

PRESENT:

1. Bev Williamson
2. Ben Cloves
3. Jamie Bean
4. Emma Walford
5. Sharon Roberts
6. Karen Day
7. Sue Smith
8. James Fisher
9. Emma Bradshaw
10. Bec Allott
11. Pete Naudi
12. Councillor Jane Pascoe (observer)
13. Andrew Theobald (Vice Chair)
14. Jenny Sims (Chair)

1: Welcome and Introductions

The Chair, Jenny Sims, welcomed those present.

The Chair advised the Forum that she would reorder the agenda to take item 9 - Preventing Exclusions - after item 5.

2: Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Rob Beck and James Kearns.

Apologies for lateness were received from Bec Allott and Peter Naudi.

3: Declarations of Interest

In respect of item 10, Bev Williamson declared that she is headteacher of Sutton Tuition and Reintegration Services (STARS).

Sue Smith declared that she had recently joined the governing body of Sherwood Park School. Jenny Sims noted that she and Bec Allott were non-executive directors of Cognus Limited, along with Sutton Council officer Kieran Holliday.

4: Minutes of the previous meeting

RESOLVED: That the public and private minutes of the previous meeting held on 17 October 2023 be agreed as an accurate record.

5: Revenue Report And Dedicated Schools Grant 2023/24 M08 and 2024/25 Draft budget v1)

The Strategic Finance Business Partner introduced the report.

The Forum discussed the variances created by the number of pupils with very high needs and associated costs, noting that the borough had records of 12 pupils not accessing education regularly.

The Forum discussed the £316,000 of Central School Services Block funding earmarked within the report for contribution to the ongoing costs of education services provided to looked after children by the Children's Services department of the local authority. In response to questions, officers clarified that the funding was used to cover social care costs only and not education, which would be covered by some staffing costs, and that the funding was intended to support these children into education. The Forum expressed concern that it was being asked to meet funding challenges which should be met by social care budgets, and requested reassurance that these children would be successfully brought into education. In an indicative vote on this transfer of funds for the provision of social care to looked after children for the financial year, votes were as follows:

For - one vote
Against - eight votes
Abstaining - one vote

The Forum discussed whether alternative funding might be met by the Dedicated Schools Grant, or whether a specific funding source should be created to ensure looked after children accessed education.

The Forum noted that the block transfer from the Schools Block to the High Needs Block of 0.5% would be approximately £1m, but that this would be confirmed following confirmation of October 2023 census data. The Forum noted the sentiment that headteachers were looking to work productively with the borough and appreciated officers' candour on financial challenges, but that they had significant concerns on the effect the withdrawal of Schools Block funding would have on a school. The Forum expressed support for the principle of spend-to-save, but requested that clear monitoring of the use of funds would be available.

In discussing concerns about the transfers of funds to make up shortfalls, the Forum discussed where it may make representations to ensure its concerns were registered, including the prospect of writing to the Secretary of State for Education. The Forum discussed the wider environment of pressures, including that of schools and the local authority to place more pupils in mainstream education and the increased rates of school exclusions which often followed thereof. The Forum discussed the long-term nature of this challenge and the need to clearly communicate these challenges to parents.

The Forum agreed to support the principle of a block transfer from the Schools Block to the High Needs Block of 0.5% but expressed its reluctance in doing so without a suitable alternative. It was agreed that officers would respond to the Department for Education explaining the Forum's concerns and the wider implications this decision would create for the borough.

RESOLVED:

1. To note the latest position on the DSG for 2023/24, as at November 2023 (month 8).

2. To agree in principle a block transfer from the Schools Block to the High Needs Block of 0.5% (final confirmation of figures to be reported following confirmation of 2024/25 DSG Allocation, expected in December, and completion of Authority Proforma Tool 2024/25, which will inform the transfer value. Final value will be reported at the next Schools Forum meeting on 20/02/24
3. To agree to the MFG rates for both Schools Block and High Needs Block to be set at 0%.

9: Preventing Exclusions

The Cognus Head of Inclusion introduced the report.

The Forum discussed the involvement of schools teams in discussions on exclusions but not decisions, and the appropriateness of blanket policies for what schools would consider unacceptable behaviour, noting the need for reasonable application of such policies.

RESOLVED:

1. To agree that capacity within Paving The Way is increased by 1 full-time equivalent member of staff focusing support on children in years 4,5 and 6.
2. To agree that capacity within Inclusion is permanently increased by 1 FTE.
3. To agree to the continuation of the specialist support workers attached to the schools project.
4. To agree that the funding for Limes Turnaround plus project comes to an end after year one but the service offer remains as a traded offer to schools.
5. To agree that existing commissioned funding for standard secondary Turnaround is used to subsidise both Turnaround and Turnaround Plus.

6: School Improvement and Monitoring

The Acting Strategic Lead for Education introduced the report.

RESOLVED: For maintained schools to agree in principle to de-delegate a collective sum of £50,837 to fund the core / de minimis responsibilities of the Local Authority following the Government's decision to remove the School Improvement and Brokering Grant. The final sums will be confirmed at the February Schools Forum meeting in February 2024.

7: Schools Falling Rolls Fund 2024/25

The Acting Strategic Lead for Education introduced the report.

RESOLVED:

1. To agree Option 3 - Additional funding is allocated based on a proportion of the basic entitlement for vacant places below 85% of the PAN for the normal year of entry (reception or year 7) and also for the next year group after entry (year 1 and year 8). Funding is available for a maximum of 3 years (provided SCAP data shows places are needed in the next 3 to 5 years) after which a school's PAN may be adjusted or other action taken.

2. To note the Schools Block Falling rolls allocation for Sutton for 24/25 is projected to be nil. This allocation will be reported to the Forum at the February 2024 meeting, following its confirmation by the Department for Education.

8: Schools in Financial Difficulty and Hardship Fund

The Acting Head of Pupil Based Commissioning introduced the report.

The forum welcomed the establishment of a policy but expressed concern about current pupil numbers, noting that a class size of 21 pupils was too large to allow for consolidation of classes but nonetheless created a deficit for the school. The Forum discussed the impact of planning decisions to create housing developments on school place provision.

RESOLVED: To provide schools that have a cumulative forecast deficit at the end of 2023/24 proportional to the size of that deficit as a one off payment (Option 2), namely: to provide funding support to those schools with an overall financial deficit proportionate to the forecast level of overspend.

10: Sutton Tuition and Reintegration Service Review

The Acting Head of Pupil Based Commissioning introduced the report.

The Forum discussed whether the increased demand for places at the Drapers Centre indicated a need for more early intervention with pupils, whether charging for provision would only affect future placements, and what the £6,700 top-up funding would entail. The Forum proposed that the £6,700 top-up funding be listed as to be determined until such time as the use of this funding could be clarified.

RESOLVED:

1. To agree the recommendation of the review whereby a funding mechanism for STARS provision is created as follows (per page 10 of the review document in Appendix A):
 - a. To introduce a funding mechanism to be overseen by STARS where schools are charged to a per-pupil value to be determined (up to £6,700) per pupil (equivalent value of top-up funds for STARS places) for the spaces that they use.
 - i. The amount will be on a pro rata basis for short-term/long-term places.
 - ii. The amount will be on a pro rata basis for full-time/part-time places.
2. To note that the funds for placements at STARS will be used to create a Family Support Service which includes:
 - a. commissioning CAMHS services
 - b. commissioning Counselling services
 - c. commissioning Education Psychology services
 - d. providing capacity to support family and school liaison work.

11: Extended Early Years Entitlement funding April 2024

The Early Intervention Service Manager introduced the report.

The Forum noted that it was harder to forecast funding needs for newborns than forecasting from pre-school/nursery attendance.

RESOLVED:

1. To keep the current funding formula in place for 2024/25 while we review uptake of the new entitlements and to ensure stability in the market.
2. To consult with the sector on the proposal to maintain the same formula and appetite to expand places to meet the increased demand.

12: Year 11 in-year placements and Fair Access Protocol

The Acting Head of Pupil Based Commissioning introduced the report.

The Forum discussed whether unplaced year 11 pupils could refuse assessments and still be placed into mainstream educational settings, noting that this would create pressure for year groups in the midst of preparing for GCSEs. The Forum noted that pupils and their parents/carers could appeal for places in-year, and that the system was designed to balance parental preference with professional opinion.

RESOLVED:

1. To agree that for the 2024-25 financial year the budget for unplaced year 11s should move to the growth fund of the Schools Block of the Dedicated Schools Grant, from the High Needs Block, where it currently sits.
2. To note the proposals for changing the referral and placement process.

The meeting ended at 19:16.