ms Cosgrove, Mrs Elwiss, Mr Ingram, Mr James, Mr Mounthey and the Director of Children's Services (Mr Freeman).

It was also noted that Mrs Brock was in attendance at the meeting as a substitute for Mr Hatton.

4. MINUTES

RESOLVED

That, subject to the inclusion of Mr Lloyd in the list of Members present at the meeting, the minutes of the meeting of the Forum held on 20th March, 2007, be approved as a correct record and signed.

5. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES

In connection with Minute Number 4 – Common Assessment Framework (CAF) – Update, Members raised several issues regarding the ‘in principle’ agreement the Forum had previously given to the proposals put forward by the Directorate of Children’s Services in relation to the implementation of the CAF.

Firstly, Members expressed concern that the result of the vote on this issue, which had been taken at the Forum meeting held on 6th February, 2007, had not been recorded in the minutes. In addition to this, clarification was requested as to whether a simple majority vote was sufficient, under the regulations governing the operation of Schools Forums, to give an ‘in principle’ agreement to the proposals. In responding, Mr Jewkes gave an undertaking to amend the minutes of the previous meeting to reflect the result of the original vote, and also gave an undertaking to investigate further the issue of Schools Forum voting procedures, as set out in the Forum’s Constitution and the Education (England) (Schools Forums) Regulations 2002, and report his findings to the next meeting of the Forum.

Secondly, Members expressed concern regarding the nature of the consultation between the Local Authority and the other partner agencies which were being requested to fund the implementation of the CAF. It was commented that a number of the agencies involved did not feel that they had been fully consulted, and consequently had not yet committed themselves to providing the requested funds. In responding, the Assistant Director of Children’s Services (Resources) gave an undertaking to confer with the relevant officers within the Directorate and ensure that an update in respect of the process for implementing the CAF be provided to the next meeting of the Forum.

In connection with Minute Number 7 – Pupil Retention Funding, it was noted that the Headteachers Consultative Forum Budget Working Group would shortly be considering in detail the possibilities for the reorganisation of Pupil Retention Funding, and that following these discussions a further report would be submitted to Schools Forum in due course.

6. 2006/07 DEDICATED SCHOOLS GRANT (DSG) OUTTURN

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted on the provisional outturn data in respect of the Schools Budget for the 2006/07 financial year.

The Children's Services Finance Manager reported that the Local Authority was now finalising its accounts for the 2006/07 financial year and that the provisional outturn, subject to confirmation by the Audit Commission, indicated that the year had been completed on budget at £173.955 million; this included an earmarked DSG reserve of £129k in respect of 2006 Dudley schools reorganisation. The predicted overspend of £1.1 million which had been expected in February 2007 had been successfully mitigated as a result of action taken by the Directorate of Children's Services, and £100,000 which had previously been earmarked by the Forum to offset any overspend would not now be required, and as such could be retained within the Schools Specific Contingency for allocation at a later date.

In responding to the report, the Chairman, on behalf of the Forum, congratulated the Children's Services Finance team on their success in reducing and eventually removing the overspend and thanked them for their hard work in this regard.

RESOLVED

That, subject to the external audit during June 2007, the 2006/07 outturn in respect of the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG), be noted.

7. PRIMARY SCHOOLS REORGANISATION

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted on the financial position in relation to the closure of four Dudley primary schools during 2006/07. Statistical information relating to the savings made as a result of the closures and the areas in which these funds had been reallocated to support the affected staff and children, was appended to the report.

It was reported that the vast majority of the 156 staff affected by schools closures in Dudley in 2006/07 had now secured alternative employment, either within the Local Authority or with new employers. However, a small number of staff had not yet found new jobs. Support for these staff was being funded from the £129,000 surplus left over from savings made as a result of the closures. It was noted that these funds would be carried forward into 2007/08 as an earmarked DSG reserve in order that the Local Authority could continue to provide for the needs of the staff involved while they pursued new positions.

It was noted that despite the concerns expressed at the time of the primary school closures that a reduction in the number of schools in the Borough would lead to unacceptably large class sizes, pupil to teacher ratios had actually fallen during 2006/07.

In considering the report, the Chairman requested clarification in respect of the activities being undertaken by the 32 remaining affected staff who had not been redeployed or found alternative employment elsewhere. In responding, the Assistant Director of Children's Services (Resources) reported that all of these members of staff were engaged in work either in Dudley primary schools or in other areas of the Directorate of Children's Services.

RESOLVED

That the financial details relating to the 2006 Dudley primary schools reorganisation, as set out in the report submitted, including the ongoing staffing issues, be noted.

8. SCHOOL RESERVES 2006/07 PROVISIONAL OUTTURN

A report of the director of Children's Services was submitted on the projected school reserve balances outturn for the 2006/07 financial year.

It was reported that the Council was currently in the process of preparing the final accounts for the 2006/07 financial year. Early indications in the provisional data were that the schools delegated reserve balances for 2006/07 would stand at £9.46 million. This would be down from £10.49 million in 2005/06. A table indicating the level of balances in each of the education sectors was included in the report and it was reported that further details would be submitted to the Forum its next meeting.

RESOLVED

That the financial data in respect of the provisional schools delegated budget reserves for the 2006/07 financial year, be noted.

9. CHANGE IN ORDER OF BUSINESS

RESOLVED

That Agenda Item 8 – Audit Commission School Balances Toolkit, be considered as the next item of business.

10. AUDIT COMMISSION SCHOOL BALANCES TOOLKIT

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted on the Audit Commission School Balances Toolkit data for the period of 2003 to 2006. The toolkit data contained information in relation to the level of school reserve balances in all UK Local Authorities and covered the 2003/04, 2004/05 and 2005/06 financial years.

It was reported that nationally, the level of balances had increased in 2005/06 to £1.537 billion. Whilst balances in Dudley remained high in comparison with statistical neighbours, they had declined as a percentage of the total Schools Budget during the period from 2003 to 2006.

In response to a member regarding what methods Dudley's statistical neighbours were employing either to reduce balances or maintain low levels, the Children's Services Finance Manager commented that there were no real trends in terms of which Authorities were maintaining low levels of reserves, and stated that in order to address the problem in Dudley, the Local Authority would need to look into the specific circumstances of each school which was retaining funding.

RESOLVED

That the Audit Commission data in respect of the Schools Balances Toolkit for the period 2003 to 2006, be noted.

11. CONSULTATION AND RESPONSE ON SCHOOL, EARLY YEARS AND 14-16 FUNDING

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted on the DfES consultation document in respect of school, Early Years and 14-16 funding for the period from 2008/09 to 2010/11. The document contained 37 questions relating to the proposed framework of the school funding system. It was reported that the Headteachers Consultative Forum Budget Working Group had already considered the document and had proposed responses to a number of the questions. The Forum was requested to consider these proposed responses and also to come to a view on the remainder of the questions, in order that the response could be submitted to DfES by the deadline of 1st June 2007.

In considering the report, Members raised a number of issues regarding questions contained in the consultation document. These were as follows: -

- concern regarding the allocation of funding by DfES according to ministerial priorities, rather than it being allocated to LAs via a formula, as discussed in Question 3. It was requested that the answer to Question 2 be amended to state that overuse of a 'spend plus' formula could do significant damage to schools.

- a request for further information regarding the possibility of merging School Standards Grant (SSG) and School Standards Grant Plus (SSG (P)), as suggested in Question 36. It was commented that the Forum would need to see additional details and modelling in relation to this proposal to determine whether or not it would be beneficial in Dudley or elsewhere.
- disagreement with the suggestion in Question 38 that DfES could provide specific grants directly to academies in 2008/09, rather than them being allocated via the LA. It was commented that this would be damaging to Dudley's strategic priorities.
- concern that the widening of the remit and membership of Schools Forums, as suggested in Question 21, could lead to an increased workload and dilution of discussion which would ultimately be to the detriment of the work it undertook. However, it was recognised that further engagement and partnership with the Early Years and 14-19 sectors, albeit possibly through a different Forum, was crucial to the Every Child Matters agenda.

In relation to these issues, Members commented that they were sometimes unclear as to the precise remit of Schools Forum in terms of its statutory obligations, and also requested additional information or training in respect of the machinery through which the partnership agenda was being realised, particularly at Local Authority level.

RESOLVED

1. That, subject to the additions and amendments outlined above, the response to the DfES consultation on School, Early Years and 14-16 Funding, as set out in Appendix to the report submitted, be approved.
2. That Mr Jewkes be requested to circulate the current Dudley Schools Forum Terms of Reference and Constitution to all Members of the Forum in advance of the next meeting, for their information.
3. That the Assistant Director of Children's Services (Resources) arrange for a report providing information in respect of Local Authority partnership arrangements, including the Local Area Agreement (LAA), the Dudley Community Partnership (DCP) and the Children and Young People's Partnership (CYPP), to be submitted to a future meeting of the Forum for Members' information.

12. CRADLEY HIGH SCHOOL – BUDGET PLAN FOR 2007/08

The Assistant Director of Children's Services (Resources) gave a verbal update in respect of the 2007/08 budget plan for Cradley High School, which would be operating with one year group in the 2007/08

academic year and which would be formally closed with effect from 31st August 2008.

It was reported that a four-phase budget plan had been formulated to manage the closure of the school. The annual school budget had been set for 2007 and 2008, however pupil related funding of approximately £2000 per pupil would be transferred to the schools receiving former Cradley children when years 7 to 9 left the school in July 2007. The schools involved had been notified of the additional funding they would be receiving.

In relation to staffing, it was reported that the number of staff at the school would need to be reduced by approximately 80% by January 2008 in order for budgetary targets to be met. Of the 42 full time staff affected by the closure, 25 had now obtained alternative posts, with a further 7 waiting to attend interviews. This equated to approximately 60% of the total number of staff. The Assistant Director of Children's Services (Resources) thanked Dudley secondary schools for their help so far in managing the closure of the school.

In response to a question from a Member regarding the future use of the site, the Assistant Director reported that consultation on this issue was ongoing. He undertook to inform the Forum of any progress in this regard in due course.

In relation to the financial management of the closure of Cradley High, Councillor Mrs Walker reported that she had recently received complaints from parents of former Cradley pupils who had transferred to new schools before the School Organisation Committee (SOC) approved the closure of the school. The complaints centred around the fact that whilst Schools Forum had agreed to provide a uniform grant to children who would be displaced as a result of the SOC decision, pupils who had transferred to new schools prior to the closure being confirmed would not receive financial assistance. She asked for the Forum's views in respect of this complaint.

A discussion ensued in which it was widely agreed, in line with the policy set out in relation to previous school closures, that the Forum should only provide uniform grants to pupils who had been forced to change schools as a result of a closure. It was felt that where parents had made a decision to transfer their children in anticipation of a possible closure, this provision was not appropriate.

RESOLVED

That the verbal update in respect of the 2007/08 budget plan for Cradley High School, be noted.

13. DEPRIVATION REVIEW – UPDATE

The Principal Accountant gave a verbal update in respect of Deprivation Funding. She reported that at the request of the DfES the Local Authority was undertaking a review of its arrangements in respect of Deprivation Funding. She stated that officers were currently evaluating a series of potential alternative models and exploring the possibility of identifying funding for individual pupils. Further information in respect of the review, possibly including proposals for change, would be submitted to the next meeting of the Forum.

RESOLVED

That the verbal update in respect of the review of Deprivation Funding be noted.

14. SECTION 52 BUDGET STATEMENT

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted on the Section 52 Budget Statement for 2007/08 financial year.

It was reported that under the Schools Standards and Framework Act 1998 all Local Authorities were required to provide each of their schools with an annual budget statement relating to the Authority's planned expenditure on schools for the forthcoming financial year. This was known as the Section 52 Budget Statement. Copies of the statement had been circulated to all Forum Members for their information in advance of the meeting. It was noted that the statement was also available online via the Council's intranet site, Inside Dudley.

RESOLVED

That the Section 52 Budget Statement for 2007/08 be noted.

15. INTRODUCTION OF SINGLE POINT OF ENTRY FOR RECEPTION CLASSES

RESOLVED

That this item be deferred to a future meeting of the Forum.

16. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

It was noted that meetings of Schools Forum would be held on the following dates in 2007/08: -

- Tuesday 10th July 2007
- Tuesday 2nd October 2007
- Tuesday 11th December 2007
- Tuesday 5th February 2008

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

The meeting ended at 7.30pm

CHAIRMAN