

CUMBERLAND SCHOOLS FORUM

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 13 June 2023 via Microsoft Teams

PRESENT

David Grimshaw (Maintained Primary)
Rhiannon Hughes (Maintained Nursery)
Elaine Lynch (Cumberland Shadow Portfolio Holder – Education, Skills & Training)
Chris McAree (North Secondary Academy)
Nerissa Nicholas (Maintained Primary)
Michael Smillie (Secondary Academy – Cumberland)
Laura Watson (CE Diocese – representing Charlotte Tudway)
Kris Williams (North Secondary Academy)

Officers in Attendance:

Dan Barton	(AD – Education and Skills)
Susan Milburn	(Group Accountant – People)
Amanda Chew	(Finance Manager)
Nicola Shiels	(Forum Support)

Observers:

None

Apologies for Absence

Julie Jones (RC Diocese)
Charlotte Tudway (CE Diocese represented by Laura Watson)
Sally Senejko (Senior Manager – SEND & Inclusion)

PART 1: ITEMS LIKELY TO BE CONSIDERED IN THE PRESENCE OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

This was the first meeting of the Cumberland Schools Forum.

Dan Barton welcomed colleagues to the meeting and there was a round of initial introductions.

1. **Appointment of Chair**

It was agreed to defer the appointment of Chair until the next full meeting of the Forum. Chris McAree agreed to chair this meeting.

2. **Appointment of Vice-Chair**

Michael Smillie was appointed as Vice-Chair for this meeting.

3. **Exclusion of Press and Public**

It was agreed that all items would be considered in the public domain.

4. **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest at this stage.

5. **Minutes of Previous Meeting and Matters Arising**

The minutes of the meetings of the Schools Forum held on 16 January 2023 were agreed as an accurate record.

There were no matters arising from the minutes.

6. **The Schools Forum Constitution and Working Groups**

A report was presented that updated Schools Forum members on the constitution for the Cumberland Schools Forum. The Forum was asked to consider whether working groups should be established and if so, to agree how frequently they should meet and terms of reference for the group(s).

Schools Forum were able to set up working groups to discuss specific issues and could make recommendations to the full Schools Forum. Under the former Cumbria Schools Forum arrangements there was a Budget and a SEN working group. Most members of the Schools Forum were either a member of the Budget and/or SEN group. There were 3 meetings of each group per year, however, more recently the meetings had been joint and many of the papers reviewed at the working group meetings had also gone to full Schools Forum for consideration.

Provisional meetings dates for working groups had been set out in the proposed meeting schedule that had been circulated with the agenda and papers.

Several members felt that the dates that had been identified should remain and would be dedicated time that could be used for working groups (if established), to discuss or work through key issues or could be used for training for Forum members. An overview of the work of the Forum, the role of a Forum member and budgets – history, how we got here would be useful for new and existing members. The retention of a SEND/HNB working group would also be welcomed.

Following the discussion, Schools Forum agreed to hold the provisional working group meeting dates for potential task and finish groups that might arise during the year and also for opportunities for training when appropriate.

7. Revised LA Scheme for Financing Schools

Schools Forum received a report that set out an amendment to the Cumberland LA Scheme for Financing Schools and Pupil Referral Units (Scheme) relating to the retention of funds from the sale of land assets.

As the amendment had been led by the DfE, consultation with maintained schools and approval of the Scheme by Schools Forum was not required.

The revised Scheme would come into effect from June 2023 and would be published on the Schools Portal after this meeting.

Schools Forum noted the amendment to the Scheme which applied to all maintained schools and pupil referral units.

8. Provisional Cumbria Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) Earmarked Reserves Outturn 2022-23

Schools Forum considered a report that presented the provisional outturn position on the Cumbria DSG Earmarked Reserves outturn for the 2022-23 financial year. There was a deficit balance of £21.031m.

The Cumbria DSG Earmarked Reserves had been disaggregated between the two new councils and the provisional split was £8.741m for Westmorland & Furness and £12.290m for Cumberland. The actual split would be confirmed when the 2022-23 year accounts had been finalised.

The DSG had an overall in-year pressure of £6.339m as at 31 March 2023, comprising of a £8.171m pressure on High Needs offset by an underspend of (£1.832m) on Central DSG. The overall cumulative deficit was therefore £21.031m split as a deficit balance on High Needs of £28.612m offset by a surplus balance on Central DSG of (£7.581m).

There was a (£1.508m) underspend on the Early Years Block but it was expected that this position would be adjusted in July due to the lagged funding for early years.

The deficit on the High Needs Block had increased by £8.171m. Key variances were pressure on special schools due to changes in banding levels and the increase in in-house provision, independent specialist day placements (ISPs), residential placements, Post-16 ISPs and further education, EHCP top-ups and invest to save initiatives.

The growing deficit on the High Needs deficit was not sustainable and Council officers had been working with the Department for Education's (DfE) Delivering Better Value (DBV) for SEND programme. The aim was to reach a balance in-year position going forward. Grants of £1m for each new authority had been applied for and approval had been received. The grants were ring-fenced in support of each authority's DBV improvement plan, the impact of which would be incorporated in their respective DSG management plans.

The methodology for disaggregating the DSG EMRs between the two new authorities had been agreed by the Local Government Reorganisation Management Implementation Board in September 2022. It was agreed that the deficit balance on the High Needs

reserve should be disaggregated using the percentage split for each authority based on the formula allocation of High Needs Block (HNB) funding.

It had been agreed that the surplus balance on the Central DSG reserve, made up of the Early Years Block (EYB) and Central School Services Block (CSSB), should be disaggregated using the percentage splits for each authority based on the formula allocations for each of the EYB and CSSB allocations. For Cumberland, there was a surplus on EYB/CSSB of (£4.305m) 57% and HNB deficit £16.595m 58% resulting in an overall deficit for Cumberland of £12.290m 58%. The actual figure would be confirmed when the 2022-23 year accounts had been finalised.

Following a short discussion, Schools Forum noted the provisional outturn position of the Cumbria DSG Earmarked Reserves and the split of the reserves between the 2 new councils.

9. Provisional Cumbria De-Delegated Contingency Budget Outturn 2022-23

A report presenting the provisional outturn position on the Cumbria de-delegated contingency budget for the 2022-23 financial year as at 31 March 2023 was considered. The budget was underspent by £0.262m and in accordance with the Dedicated Schools Grant conditions, the underspend would be carried forward into the Cumbria Dedicated Schools Grant earmarked reserve which would be disaggregated between Cumberland and Westmorland & Furness Councils.

As this was a de-delegated budget it therefore only related to maintained schools and not academies.

The de-delegated contingency budget for Cumbria in 2022-23 was £0.666m. DfE guidance stated that the contingency budget could be used for three purposes:

- Circumstances which were unforeseen when the school's budget share was initially determined.
- Schools in financial difficulties
- Additional costs relating to new, reorganised or closing schools

Circumstances which were unforeseen when the school's budget share was initially determined.

The main areas of expenditure related to St Bridget's, Parton temporary site costs due to the landslip investigations. The remaining costs related to ill health retirements, administration of the Teachers Annual Return, temporary accommodation costs at the Gillford Centre PRU and other miscellaneous costs.

Additional Costs relating to New, Reorganised or Closing Schools

This related to St Joseph's Catholic Primary School, Cockermouth which closed on 31 August 2022 with a surplus balance. This was offset by costs relating to maintained schools that had converted to academy status.

The figures set out in the report were provisional as the Cumbria County Council accounts for 2022-23 had not yet been finalised.

The maintained schools' Schools Forum members noted the 2022-23 provisional outturn position for contingency budget.

10. Maintained School Balances Outturn 2022-23

Schools Forum considered a report that presented the Cumberland maintained school balances outturn for the financial year 2022-23. The balance was a net surplus of (£4.806m).

As at 31 March 2023, the net surplus balance for maintained schools was (£4.806m). This was a decrease in net balances since 2021-22 and an increase compared to schools' own forecasts as at the October budget submissions.

The number of maintained schools in deficit had increased by 3 and the total value of deficit balances had increased by £0.777m. During the year 1 school closed with a net deficit balance of £0.001m as at 31 March 2022, therefore in terms of the maintained schools both at 31 March 2022 and 31 March 2023 the number of schools in deficit had increased from 15 to 19 with the total deficit for these schools increasing by £0.778m.

In their three-year budget plans for 2022-23, 19 schools had proposed a deficit budget plan totalling £3.272m. Of the 19, 15 had ended the financial year in deficit and 4 schools that had proposed a surplus budget ended the year in deficit.

Maintained secondary schools faced the most significant financial challenges. The number of secondary schools in deficit had increased from 4 to 5 between 31 March 2022 and 2023; the net deficit of the 5 schools was £2.566m as at 31 March 2023.

The number of maintained schools in surplus had decreased from 115 to 108 and the total value of surplus balances had reduced by £1.707m. During the year 3 schools had joined academy trusts with a net surplus balance of £0.464m as at 31 March 2022, therefore in terms of the maintained schools both at 31 March 2022 and 31 March 2023 the number of schools in surplus had reduced from 112 to 108 with the total surplus for these schools reducing by £1.243m.

Although schools received additional funding in 2022-23 the main reason for the overall reduction in net school balances between years was due to increased staff costs including the impact of the teacher and non-teaching staff pay awards, increased energy costs due to the energy crisis as well as rising inflation on food and other supplies and services which more than offset the additional funding available in 2022-23.

36 maintained schools ended the financial year with an excess surplus balance (8% primary and 5% secondary) over the allowable threshold. The total value of the excess balance amount for these schools was £1.544m.

As agreed by the Cumbria Schools Forum the excess surplus balance policy would be applied and schools had been asked to provide justifications for their excess balance amounts. It was expected that schools would be notified of the outcome of this exercise by the end of the Summer term and a summary report would be available at the next Schools Forum meeting in September when the maintained schools' Schools Forum representatives would be asked to consider whether or not the policy should apply against school balances at the end of 2023/24 financial year.

There followed a short discussion about schools in a deficit position. The policy that the LA applied was emphasised and it was noted that there were some schools with a historic deficit where the position was improving and there was a balanced position in-year. The work of the SRBMs was continuing and their work with schools was felt worthwhile and to be of benefit to those schools involved. There was also a pragmatic view about the difficulties and challenges currently facing schools.

Falling rolls and staffing costs were challenging and reducing NORs would soon be feeding through to secondary schools so some work on infrastructure and strategic place planning would be needed.

The maintained schools' Schools Forum representative members noted the maintained schools' balances outturn position for 2022-23 and the application of the excess surplus balances policy.

11. Delivering Better Value for SEND

Issues relating to funding for SEND, High Needs budgets and the growth in demand not being met by funding were impacting LAs nationally. Some additional funding had been provided but there still an upward trajectory in terms of demand.

Government was working with those authorities with the most significant deficits with very strict monitoring and robust interventions.

55 other LAs (including Cumbria) had been identified to work with DfE on the Delivering Better Value in SEND programme which was research led, recognising that there was a national issue and looking to collect evidence that would inform a structural resolution. Working with Newton Europe, DfE's appointed consultant, phase 1 of the programme involved 6 months of work on baselining surveys, triangulation and demand forecasting. Following the initial work, funding to support a 2-year programme of work had been allocated; an implementation plan and 5/6 workstreams were being developed, with schools, parent career networks, CASH and PHA all being updated and involved.

The work would include developing a process for good early intervention to support the whole system at point the need was identified and a plan for AP and RP in schools that was strategic.

Forum members welcomed the update, noting that EHCPs had doubled since statements were replaced by EHCPs and it was good that this was being recognised. Concerns about funding and staffing to support remained; TAs were very difficult to recruit so colleagues were looking at/revisiting a TA academy model. How could Schools Forum help, what there a more formal role for Forum in progressing this work?

A written briefing would be presented to Forum at the November meeting.

12. Dates of Future Meetings

The next meeting of the Schools Forum would be held on Monday, 18 September 2023. The meeting would begin at 9.30am and was likely to be via Microsoft Teams. Final arrangements would be circulated prior to the meeting.

13. Any Other Business

There were no other items of business.

E&S/NS
August 2023