

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL

SCHOOLS' FORUM

At a virtual meeting of the Schools' Forum on Wednesday, 7 July 2021 at 9:30 am.

PRESENT

C Pearson (in the Chair)
Trustee, Three Rivers Learning Trust

Headteacher Representatives

M Deane-Hall, Wooler First
F Hartland, Kielder Primary

B Ryder, Berwick Middle

Governor Representatives

K Faulkner, Collingwood School and
Media Arts College

B Watson, St Robert's RC First
I Walker, Duchess' High
G Wilkins, St Wilfrid's RC Primary

Academies Representatives

G Atkins, Queen Elizabeth High
A Alden, (Substitute NCEA)
A Crawley (Substitute JCSC)

A Thelwell, Bede Academy
S Wild, NCEA Castle

Church of England Diocese - Nicola Threlfall

Early Years' Representative – Kath Dickinson

Trades Union Representative - R E Woolhouse

16 - 19 Provider of Education Representative - Not present

Northumberland County Council Elected Member – Not present

Ch.'s Initials.....

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE

S Aviston	Head of School Organisation and Resources
A Kingham	Interim Director of Education and Skills
L Little	Senior Democratic Services Officer
B Parvin	Education and Skills Business Manager
R Pickering	Senior SEND Manager
C Ponting	Senior Manager, Schools HR
A Russell	Principal Accountant
D Street	Deputy Director of Education
N Taylor	Head of Inclusive Education Services

90. MEMBERSHIP AND MEMBERSHIP UPDATE

- 90.1 Mr Parvin advised that Nicola Threlfall who was the Headteacher at Embleton Vincent Edwards Primary CE School was to join the Forum as the Church of England Diocese representative and Kath Dickinson from SEND to Learn Nursery was to join as the Early Years representative, and welcomed them to their first meeting.
- 90.2 Mr Deane-Hall and Mr Faulkner had completed four years as members and both had indicated that they would be prepared to continue serve on the Forum and Mr Parvin asked that their positions be ratified and this was agreed.
- 90.3 An expression of interest had been received from Nichola Brannen from the Federation of Whalton and Longhorsley for one of the vacant primary positions, she was unable to join the meeting today but would join in September.
- 90.4 Mrs Little was also welcomed as the Clerk to the meeting.
- 90.5 Mr Pearson had served for four years on the Forum and he had advised that he would be prepared to serve again and be agreeable to be appointed as Chair of the Forum in line with the terms of reference for a further two years. This was agreed by the Forum.
- 90.6 Following Mr Walker's retirement, there was a vacancy as the Chair of the Funding Formula Meeting and also as Vice-Chair of the Forum. Mr Parvin asked for expressions of interest to be forwarded to him and advised that the roles could be separated if necessary.
- 90.7 Mr Woolhouse advised that this would be his last meeting of the Forum.

91. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Mr Hardie (Alison Alden was in attendance as substitute) and Mr Heminsley.

Ch.'s Initials.....

92. MINUTES AND MATTERS ARISING

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Schools' Forum held on Wednesday, 24 February 2021, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record and signed by the Chair.

Matters Arising:

- 92.1 Minute 84.1: There was no further update to be provided in respect of the retrieval of public money from Bright Tribe. It was clarified that this was government funding which had been given to Bright Tribe and was not the Council's money to retrieve, although attempts had been made by the former Cabinet Member for this to happen. Concern was expressed that this funding should have been spent on Northumberland Children and the Chair asked that a statement be provided to the Forum. Mrs Kinghorn advised that she was meeting with the Regional Schools Commissioner the following week and would seek a response and would ensure that Councillor Renner-Thompson would provide a reply to the Forum. Mr Parvin clarified that the children of Haydon Bridge did not lose out as the Council had agreed a package to support the school following the withdrawal of Bright Tribe. However there was still a public interest there as public money had been provided to Bright Tribe.
- 92.2 Minute 84.3: A report on the School Organisation Plan and Update on the Capital Investment Plan would be provided for the September meeting. It was clarified that the School Organisation Plan which had been approved by the Families and Children's Services OSC was only an update and a new Plan would be written over the summer period and be brought to the Forum in September.

93. COMMUNICATION

- 93.1 Mr Wilkins advised that the March minutes of the High Needs Sub Committee had been ratified at the meeting in June and could be accepted by the Forum and the June minutes were a draft and would be ratified at the next meeting. There had been some interesting items for discussion; however these were covered later in the agenda and questions could be picked up at these points.

94. SCHOOL FORUM OPERATIONS AND GOVERNANCE

- 94.1 Mr Parvin stated that the legislation in relation to Schools Forums had largely remained unchanged since 2012 until last year when it was changed to allow meetings to be held virtually.
- 94.2 In discussing the first recommendation on the report which was to consider if the Forum wished to continue to meet virtually, there were varying opinions put forward with some stating that meeting virtually had allowed greater participation, with time being saved by not having to travel to County Hall, especially for those in the more rural parts of the County. Others thought that meeting face to face provided value especially for new members on the Forum through the ability to talk to others from

Ch.'s Initials.....

different settings. Those with experience of a hybrid style of meetings had not found that these worked well.

- 94.3 It was agreed that the Chair would discuss the agenda for each meeting with Mr Parvin and meetings would continue to be held virtually unless it was considered there was a good reason for the meeting to be held in person. Virtual meetings would still need to be accessible to the public.
- 94.4 Mr Parvin highlighted the current ESFA Best Practice Guide in comparison to the Northumberland Schools Forum Terms of Reference (ToR) with specific reference to Special Academies Representative, as previously Northumberland did not have Special Academies. Special Academies were already represented by Sara Wild as a member of the Forum and therefore the ToR should be updated to reflect this.
- 94.5 Forum had further vacancies and representatives for these would continue to be pursued.
- 94.6 As stated previously there were vacancies for both the Vice-Chair of the Forum and Chair of the Funding Formula Committee and Members were asked to contact Mr Parvin if they were interested in these roles.
- 94.7 Mr Parvin highlighted the makeup of the membership of the Forum and advised that whilst it remained proportionally representative he would seek additional representatives and would run an advert on E-Courier seeking interest from September when schools returned.
- 94.8 It was clarified that Mr Wilkins, in line with best practice, had already been recorded as an Academy representative.
- 94.9 Mrs Kinghorn queried paragraph 2.9 on in the ToR in relation to voting rights and asked that a table be provided to enable everyone to be clear about exactly what they could vote on. Mr Parvin would publish that information.
- 94.10 The Chair highlighted section 3 in the ToR and suggested that the minutes be made available. He considered that the Council published extensive and sufficient information, often for comment, and he did not feel that this needed to be amplified by Schools Forum directly.
- 94.11 There were no objections to the suggestion put forward by Mr Parvin that the front page of the Schools' Forum website should include the membership. He reminded members that they should take opportunities to communicate decisions of the Forum through their networks and drive traffic to the Schools' Forum website for reference.
- 94.12 Mr Deane-Hall advised that a different authority had a similar approach and a summary document which linked into the minutes was put on the website so that members did not have to feed out information to their networks.

Ch.'s Initials.....

95. 2020/21 DEDICATED SCHOOLS GRANT (DSG) OUTTURN

- 95.1 Ms Russell advised that the final DSG for the 2020/21 year was £137.062m with a final outturn of £0.898m underspend spread across all blocks except for the High Needs Block as provided in paragraph 4.1 of the report. Detailed information was set out under the separate headings in the report.
- 95.2 In addition to the alternative funding provided through the Contain Management Outbreak Funding (CMOF) for 2020/21, the Council would continue to make best use of alternative funding sources.
- 95.3 It was the intention to ring fence the year end position on each block to ensure that funds carried forward could be utilised effectively to meet the emerging priorities within the specific areas of the DSG. A monitoring report would be provided at the September meeting on the position at that point, what grants were still available to the Council and the plan for the next twelve months from that point.
- 95.4 Ms Russell sought to clarify recommendation (a) as it should state that the High Needs Block deficit should have first call on the £184,000 carry forward from the 2020/21 DSG.
- 95.5 Ms Ponting clarified that there had been some changes on the trade unions time facility funds with new members joining and the SLA runs on the academic year therefore the de-delegated funding was required to be split across 2 years. A report would be brought back to Schools Forum in the Autumn explaining how the de-delegated and the underpinning SLA allowing Academies and other schools buy in operates.
- 95.6 In response to a question regarding families losing out in relation to the underspending on the Early Years Block, Mr Street advised that this was what was predicted to happen but there could be clawback based on the census figures and the summer count which was required to be shared with the DfE and it would be November 2021 when the figure was known. £120,000 of this was the underspend in DAF as this was an estimate on what the County would need rather than the actual number of families who were eligible for DAF at this time. He suggested that Forum might wish to consider using the surplus DAF to support the Early Years inclusion fund which might release some of the pressure which remained on the High Needs Block. He advised that throughout the pandemic that all those families who had a need for childcare had been found places within two to three weeks . Carrying forward would allow more flexibility to increase rates and passport as much to the providers as possible.
- 95.7 Mrs Dickinson advised that there had been a massive under-application for DAF funding and she had been asked to write a case study to practitioners to show how easy it was to apply for and how it could be used. A link to the E-mag would be forwarded to all Forum Members.

Ch.'s Initials.....

- 95.8 Mr Deane-Hall advised that his school Early Years had seen a massive drop-off in payments as parents did not need to access the service. Unlike private settings schools had been unable to access the grants and his school had received only £12,000 in fees as opposed to the £50,000 which had been included in the school's budget and necessitated him having to juggle budgets and staff to compensate. He had subsequently lost 2 staff members due to a lack of job security. This was a frustrating situation when community clubs etc were able to attract funding and his school was the only setting in the local community which had Early Years provision and they were unable to access any grants. If this situation was replicated in other areas he questioned if some of the underspend be used to ensure that the service in those affected schools could continue.
- 95.9 Mr Street advised that Mr Deane-Hall was impacted more than other schools in the County and the schools which did not offer anything above the hours funded by the Council had benefitted as funding was based on historical data and not actual attendance. He would take this forward as an action and report back on any avenues that could be used. If the Early Years funding was agreed to be ring-fenced today then there may be something that could be done, especially in areas where there were very few providers as the Council had a statutory duty to provide Early Years provision. Such a scheme would need to be seen to be fair to all members and the school community.
- 95.10 Mr Deane-Hall questioned if the data was available as it was a time critical situation. Ms Russell advised that there were at least 5 other maintained schools in a similar position. Information was unavailable for academies.
- 95.11 Mrs Kingham committed that officers would look at this and advised that Mrs Aviston had done some work with schools around exceptional costs through Covid through the CMOF but there were specific guidelines to follow. It was essential that any scheme was transparent and fair.
- 95.12 Mr Street advised that he would report back to schools before the end of term.
- 95.13 **Agreed** that the year end position on each block be ring-fenced to ensure that funds carried forward could be utilised effectively and to provide services with additional resource to meet the emerging priorities within the specific areas of the Dedicated Schools Grant.

96. MAINTAINED SCHOOL BALANCES AS AT 31 MARCH 2021

- 96.1 Mr Parvin stated that historically a downward trend had been reported on maintained school balances. This had been an exceptional year and overall aggregated balances had improved across all phases. However, for those schools already experiencing financial problems these had been exacerbated. Ms Russell's team would work with schools to reduce the deficit during the following year.

Ch.'s Initials.....

- 96.2 Mr Parvin advised that when considering secondary schools this was a very small cohort and not representative. He drew the Forum's attention to the Schools Financing Benchmarking tool developed by the DfE to enable comparisons to be made between both maintained schools and academies and encouraged members to consider its use. He suggested that a demonstration could be provided at the meeting in September if members wished.
- 96.3 Mr Parvin advised that Covid had impacted some schools more than others and this was the reason that a targeted approach had been used in recent schemes managed by NCC.
- 96.4 In response to a question regarding the three high schools with deficit budgets, Ms Russell advised that all three had budget recovery plans in place and that deficits were being recovered . It was anticipated that by the end of 2023 three out of the four schools would have returned to a surplus.
- 96.5 Mr Street advised that a few First and Primary schools had over time run up some significant deficits as a percentage of their annual income. All schools were now operating with in-year balances although this could quickly change as fluctuations in pupil numbers within small schools could be significant and occur quickly. Whilst they were currently balanced in-year it still remained a challenge to pay off existing deficits in the long term. He wished to make the Forum aware of this.
- 96.6 In respect of budget allocations and pupil numbers from feeder schools, the Forum were advised that schools had been provided with budget allocations in February and this had included information on pupil numbers. Mrs Aviston also advised that the pupil numbers were included on the School Organisation Plan which had been sent to schools approximately 4 weeks ago.
- 97. SEN UPDATE : NORTHUMBERLAND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION SERVICE (NIES)**
- 97.1 Ms Taylor informed the Forum that prior to September 2020 traded arrangements had applied to the specialist teaching services. However, as part of the actions undertaken following feedback from schools and the SEND Inspection in October 2018, transfer of funds from the Schools Block had enabled the offer of no cost support services to be implemented as part of a two year pilot scheme. She advised that the overall service would have been affected due to the unusual circumstances of the past year with some support being provided virtually.
- 97.2 There had been an increased demand for resources compared to the same period in 2019-20. The only partnership where demand had reduced was Cramlington and the reasons for this would be explored.
- 97.3 July data was not included in the report and a full year report would follow to the Forum in November. End of year evaluations would provide a deeper insight into the impact of the changed model of delivery. Monitoring would take place on pressures on teams going into the new academic year and further capacity building measures would be undertaken.

Ch.'s Initials.....

- 97.4 In relation to mainstream inclusion payments, Mr Street advised that a core principle related to meeting the needs of students as close to home as possible which in most cases meant a mainstream school. There had been an increasing number of students with EHCPs and an increased demand for special school places by parents. To try to influence the journey of EHCP learners and to provide high quality placements close to home and increase capacity in maintained schools the High Needs Sub-Committee (HNSC) had looked at models for providing additional funding to support placement in mainstream schools.
- 97.5 It was proposed that the STAR funding be opened up to more students and make the application process easier and governed by peers, who would be represented on the Panel to allocate funding. A model had been highlighted to the HNSC which had been widely welcomed with caveats that High Needs funding had been provided to support the process which aimed to reduce the pressure on special school places and meet need close to home but at the same time it would not be prudent to overspend on this.
- 97.6 Mr Street also advised of some costed provision-mapping tools which had been piloted in some schools with SENCOs providing some clarity on funding which schools already received and informing if additional funding would be required for individual pupils. It was hoped to be able to report back shortly on additional pilots with a new process in place from the start of the January term.
- 97.7 Mr Wilkins asked that the paper presented by Samantha Barron to the HNSC be presented here as it showed that the process would be much quicker and he would recommend it to the Forum as one of the best pieces of work undertaken by the Local Authority.
- 97.8 In response to Mr Wilkins reference to the Forum support being provided to writing a very strong letter to the Government regarding lack of funding for SEN, Mr Parvin advised that it had been agreed at the last HNSC to wait for the SEN Code of Practice to be published. He advised that a response had been provided to a small consultation, but a further large consultation was expected following the publication of the SEN Code of Practice and it had been agreed that this would be the most opportune time to make representations.
- 97.9 Ms Taylor informed the Forum that schools had been notified of a current easing of restrictions around STAR funding. This had been introduced as a measure to assist schools in meeting the ongoing challenges of reintegrating pupils post COVID. It would support schools with temporary funding in order to ascertain whether these challenges were short term or indicative of a complex need which would require an EHC needs assessment.
- 97.10 In response to a question from the Chair in relation to the increased use of services since it became free to schools Ms Taylor advised that numbers had increased, but more crucially it had allowed schools access to services at the earliest opportunity and officers were confident that data showed that learners needs were being met.

Ch.'s Initials.....

98. SCHEME FOR FINANCING MAINTAINED SCHOOLS

- 98.1 Mr Parvin highlighted that there were only three minor changes for September 2021 which were highlighted in paragraph 4.1. He further drew the Forum's attention to paragraph 5 to ensure that the Forum promoted equity and transparency.
- 98.2 Mr Deane-Hall raised the issue of transparency in relation to schemes offered through the Council specifically leasing schemes for cars which members of his staff had accessed and he had authorised. The school had since been invoiced and the implications on the school budget had not been clear when staff had applied. Mrs Aviston stated she had worked with Mr Deane-Hall on this and was waiting for correspondence from Employee Services as there were implications that were not made clear. It was an individual school matter and staff would continue to pursue. Mrs Ponting advised that this had also been raised with her the previous week and stated that she would ensure that any briefings being given to schools would be clear on any schemes staff were signing up for what the costs and risks would be for the individual school employer. It was important that school employers, when being included into any benefit schemes, were aware of the financial implications.
- 98.3 Ms Alden highlighted an offer from Active Northumberland which had been circulated and which had stated it was applicable to all Local Authority staff and had been extended to education staff. It had not made it clear whether this included staff employed in Academies. Ms Ponting had already identified this issue and advised that she would confer with Mrs Kingham on the types of communications which were being issued to schools.

99. 2020/21 WORK PROGRAMME AND MEETING DATES

- 99.1 Mr Parvin advised that a schedule of dates for the next academic year would be sent out before the start of the new term.

100. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

- 100.1 The Chair highlighted that Mr Woolhouse had advised at the start of the meeting that this would be his last meeting and he thanked Mr Woolhouse for his contributions to the Forum and wished him well for the future. Ms Ponting clarified that she would discuss a replacement trade union representative with Mr Woolhouse outside of the meeting.

101. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The next meeting would take place on Wednesday, 29 September 2021 at 9:30 am.

Ch.'s Initials.....

CHAIR_____

DATE_____

Ch.'s Initials.....