

MEETING OF THE SCHOOLS FORUM
Wednesday, 11 October 2023 at 8:30am
At the PDC Main Hall

TYPE	MEMBERSHIP
GOVERNORS	Alan Morton*; Jo Faulkner; Pip Pinhorn*; Abdul Chowdhury* (AC). Tracy Edwards
HEADTEACHERS	Veronica Armson*, Dorothy Asare, Dee Bleach*, Graham Clifford*, Hodo Dirir*, Becky Dolamore*, Brenda Landers* (Chair), Danny Lye*, Owen O’Regan* (Vice-Chair), Jemima Reilly, Astrid Schon, Fanoula Smith, Jessica Williams*, Paul Woods,
Non-School Members	Tracy Smith* -THEP , Natasha Chaudhury* – NEU,
OBSERVERS	Ruth Roberts (THEP), Shoshannah Thompson
Officers in Attendance	Kay Goodacre (KG)*; Farhad Ahmed (FA)*; Nikki Parsons (NP)* Lisa Fraser* (LF),

The meeting started at 08:36

AGENDA ITEM 1: Welcome and apologies

PRESENTING: Chair

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting. Apologies were received and accepted from Jo Falkner, Fanoula Smith, Dorothy Asare and James Thomas.

AGENDA ITEM 2: Election of Chair and vice chair

The Schools Forum RESOLVED to elect Brenda Landers as Chair of the Schools Forum for another year.

The Schools Forum RESOLVED to elect Owen O’Regan as Vice Chair of the Schools Forum for another year.

AGENDA ITEM 3: Minutes of the last meeting

PRESENTING: Chair

The minutes of the last meeting were agreed as an accurate record.

Action point update:

Expressions of interest from headteachers for the High Needs Working Group and the Year-end Working group will be invited in upcoming HT meetings.

A paper on the end of year accruals has been presented to the working group. A HT asked if Mulberry London Docks School is on schedule to open in September 2024. Kay confirmed that this is on schedule.

AGENDA ITEM 4: Final DSG Outturn 2022-23

PRESENTING: Kay Goodacre

This paper was presented for information and sets out the final outturn position for Tower Hamlets Dedicated Schools Grant Budget for 2022-23.

The confirmed final underspend is £1.199 million. The report circulated to members gave a breakdown of the movement in 2022-23 outturn from provisional outturn and the final position per DSG block.

The High Needs Block continues to be overspent, however the overspend is considerably less than in recent years.

AGENDA ITEM 5: Distribution of DSG 23/24

PRESENTING: Nikki Parsons

The Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) for 2023-24 has been updated with in-year adjustments and the impact of the January census data.

The DSG was issued to the local authority with final figures for the Schools Block and Central Services for Schools Block in December 2022. Once the schools' budget was confirmed and agreed in the spring of 2023 the recoupment figure was identified and accounted for in the grant determination. The subsequent conversion of Canon Barnett to academy status, led to an increase in recoupment confirmed in July 2023.

The Early years block adjustments relate to the impact of pupil numbers recorded in the January 2023 census: 2 year olds and 3 & 4 year olds eligible for additional hours have increased, whilst free entitlement for 3 & 4 year olds & maintained nursery supplement has decreased. This largely balances out and has not had an impact on the funding rates LBTH have set.

Additional grants for 2022-23 are the Early Years Supplementary Grant and the Teachers Additional Pay Grant. The Early Years Supplementary Grant is for disadvantaged 2 year old children and 3 and 4 year old children for the 2023 to 2024 and 2024 to 2025 financial years. The grant commences in September 2023, and must be used to uplift funding rates in the early years formula categories, passing 100% of the grant to providers. There is some modelling to be carried out for this.

The Chair asked if the Early Years Supplementary Grant has been paid yet. Kay replied that this has not been received by the LA yet. The Chair added that schools facing financial challenges may benefit from knowing what their grant allocation is likely to be. Kay replied that any school facing cash-flow problems is encouraged to

contact the LA. Some schools have received cash advances to help cash-flow.

A HT asked if there will be a difference between what the Government has promised schools and what schools will actually receive. Kay replied that the Government's previous calculations for the National Funding Formula (NFF) were wrong and as a result some schools will receive less funding than they were previously led to expect. Schools which receive funding above the minimum funding guarantee will be affected by this. Tower Hamlets is on the minimum funding guarantee and will not be impacted by this.

A member stated that Trade Unions had accepted the pay deal on the understanding that it will be fully funded and were disappointed to hear that this will not be the case. Kay replied that the government recommendations for schools was to budget a 3% increase. The government will fund the difference between this and 6.5%.

AGENDA ITEM 6: Disapplications

Presenting: Nikki Parsons

Local authorities need to apply for a disapplication of the normal NFF funding rules for exceptional circumstances funding. A school variation is only allowed if the amount of funding applied for is more than 1% of the school's budget and impacts less than 5% of schools in the local authority. This disapplication request is a continuation of circumstances approved in 2023-24 and Schools Forum are invited to give a view.

The Bygrove Primary School disapplication was agreed in 2023/24. The rental cost is due to be in the region of £241k per year (2023-24 costs), approximately 12% of the budget share. Oakland Secondary School expanded the upper school into a vacant school site which is let via a lease agreement. The lease agreement for the additional site is expected to be in the region of £60k per year, which represents a possible 1% of the budget share.

A HT asked if disapplications applied to academies as well as maintained schools. Nikki confirmed that they apply to academies too.

AGENDA ITEM 7: Schools Finance Working Party Update

PRESENTING: Nikki Parsons

The Schools Finance Working Party (extended group) was established to work alongside the existing Schools Finance Working Party to improve the year-end (YE) closure of accounts and other finance process matters affecting schools. In addition to Schools Finance Officers and School Business Managers (SBMs), the extended group includes representatives from the Headteachers Group and Corporate Accountancy.

The last meeting was held in September 2023 to review the year end process. The School Finance Team conducted an analysis to compare the outcomes of the two

years process.

There was an increase in the number of late submissions of year end returns. The working group agreed that if a return has not been signed off by a headteacher, schools should submit anyway before the deadline with a signed version to follow.

The volume of trade creditor and accruals has increased - not all schools are practicing good financial housekeeping such as chasing suppliers for invoices and processing a final payment run before YE. It was also identified that schools with a lot of accruals were also writing manual checks. All schools are encouraged to move to electronic payments.

Other recommendations include sending the year end template to schools earlier and improving the communication with HTs, which has been better previously. It has been suggested that it may be helpful for the Schools Finance Team to attend Headteacher meetings in January. All schools were encouraged to send a representative to the year end workshops.

Nikki informed everyone that there are some ongoing conversations with SBMs to identify issues they may be facing and to identify trainings and development needed to support them, such as training on SAGE systems.

AGENDA ITEM 9: Trade Union Facilities Time 2023-2024

PRESENTING: Nikki Parsons

A report on the Trade Union Facilities Time Agreement (TUFA) 2023-24 cost and income budgeted, and the and the outturn position for 2022-23 was shared before the meeting.

Table 1 of the report sets out the income received through de-delegation and a further £40k invoiced to academies. The estimated outturn is the reimbursement costs for providing support for the year.

The costs are claimed by schools that release staff to support union members across all school types. Costs are also incurred by the local authority that employ the GMB representative. To protect the overspending budget, reimbursement for claims to support the cover arrangements of released staff are set at universal daily pre-agreed rates of £150 for support staff, £350 for headteachers and £300 for teaching staff.

Previously Special Schools were not charged, although staff from schools were supported. Nikki requested the Schools Forum to approve applying the national recommended guidelines at a rate of 3 times the place numbers, to special schools. The report outlined the cost to each special school and the total contribution would be in the region of £16.3k, if agreed.

Natasha Chaudhury commented that often representatives are experienced staff, and the daily rate does not cover the full cost of employing them for a day. Some

schools employ cover staff on a fixed term contract and often end up paying the difference. Kay replied that this agreement has been made after extensive discussion and the daily rate covers the cost of employing someone to cover the teacher, and not any other additional responsibilities they may have. The Schools Forum guidance is that the allocated budget has to be maintained.

Natasha commented that union representatives are experienced staff, often on higher salaries. When employer costs are added to this, the true cost to a school often exceeds the daily rate. Additionally, unions are increasingly receiving higher caseloads and Natasha expressed her concerns that unions may struggle to continue providing high quality support under the current time constraints. Kay replied that the idea is that the daily cost is for backfilling staff, the cost of what they would have been teaching, and not the cost of their post.

A HT commented that if the representative is a member of staff with a TLR, then it is usually expected that their replacement would also include that. Kay replied that this issue can be explored further at the next Trade Union meeting.

Natasha also informed the Schools Forum that the NEU has not had an allocated office space to work from since September 2023. This has been raised with the LA but no solution has been identified yet. Kay agreed to raise this at the next Trade Union Forum Meeting.

Action.

Veronica Armson stated that she would like to discuss the proposal to apply the contribution to special schools at the next Special School Consultative. A member asked if there was a reason why special schools were not charged historically. Kay replied that this may have been an oversight.

The Schools Forum agreed to discuss this at the next meeting after this has been raised at the next Special School Consultative Meeting.

AGENDA ITEM 9: De delegated budget.

PRESENTING: Kay Goodacre

Kay Goodacre presented the report on the de-delegated services for 2023-24 and the proposed de-delegation for 2024-25.

The de-delegated amount will be top sliced before the school allocations are made.

The Schools Forum was requested to agree maintaining the services for 2024-25.

A member asked when the decision has to be made by. Kay replied that the decision has to be made by November.

The Chair asked the Forum to consider how they would like to receive reports on the de-delegated services to ensure that value for money is being received.

Jessica Williams left the meeting at 9:30am.

A member asked if there were any areas of particular pressure. Kay replied that there is no budget for supporting schools in difficulty. The contingency budget is used to support schools if needed.

It was agreed that a more detailed report on the de-delegated budget will be presented in November.

Action.

AGENDA ITEM 10: Delivering Better Value

Lisa Fraser gave a verbal update on Delivering Better Value or DBV which is a DfE programme, designed for Local Authorities which are overspent on their High Needs Block and administered by consultancy firm Newton Europe. Tower Hamlets is currently in this programme.

DBV is a programme to critically analyse spend and consider where spend might be better utilised and how, it is not a cost-cutting measure and it does not give LAs an instruction to cut its spending, nor does it make suggestions of savings.

This is a fast-paced, data driven programme, rooted in co-production. The activity and analysis phase runs to October 2023 and there will be a grant application opportunity in November.

The programme has highlighted that Tower Hamlets is spending more than other LAs on EHCPs, the special school rates are much higher and independent school rates are much lower. The number of children with Speech and Language Needs is very high. Tower Hamlets also has a practice of keeping EHCPs open whereas some LAs have a gradual process of closing EHCPs.

Veronica Armson commented that it would be helpful to look at the structures and systems in place around EHCPs. Kay added that in the last few years the focus has been on catching up with the EHCP caseloads and considering other factors had not been a priority.

A member asked if there was a High Needs Working Group. Kay replied that there had been a working group previously, and a new one will need to be set up again. Dee Bleach commented that if the consultative chairs are informed of how many headteachers are needed this can be discussed at the next consultative meetings.

Veronica Armson stated that it is important to look at how to create a good quality EHCP. As a school with a high number of children requiring SaLT it is not necessary for children to receive 121 SaLT support in order to receive high quality SaLT support. The experience of special schools in this discussion is significant as they deal with these issues in large numbers.

A member suggested that it may be helpful to consider incentivising schools on exploring what other aspects of special need can be supported.

A member asked when the working group will start and what the criteria for the membership will be. Kay replied that the group will start in the next month and the membership will include a cross section of schools.

Natasha commented another factor which should be considered is that having an EHCP often allows families to access disability benefits. Anything which affects this would have an impact on household income.

AGENDA ITEM 11: Any Other Business

A member commented that the auto enrolment exercise which mapped children eligible for Pupil Premium was a great exercise and thanked Lisa Fraser and her team for their work on this. In response to a query Lisa clarified that some schools may not have been notified if they did not have any children eligible for Pupil Premium.

AGENDA ITEM 12: Date of Next Meeting

The date of the next meeting is Wednesday 29th November 2023.

The meeting ended at 9:49

Summary of action points

Discuss office space allocation for the NEU at the next TUF meeting. Kay
Present a more detailed report on the de-delegated budget at the next meeting. Kay