

SCHOOLS FORUM

At a meeting of the Schools Forum on Wednesday, 21 February 2024 held remotely

Present:

A. Jones, Democratic Services, HBC
N. Shafiq, Financial Management, HBC
C. Finch, Policy, People, Performance & Efficiency
K. Landrum, (Chair) Primary School with a Nursery Representative
J. O'Connor, PVI Representative
J. Coughlan, Primary Representative - Infant School
N. Hunt, Pupil Referral Unit Representative
E. Haver, Special Academy Representative
J. Thompson, Community Special Schools
A. Sheppard, VA Schools Representative
C. Dalton, Secondary Academy Representative
C. Liku, Community Nursery Schools Representative
J. Robertson, Small Primary School Representative
B. Barton, 16-19 Provision Representative
R. Houghton, Community Primary School Governor Representative
A. Good, Financial Management, HBC
S. Evans, Secondary Governor Representative (Sub)

Action

SCF34 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor T. McInerney and Jim Wilson – Secondary Governor Representative but named substitute in attendance.

SCF35 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 17 January 2024 were agreed as a correct record.

SCF33 – it was noted that the subgroup meeting had not yet taken place, Officers would look into this as the Officer who requested volunteers at the last meeting, was not available to follow up.

Representatives raised questions on the educational functions budget and what came under this. It was commented that this budget was for maintained schools only and covered Capital Officers, Finance Officer support and Health and Safety Officer support. Also, the delegated contingency budget was queried as to what was included on a historic basis.

SCF36 DSG EARLY YEARS BLOCK 2024-25

The Forum received an update on the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) allocation for 2024-25 for Early Years.

It was reported that the indicative allocation for 2024-25 was £15.554m, which is £5.779m greater than 2023-24 but reflected the national change to enhance the 2 year old offer and create a new under 2s offer. This allocation includes the up-to-date hourly rates to be used in Halton's determination of the under two, 2, 3 and 4 year olds early education funding entitlement to Maintained Nursery Schools, Nursey Classes, and Private Voluntary and Independent (PVI) settings, including childminders.

It was noted that the 2024-25 allocation remained indicative until after the January 2024 early years headcount had been collated, validated and used by the DfE to inform Halton's actual Early Years Block allocation, to be notified in July 2024.

A consultation exercise with the sector had been undertaken and the results were currently being collated; the findings of which would be taken into consideration. The indicative rates and DSG allocations were provided in the table on page 5 with the proposed banding allocations, and the Indicative Funding Rates were on page 6.

Representatives questioned whether the consultation would affect the figures presented. In response it was commented that only minor adjustments to the percentage allocations between base rate, deprivation and quality were possible within the formula rules.

RESOLVED: That the report and comments made be noted.

SCF37 DSG HIGH NEEDS BLOCK 2024-25

The Forum received an update on the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) allocation for 2024-25 for the High Needs Block.

The High Needs Block allocation had been announced as £27.008m, before academy and further education (FE) recoupment, but including the deduction in respect to net exports of SEND children being educated in other areas. Academy and FE recoupment would be £3.180m for the per place funding element deduction, as identified by the DfE published allocations. It was noted that

no intra block transfers had been applied this year.

For 2024-25 Halton had £23.827m for distribution to specialist provisions and to contribute to supporting the ongoing cost pressures being faced by the High Needs Block. Schools Forum were requested to note the funding rates to be applied to the High Needs Block allocations, on the basis of Place-Plus (top-up) funding for specialist provision including mainstream SEND units; these were presented in the tables on pages 9 and 10 of the report.

With regards to FE establishments, it was proposed to apply a 2% uplift to FE Element 3 Funding, with effect from April 2024. The cost of this would be covered within the overall DSG 2% uplift. Schools Forum were requested to support this uplift for 2024-25.

The PRU Representative requested to know how the top up funding of 2% was calculated within the different bandings and requested a breakdown of the calculations. Debate then took place on the need for a review of the banding system, which was considered out of date and was needed to ensure best value for money. Other Representatives commented that the figures they had received were not in line with SLA's they had been asked to sign. Officers explained that there were two different funding arrangements that schools were currently using and for this reason, all schools were being encouraged to accept a new funding offer, so that everyone was on the new SLA.

With regards to a review of the banding system, the Forum agreed that in principle this needed doing as there were many changes over the past 8 years. The Forum was advised however, that it would be prudent to carry out a benchmarking exercise with neighbouring authorities first, as there were instances where reviews had resulted in reduced funding. In conclusion, Officers agreed to share with the Forum the results of a benchmarking exercise confidentially, so that Representatives were better informed and could make comparisons with other authorities, which would help them decide on whether to request a banding review. In the meantime, the Forum supports the uplift for 2024-25 as outlined in the report.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

SCF38 DSG FORECAST OUTTURN 2023-24

The Forum received the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) forecast outturn for 2023-24.

Operational
Director - Finance

The DSG allocation for 2023-24 was £143,393,022 and was broken down as follows:

Schools Block	-	106.745,453m
Central Schools Services Block	-	0.737,941m
High Needs Block	-	26.135,051m
Early Years Block	-	9.774,941m

Of this, £52,623,991 was recouped from the Schools Block and an estimated £3,166,667 was recouped from the high Needs Block for academies and further education.

The report provided explanations on expenditure and balances for each of the above Blocks.

It was reported that taking into account the deficit brought forward from 2022-23 of £2,892,585, and anticipating the ongoing pressures specifically faced by the High Needs Block forecasting and in-year deficit of £1,986,749, the cumulative forecast deficit by the end of 2023-24 is £4,879,334.

As discussed in a previous meeting, this accumulating deficit has resulted in Halton being included in tranche 3 of the DfE intervention 'Delivering Better Value (DBV) in High Needs', where work was currently in progress to develop a realistic and robust recovery plan that would require the approval of the DfE.

In response to questions from Representatives, the following additional information was provided:

- The transfer of 0.2% (£235,721) from the Schools Block to the High Needs Block was clarified – this was not for a specific budget/purpose but to go into the High Needs pot to assist with the overspend;
- More information was requested on the numbers of children in Out of Borough placements – these were used only if necessary, where the LA had no choice. It was noted that this provision was being looked at in the DBV Programme, as well as forecasting SEND requirements;
- Resource bases were the most cost effective way to educate those with SEND requirements, but the increased demand for these and complexity of need resulted in students being accommodated in out of Borough placements;
- The shortage of SEND provision was a national problem;
- The Raise Academy Free School would provide some

- relief when this opens in September; and
- Nationally, according to the DBV Programme, Halton was in the middle zone of overspend in comparison to other authorities, although nothing was published to confirm this.

RESOLVED: That the report is noted.

SCF39 MEETING DATES FOR 2024-25

The following meeting dates for 2024-25 were noted:

- 5 June 2024;
- 16 October 2024;
- 22 January 2025; and
- 26 February 2025

Meeting ended at 5.15 p.m.