

Minutes of the meeting of the Schools' Forum held on Thursday 12 December 2024 at 15:00

Present: P Hussey (Chair)

J Fellowes, P Herbert, J Hoarty, K Hopkins, K Hughes, T Long J Pilgrim, Skillings, K Warren (Vice Chair) and J Yeo

Apologies: N Fowler, H Middleton and R Tite

Officers: K Burgess (Management Accountant), V Courtis (EHC Service Leader), M Denny (Assistant Director - Education, Learning and Inclusion), K Enser (Virtual School Headteacher), S Hattle (Head of Finance for Social Care, Education and Housing), M Hibbert (Schools Funding Accountant), N Hutchin (Assistant Director - Finance), J McDougall Children's Services Lead Finance Manager), S Sims (Head of Access to Education, Employment, and Training), A Talbot (Principal Officer for Education Outcomes) and G Vincent (Democratic and Electoral Services Officer)

SF25 Apologies for Absences

Apologies for absence had been received from Natalie Fowler, Helen Middleton and Rob Tite.

SF26 Disclosures of Interest

There were none.

SF27 Minutes and Matters Arising

The minutes of the meeting held on 17 October 2024 were agreed as an accurate record. An update was provided on an action from the previous meeting, the Forum were advised that the vote which was conducted online on the de-delegation of funding for school improvement had concluded, and had been approved.

Members commented on potential improvements to the process, additionally their disapproval of the situation and approach to the vote was noted.

SF28 Forecast Outturn 2024-25

The Children's Services Lead Finance Manager presented the latest dedicated schools grant funding allocation and forecast outturn position.

The following areas were highlighted by officers:

The small adjustment of £0.029m to the early years block for the newly introduced 2-year-old working family entitlements.

The overall DSG carry forward was reduced by £0.416m due to in-year pressures.

There was an underspend of £0.721m on the schools block, largely due to underspends against the growth budget and adjustments related to Academy growth funding.

The early years block had a predicted surplus carry forward of £1.9 million, with an in-year overspend of £1.1 million due to final funding adjustments.

The high needs block anticipated a small in-year overspend of £0.026m, with significant pressures on special school top-up funding budgets.

Actions:

1. The Forum noted the latest DSG funding allocations for 2024/25 and the latest forecast outturn position.

SF29 Annual Report for Early Years

The Head of Service - Access to Education, Employment, and Training presented the early years annual report, advising members of the following key points:

There was a buoyant and high-quality provider market in Milton Keynes, with better take-up rates and outcomes compared to national and regional levels.

The introduction of new entitlements for working parents had gone well, with the final stage due in September.

There were potential sufficiency challenges and ongoing work needed to create additional places in areas of projected pressure.

Actions:

1. The Forum noted the Report.

SF30 Annual Report for Alternative Provision

The Head of Access to Education, Employment and Training introduced the report, highlighting the following points:

The proactive commissioning of places to be used as supportive interventions rather than as a last resort for permanent exclusions.

There had been a positive impact on exclusions, with Milton Keynes bucking the national trend.

There was a challenge of rising numbers and the need for additional places at both primary and secondary levels.

A member queried the sufficiency of projected numbers and the impact of reintegration pathways on primary and secondary schools.

The member was advised that the additional 10 places at both primary and secondary levels were based on current data and reintegration pathways. Officers emphasised the need for short-stay places and monitoring the sufficiency of these numbers.

Actions:

1. The Forum noted the annual report on alternative education.
2. The Forum noted that for 2025/26, 35 Places would be commissioned at the Primary PRU (Primary phase) and 205 Places would be commissioned at Bridge Academy (Secondary phase).

SF31 Annual Report for High Needs

The SEND Lead introduced the annual report on the high needs block. The Forums attention was drawn to the following points.

The contingency was around £3.5 million and there were a number of risks associated with the high needs block.

The SEND strategy was highlighted, with the Forum being told that new priorities would be launched based on the SEND inspection and stakeholder feedback.

The success of specialist unit provisions and the introduction of the ordinarily available provision document were emphasized.

A member inquired about the level of contingency, and how it would be used. Officers responded, stating that the surplus was kept as a contingency to manage volatile pressures and avoid future deficits. It was added that future projections indicated potential in-year overspends, which justified maintaining the contingency at that level.

Actions:

1. The Forum noted the report.

SF32 Government Updates & 2025-26 Budget Setting

Michelle Hibbert, Schools Funding Accountant presented the latest updates on the national funding formula and budget setting.

A number of key updates were set out, with the following topics being covered. Further detail is available in the report.

- National Funding Formula
- Minimum Funding Guarantee (MFG)
- National Insurance Contributions
- Early Years Funding Rates:
- Provisional Funding Allocations

The Forum were advised that all the information on funding allocations was provisional and subject to being recalculated based on October 2024 actual census information, it was also dependent on local factors.

Final allocations would be published in December, except for the early year's block which would be determined by the separate national formula for early years.

An update on the schools funding formula consultation was provided by officers, with full detail set out in Annex A of the report.

Officers proceeded to set out the Central Services Block funding request for 2025/26, with the Forum being advised that the total budget was £2.2m, which was an increase of £0.19m from the previous year.

A member inquired as to when further information on the national insurance contributions funding would be available and was told that this was not known.

Officers were asked whether the grants that had been rolled into the NFF had been funded at the same per pupil level as previously. Members raised concerns that this would lead to a reduction in funding and were advised that officers would look into this, and the exact figures would be circulated to members following the meeting.

Upon being put to the vote, the Central Services Block funding request was approved by the Forum.

Officers subsequently set out the Early Years Central Services Funding request, advising the Forum that since publication of the agenda, early year rates and operational guidance had been published by the government, and that a review of the provider rates would be brought to the Forum in January 2025.

Members were advised that the total funding request was £1.032m, which was a net increase of £0.391m, this had been agreed by the Early Years Reference Group and was primarily due to increases in staffing costs. Upon being put to the vote, the request was approved unanimously.

An update was provided to the Forum on the High Needs Budget for 2025/26, with the following key points highlighted by officers.

- That an additional £3.5m had been received, with £2.3m used to meet costs for 2025/26.
- That work was done based on provisional allocations and would be subject to review based on census data.
- That the full budget of £65.5m had been committed for 2025/26, with no in year demand contingency being held.

- That there would be a 3% uplift to the top up funding rate for High Need Pupils in Mainstream Schools.

Further updates on government announcements were provided to the Forum, with full detail set out in the report.

Actions.

1. The Forum noted the latest updates on the national funding formula (NFF) and the DSG.
2. The Forum noted that information on the funding level for newly rolled in grants would be circulated to members following the meeting.
3. The Forum noted the 2025/26 Schools Funding Formula Consultation Outcome.
4. The Forum voted on and approved the Central Services Block funding request for 2025/26.
5. The Forum voted on and approved the Early Year Central funding request for 2025/26.
6. The Forum noted the High Needs Draft Budget for 2025/26.

SF33 Early Years Reference Group

The Chair of the Early Years Reference Group, Simon Sims provided an update to the Forum on the latest meeting of the Group, advising that they had discussed the Annual report, the Early Years Central Spend, and the Early Years Budget Grants, with a focus on the additional funding received from government for teacher pay awards and staffing costs.

SF34 High Needs Reference Group

Victoria Curtis, Chair of the High Needs Reference Group noted that the group had not met since the last meeting but had a scheduled meeting for the following week.

SF35 Forward Planning

Actions:

1. The Forum noted the future meeting dates and items.
2. The Forum recorded their thanks to Jordan McDougall and Natasha Hutchin for their support and efforts, as they were leaving their roles at the Council.