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**Minutes of the Schools Forum – 18th January 2024**

**Walker Room Meeting Point House.**

**Status: Draft**

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| **Name** | **Establishment**  | **Representing** |
| Claire Whiting (CW) **Chair** | Redhill Primary Academy | Academies |
| Christobel Cousins (CC) | Lilleshall Primary School | Maintained Primaries – Newport Cluster |
| Sarah Roberts (SR) | High Ercall Primary School | Maintained Primaries – Wellington Cluster |
| Rachel Cook (RC) | Newdale Primary School | Maintained Primaries – Central Cluster |
| Jo Edgar (JE) | Abraham Darby Academy | Academies |
| Louise Lowings (LL) | Madeley Nursery School  | Maintained Nursery Schools |
| Penny Hustwick (PH) | ABC Day Nurseries | PVI Settings  |
| Sarah Farrelly (SF) | The Bridge Special School | Maintained Special Schools |
| Simon Wellman (SW) | Director of Education & Skills | Representative of the Director of Children’s Services |
| Tracey Smart (TS) | Finance Manager | Representative of the Director of Finance |
| Natalie Bevan (NB) | SDM for SEND | Representative of the Director of Children’s Services |
| Tim Davis (TD) | Group Accountant | Representative of the Director of Finance |
| Andy Wood (AW) | Senior Accountant - Schools | Representative of the Director of Finance |

1. **Apologies - AW.**
	1. Apologies were received from:

Michael Scott – Newport Girls’ High School.

Paul Roberts – Learning Community Trust.

Darren Lennon – Linden Centre PRU.

* 1. CW pointed out that if members cannot make the meeting then they must, in good time; identify a replacement to give the viewpoint of those settings that they are representing.
1. **Minutes of the 16th November 2023 meeting and matters arising - CW.**
	1. The minutes of the 16th November 2023 were accepted as a true and accurate record. A copy of the minutes can be found here:

[Minutes of 16th November 2023](https://www.telford.gov.uk/downloads/file/26674/16_november_2023_-_forum_minutes).

* 1. There were no matters arising that would not be covered at this meeting.
1. **December allocations of Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) Update for Financial Year 2024-2025 Including Joint Use Funding - TD**
	1. The Forum were provided with a paper which can be found here:

[Schools Block, High Needs Block and Central Schools Services Block Allocations for 2024/25](https://www.telford.gov.uk/downloads/file/26729/january_2024_-_december_2023_allocations_of_dedicated_schools_block).

Schools Block (SB).

* 1. TD advised that this is the final iteration of the DSG allocations process, which started in July last year. Pupil numbers increased in the secondary phase. Primary numbers were relatively stable, with a lower reception intake compared to year 6 leavers compensated by in-year growth in all year groups, arising from housebuilding, etc.
	2. The allocation for growth funding, which forms part of the schools block, was as expected, with additional funding to cover the growth funding we are paying to Thomas Telford School.
	3. The schools block funding increase of 2.12% per pupil was modest compared to current levels of inflation.

High Needs Block (HN).

* 1. The HN block increased by £1.65m which is much less than recent years. The potential outturn for 2023/24 is currently projected to be a deficit of well above £1m.
	2. To put this into context, after repeated requests to the ESFA, we were provided to a link to DSG balances at LA level for all of England. Unfortunately the data has not yet been updated to 2022/23, but the financial year 2021/2022 net overall deficit in England was for £1.153bn. Of the 152 LAs listed, 105 were in deficit. These deficits totalled £1.443bn, an average of nearly £14m per local authority.

Central Schools Services Block (CSSB).

* 1. The CSSB increased by £13K due to increased pupil numbers compared to the prior year. Unfortunately the increase in centrally purchased (by the DfE) licence costs is likely to be at least equal to this figure.
1. **Joint Use (JU) Funding for FY2024/2025 - TD.**
	1. The Forum were provided with a paper which can be found here:

[Joint Use Funding 2024/25](https://www.telford.gov.uk/downloads/file/26762/january_2024_-_joint_use_funding_financial_year_2024_to_2025).

* 1. JU funding, which falls under the guise of exceptional funding, has historically been used to support leisure facilities jointly used by the community and schools, including swimming pools. There have been ongoing discussions with the ESFA over the last couple of years, as reported to the Forum in previous meeting, as the ESFA were reviewing exceptional funding and had indicated that funding connected to swimming facilities was to be removed.
	2. The DfE notified us on 12 January 2024 that JU funding for swimming would remain for financial year 2024/25 and then be removed in its entirety.
	3. SW stated that we need to have a plan to reflect the eventual loss of funding within school budgets. We could begin to charge schools in financial year 2024/25 and use the 2024/25 funding to phase in charges gradually over a couple of years, or only begin to charge schools from April 2025.
	4. RC stated that it would be useful to have a working group to look the offer.
	5. CC stated that her school is looking to focus on those pupils that are unable to swim.
	6. RC stated that we should be encouraging parents to ensure their children learn how to swim.
	7. CC asked if an explanation could be sent out to parents explaining how the situation has come about. SW stated that he would not wish to do this at this stage.
	8. SW stated that from the discussion, it looked like the consensus was to commence charges from April 2025 rather than any sooner.
	9. SR pointed out that it is not just the cost of swimming the schools have to pick up; the cost of transport is also significant.
	10. SW stated that the LA already supports swimming for schools through local authority budgets, in addition to joint use funding and is not in a financial position to do more. Thus the offer to schools will have to change, once joint use funding for swimming ceases.
1. **Proposed transfer of funds to the High Needs Block from the Schools Block - TD.**
	1. The Forum were presented with a paper for this agenda item which can be found at the link:

[Proposal to transfer Schools Block funding to High Needs in 2024/25.oint Use Funding 2024-2025](https://www.telford.gov.uk/downloads/file/26730/january_2024_-_proposed_transfer_to_high_needs_block)

* 1. The paper presented shows the results of the consultation. Of the 25 consultations received, 14 were in favour and eleven against. The Forum were reminded of the pressures on the HN areas.
	2. CW moved the group to a vote with each member individually explaining their position. The result was eight in favour and two against. These results included two electronic votes, one for each option, received before the meeting.
	3. CW stated that this was an incredibly difficult decision for all schools given budgetary pressures, but they recognised the need to support high needs provision.
	4. RC stated that this transfer out of schools budgets would have an impact on school budget positions.
	5. CW stated that all schools had the opportunity to input to the decision via cluster meetings and the consultation.
	6. TD advised that this vote is for FY2024/2025 only and that with a new government the current policy of ring-fencing DSG deficits until March 2026 will have to be reviewed. As things stand the national funding position for high needs is unsustainable.
	7. SW stated that this funding will enable us to continue with the incentives for inclusion for mainstream schools put in place over the last couple of years and we would continue to look at possible developments.
1. **Early Years Budget for 2024/25 - TD.**
	1. The Forum were presented with a paper to support this agenda item which can be found at the link:

[Early Years Budget 2024 - 2025](https://www.telford.gov.uk/downloads/file/26732/january_2024_-_early_years_budget)

* 1. TD pointed out the startling increase in 2 year old funding over the last year, which implies a belated recognition by the DfE that previous funding levels were inadequate and would have to be radically different (i.e. higher) in order to make the expansion in 2 year old provision financially viable for providers.
	2. Despite the increases in funding per hour we should not forget the very significant increases in costs, particularly for staffing, that are being borne by the early years sector, driven by (for example) national minimum wage increases.
	3. Within the proposed formulae the LA will continue to pass as much funding as possible to providers with plans to pass over in excess of 98%; the requirement being 95%. The top slices for the SEND and local authority costs are planned to be at the same proportion of the overall budget as in 2023/24.
	4. CW commented that the increase in the LA central retention, was significant. TD responded that for a number of years Telford’s retention has been less than half of the average across local authorities in England and as it represents the same proportion of the estimated overall early years block for 2024/25, the retention proposed is likely to remain well below that of the average local authority.
	5. RC stated that schools may not have the capacity (for example building space) to take in additional two year olds.
	6. LL stated that the EY sector goes much further than schools and that the whole sector needs supporting. Younger pupils are more labour intensive and need a high quality provision in order to impact positively on their development.
	7. PH stated that PVI’s pay for elements of their service from the local authority.
	8. CW queried that the funding under discussion is for the administration/back office support, rather than for the team that goes into settings offering support.  Schools may have a different perspective to PVIs/Childminders, as they may use the service differently.
	9. PH stated, regarding the SEND top slice, that the provision is needed, given the challenges of supporting very young children with high needs.
	10. RC/PH stated that they are struggling to recruit and retain staff. RC stated that they are visiting colleges to talk to students about working in the EY sector.
	11. PH stated that staff are needing to be more qualified now and need to be paid accordingly, adding additional financial pressure to the sector.
	12. RC asked what the impact would be on the hourly rate if the LA retention were to be reduced. SW stated that the LA would do some modelling and would come back to the Forum at an exceptional additional meeting within the next couple of weeks.
	13. CW asked for the proposals to be distributed prior to the meeting for discussion at cluster. SW responded stating that data would be made available as soon as possible.
1. **AOB - CW.**
	1. TD advised the Forum of the recent high court case whereby the entitlement to full holiday entitlement for part time employees has been reversed. However unions and employers have agreed to a back-pay payment for the period 1st February 2022 until 1st April 2024. The financial impact of this on most schools will be modest. Payments will be made in the February 2024 payroll.
2. **Next Meetings**

The dates of the forthcoming meetings for the academic year 2023/24, are as follows:

* Thursday 14th March 2024
* Thursday 16th May 2024

[Planned Forum Meetings](http://www.telford.gov.uk/downloads/file/507/forum_meetings)