

SCHOOLS FORUM

At a meeting of the Schools Forum on Wednesday, 16 October 2024 at the Civic Suite, Town Hall, Runcorn

Present: Councillor T. McInerney, Observer
A. Jones, Democratic Services, HBC
C. Finch, Policy, People, Performance & Efficiency, HBC
B. Holmes, Education, Inclusion and Provision, HBC
C. Elechi, Financial Management, HBC
S. Baker, Financial Management, HBC
C. Hunt, Children's Organisation and Protection, HBC
N. Hunt, (Chair) Pupil Referral Unit Representative
J. Jardine, All Through School Representative
M. Tudor, Secondary Academy Representative
K. Landrum, Primary School with a Nursery Representative
J. O'Connor, PVI Representative
J. Coughlan, Primary Representative - Infant School Representative
J. Thompson, Community Special Schools Representative
C. Liku, Community Nursery Schools Representative
R. Houghton, Community Primary Governor Representative
B. Barton, 16-19 Provision Representative
M. Slingsby, Primary Academies Representative

Action

SCF8 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Jim Wilson, Matty Deeney, Angela Shephard, Joanne Robinson and Elaine Haver.

On behalf of the Schools Forum, the Chair conveyed thanks to the previous Chair of the Forum, Karl Landrum, for his valuable contribution and success in carrying out the role for the past few years.

SCF9 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 19 June 2024 were agreed as a correct record.

SCF10 DEDICATED SCHOOLS GRANT (DSG) FORECAST OUTTURN FOR 2024-25

The Forum was presented with the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) forecast outturn for 2024-25.

The DSG for 2024-25 was £154,359,370 and was broken down as follows:

Schools Block	-	£ 111,188,230
CSSB	-	£ 746,822
Early Years Block	-	£ 15,327,180
High Needs Block	-	£ 27,097,210

Of this, £58,637.34 was recouped from the Schools Block and an estimated £3,305,157 was recouped from the High Needs Block for academies and further education. These figures were based on latest July DSG settlement update provided by the DfE.

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

It was noted that taking into account the deficit brought forward from 2023-24 of £5,348,546 and anticipating the ongoing pressures specifically faced by the High Needs Block, forecasting an in-year deficit of £2,532,825, the cumulative forecast deficit by the end of 2024-25 is £7,881,371.

To clarify for Representatives, the additional funding referred to in paragraph 3.7 would be allocated to schools from this September to March, covering the 2024-25 financial year. The remainder would be allocated next year.

Regarding a query on the CSSB (Central Schools Services Block), a breakdown of the budgets within this would be brought to Schools Forum at a future meeting. It was agreed that a forward plan for the Schools Forum agendas would also be made.

Officers advised that due to the timing of the 2024 General Election, they had been advised by the Department for Education (DfE) that the notional schools and high needs national funding formula allocations for 2024-25 were delayed. There were plans to publish notional NFF allocations for schools and an operational guide and NFF technical note as soon as possible following the budget announcement of 30 October 2024. The DSG allocation would be published in December 2024.

RESOLVED: That the report is noted.

SCF11 EXCESS SCHOOLS BALANCES

The Schools Forum was presented with the Maintained Schools excess balances, reported in June 2024.

Executive Director
of Children's
Services

It was reported that whilst schools balances were still required to be reported to the Schools Forum no excess surplus balance limits were currently in place. However, the Schools Forum retained the right to require schools to provide further information as to how their balance would be spent, if this was requested.

The Schools Financial Value Standard (SFVS) states that schools were expected to sustain 'reasonable' levels of surplus balances and must demonstrate 'value for money' through effective plans for spending their budgets.

Representatives were referred to Appendix A, which showed the revenue balances for each Maintained school, along with their 2022-23 comparison. It was noted that the overall net surplus school budget balances position for Halton's maintained schools at the end of 2023-24 was £6,519,071.

The Forum discussed the adoption of the proposed *Halton Borough Council School Balances and Clawback Guidance 2024-25*, which was presented in Appendix C. Appendix B showed the clawback calculations although it was noted that these required some refinement now.

It was confirmed for Representatives that Halton had never previously had a clawback policy in place. However, schools excess balances were kept to within Government guidelines of a recommended 5% for primary, 8% for secondary, until this requirement was removed some years ago.

The following comments and concerns were raised during consideration of the adoption of the clawback policy and consideration of options 1, 2 and 3, as outlined in the report:

- Each school had its own unique circumstances and reasons for surplus carry overs, which may be committed to spend the following year;
- Consideration should be given to the increasing complex needs of some children being supported in the maintained sector and the additional costs of this being incurred by schools;
- If schools knew that their surplus balances were to be clawed back, they would endeavour to spend the surplus before it could be taken;
- If the £1m was clawed back and put back into the DSG there was currently no clarity on where it would be spent;

- The policy would only apply to Maintained schools – the LA does not have authority over academy surplus balances;
- Implementation of this policy may encourage schools to convert to academy status; and
- It was confirmed that special schools would also be subject to the policy.

Officers advised that the majority of local authorities in the area operated a clawback policy and it was only right that each year's allocation of DSG funding should be spent by schools on the children, as it was intended.

Also, it was important to note that most schools carried out efficient budgeting and a surplus carry over policy would encourage this further. It was commented that there would be exemptions allowed for some schools with surplus carry overs, eg. those with secured contracts for future refurbishment.

The non-academy Forum members proceeded to a vote on the three options and it was unanimously agreed that option 3 be implemented – *requesting schools to justify the excess balances with information to be submitted on the planned use of their excess school balance.*

RESOLVED: That Schools Forum approves the implementation of Option 3, as mentioned above. An updated procedure for clawback in line with this decision would be presented at a future meeting.

Director of Finance

SCF12 SPEECH & LANGUAGE SERVICE UPDATE

The Forum considered a report from the Acting Director of Education, which provided an update on the current position of the Speech and Language service by Communicate – SLT CIC, the commissioned service for Halton Council and NHS Cheshire and Merseyside.

It was noted that following a tender process last year, the children and young people's Speech and Language Therapy contract was awarded to Communicate – SLT CIC. The service is jointly commissioned with NHS Cheshire and Merseyside, with HBC holding the contract.

The report outlined the key areas of provision that were prioritised according to the clinical risk to children and young people and statutory responsibilities. It was recognised that challenges were being faced as the demand for speech and language services had exceeded capacity,

largely due to four main reasons, these were described in the report.

There were plans in place to support the increased demand for the service; these were discussed, as well as the next steps to be taken.

It was recognised that the transition of the service from the previous provider was poor, as experienced by some Representatives. There had been complications and challenges and it was noted that this current provision required additional funding of approximately £250k to get it to the required standard. Although the situation had been very complicated, as discussed, the service was now fully staffed and would be closely monitored. The importance of the service was highlighted, especially for the Early Years, and it was commented that schools were prepared to pay for a good service, that offered value for money.

It was reported that in the longer term, the service would be recommissioned post October 2025 and all stakeholders would be consulted before this happened.

RESOLVED: That the update is noted.

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SCF13 DELIVERING BETTER VALUES (DBV) PROGRAMME

The quarter two monitoring report of The *Delivering Better Values (DBV) Programme – Improving outcomes for children and young people with SEND*, was presented to the Forum for information.

The report for quarter two (July to October 2024) provided a summary of progress to date in relation to the agreed implementation plan. These reports are required to be submitted to the Department for Education (DfE) to secure the £250k funding each quarter.

Following questions it was noted that the impact of the spend would take some time to show, potentially between 3-5 years. The Chair requested an update on the Programme for a future meeting of the Forum.

RESOLVED: That the report is noted.

Executive Director
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Meeting ended at 5.20 p.m.