

MEETING OF THE SCHOOLS FORUM
Wednesday, 17 January 2024 at 8:30am
at the Town Hall

TYPE	MEMBERSHIP
GOVERNORS	Alan Morton*; Jo Faulkner; Pip Pinhorn*; Abdul Chowdhury; Tracy Edwards
HEADTEACHERS	Veronica Armson*; Dee Bleach*; Graham Clifford*; Hodo Dirir; Becky Dolamore*; Brenda Landers* (Chair); Nicholas Langham*; Danny Lye*; Owen O'Regan* (Vice-Chair); Jemima Reilly; Astrid Schon*; Jessica Williams*;
Non-School Members	Tracy Smith* -THEP , Natasha Chaudhury* – NEU,
OBSERVERS	Shoshannah Thompson*
Officers in Attendance	Farhad Ahmed*; Nikki Parsons*; Lisa Fraser*; Pauline Maddison*; Sara Walsingham*; Lewis Teasdale*; Tina Sode*; Jess Milne*;

**Denotes attendance*

The meeting started at 08:33 and was quorate.

AGENDA ITEM 1: Welcome and apologies

PRESENTING: Chair

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting. Apologies were received and accepted from Jemima Reilly, Abdul Chowdhury, Jo Faulkner and Kim Arrowsmith.

AGENDA ITEM 2: Minutes of the last meeting

PRESENTING: Chair

The minutes of the meeting held on 11 October 2023 were AGREED as an accurate record.

The minutes of the meeting held on 29 November 2023 were AGREED as an accurate record subject to the following amendment:

Nicholas Langham replaced Paul Woods as a member.

AGENDA ITEM 3: De-delegation 2024-25

PRESENTING: Nikki Parsons and Sara Walsingham

The De-delegations 2024-25 Report was circulated prior to the meeting.

Nikki clarified the following items raised at the previous Headteacher's Consultative Meetings:

- The total Schools Block Allocation is £300,061,367.

- In October 2023, primary pupil numbers had decreased by 3% compared to 2022, and secondary pupil numbers had increased by 1%. Total pupil numbers across the borough had decreased by 1%.
- All schools had been allocated full NFF allocation with the maximum allowable per pupil MFG of 0.5%. Noted that the 2023-24 MSAG (Maintained Schools Additional Grant) had been added to the baseline for this year.
- No block transfer to the High Needs block will be made. It is anticipated that 100% of the growth fund will be required for funding new and growing schools.
- The growth allocation to the LA had been reduced by 14%.

A member asked what the MSAG covered? Nikki replied that this grant was allocated to cover additional spend in relation to cost of living increases.

Contingency Fund

Nikki gave a breakdown of how the contingency fund had been spent in previous years. In 2021/22 the budget was overspent by £47,244. In 2022/23 the budget was underspent by £343,317. However, in that year the staff cost supply cover was overspent by £48,641 and this was offset by the contingency fund underspend.

Action: Share the PowerPoint presentation with all members. Clerk.

A member commented that the Trade Union Forum had been clear that trade unions needed to work within their budget and had not anticipated using the contingency fund to support an overspend of £48k. Nikki replied that the £48k overspend had been historic and for the 23/24 year the staff cost supply cover was projected to be on budget.

A HT commented that if trade unions need to reduce their time in order to keep on budget, then this should be done.

A HT commented that in 22/23 the contingency budget was underspent by £343k, and asked Nikki how confident was the Schools Finance Team that such a large delegation was needed. Nikki replied that the needs for 2024/25 are currently unknown.

A HT asked if the contingency fund is a block of funding which can be moved around to offset overspends in other budgets. Nikki replied that the staff cost supply cover block was not previously managed by Schools Finance. It has been easier to monitor this budget now that it is managed directly by the Schools Finance Team, and it is anticipated that there will not be any further significant overspends.

A HT requested that the Schools Forum receive more frequent updates on the staff cost supply cover block spend.

Action: Provide frequent updates to the Schools Forum on the staff cost supply cover block.

A member asked if the contingency fund was being inflated to support the High Needs Block (HNB) as previously any underspends were transferred to the HNB. Nikki replied that last year no funds were transferred to the HNB and for this year there is no proposal to transfer funds to the HNB.

A member asked at which point in the year did the Schools Forum agree what would happen to the underspend. Nikki replied that it would usually be brought to the Schools Forum in June after the year-end closure.

Natasha Chaudhury commented that it may be useful to arrange a meeting between the Schools Finance Team and the trade unions. Natasha stated that the NEU had sent 2 emails to the LA and was awaiting a response.

Education Services

The Education Services Fund is for services related to maintained schools only and is deducted from maintained school budget shares. The full list of budget headings were included as an attachment to the presentation. These were mainly statutory elements.

In response to a question Nikki clarified that admissions was not included in the headings included under education services.

The following de-delegations were discussed, and votes were cast:

1. School Specific Contingency

The Schools Forum AGREED the de-delegation to the school specific contingency fund.

2. Free School Meals

The Schools Forum AGREED the de-delegation to the free schools meals eligibility fund.

3. Staff Costs Supply Cover

The Schools Forum AGREED the de-delegation to the staff cost supply cover fund.

4. Behaviour Support Services

The primary school delegates of the Schools Forum AGREED the de-delegation to behaviour support services.

The secondary school delegates of the Schools Forum AGREED the de-delegation to behaviour support services.

5. School Improvement Services

The Schools Forum AGREED the de-delegation to the school improvement services fund.

The de-delegation for special schools will be agreed at the Special Schools Consultative Meeting.

AGENDA ITEM 4: Approval of Growth Fund 2024-25

PRESENTING: Nikki Parsons

The Approval of Growth Fund Report was circulated prior to the meeting.

Schools Forum are required to agree a growth policy for each financial year. There has been no material change to the Growth Policy for 2024/25 except adjustments for minimum funding rates.

The growth allocation to the LA has been reduced by 14%. Schools Forum will be requested to transfer the surplus 2023/24 Growth Fund to the 2024/25 year as it was anticipated that the whole fund would be needed to support new and growing schools.

A member noted that the Falling Rolls Fund is to support short term fall in rolls, however most schools in Tower Hamlets were predicted to experience a long-term fall in rolls. A HT commented that a recent news article cited that the ONS has predicted that rolls will rise again in approximately 5 years.

School Forum were requested to agree the Growth Policy and the Falling Rolls Fund Policy, although no funds would be allocated to the Falling Rolls Fund for the next year.

School Forum AGREED the Growth Policy and the Falling Rolls Fund Policy

AGENDA ITEM 5: Update on Dedicated Schools Budget Strategy 2024-25

Presenting: Sara Walsingham

The Dedicated Schools Grant allocations were announced in December. The biggest change was in the Early Years block with the statutory expanded entitlement responsibilities.

A member asked if there would have been an increase or decrease in the EY funding if the extended responsibilities were not included. Jess Milne replied that there would have been an increase.

The opening of the school at London Docks was delayed and it was proposed that the Growth Fund underspend is transferred to the 2024-25 Growth Fund to support this in the next academic year.

A member asked, if the Growth Fund budget had been spent this year, would the Growth Fund budget for 2024-25 be sufficient for 2024-25. Sara replied that if the new school had opened this year, the pupils from the school would already be in the ISB and would drive additional funding. As the school had not opened, the LA has to front fund them. For the 2023-24 academic year, bulge classes were funded from the Growth Fund.

A member asked why there was a difference between the funding for a bulge class and the funding for the same number of pupils at the new school. Sara replied the cost difference was the additional costs associated with setting up a new school.

The Schools Forum AGREED to carry the Growth Fund Surplus to the next financial year.

AGENDA ITEM 6: Central School Services Block

PRESENTING: Sara Walsingham

The Central School Services Block (CSSB) is issued in accordance to the CSSB National Formula Funding (NFF). This block is composed of 2 elements, ongoing responsibilities and historic commitments. The historic commitments funding were subject to 20% reduction each year however the principal cost related to redundancy of school staff was not reducing at the same -20% rate as the income.

Despite the (-8%) reduction in overall grant, certain expenditure budgets require growth in 2024-25: the Admissions budget contribution has been increased by 2%; the estimated increase of the copyright license fee had been calculated using the same percentage increase experienced between 2022-23 and 2023-24 (14%) or c £35k. The DfE will confirm the final charge imminently.

The Schools Forum AGREED the proposals for CSSB ongoing responsibilities and historic commitments.

AGENDA ITEM 7: Update from Working Groups

PRESENTING: Lewis Teasdale

High Needs Working Group

The High Needs Block Working Group is currently in the process of being set up.

The initial focus of the group is likely to be on banding, early intervention funding, any new provision in the local area, and a reduction in the use of independent placements.

The group would not be a decision-making group, instead it would make recommendations to Schools Forum and the LA. The group would consider recommendations from the LA on setting the HNB budget each year; consider recommendations on changes to planned expenditure and distribution of funds

based on need. More information on the commitment expectations will be provided.

A member asked about the High Needs block and asked if this was on budget for 2023-24. Lewis replied that previously the deficit had accumulated very rapidly over a short span of time, mainly due to a rapid increase in EHCPs.

A member queried how the High Needs Block Working Group will monitor the deficit recovery plan. Lewis replied that the working group's remit would include considering early intervention and banding as well.

AGENDA ITEM 8: Update on High Needs Block Strategy

This item was covered in the presentation above.

AGENDA ITEM 9: Update on Early Years Strategy

PRESENTING: Jess Milne

A report on Early Years Block Funding 2024-2025 was shared with everyone.

Jess Milne gave an update on the financial information relating to the provision of funded Early Education and Childcare entitlements including the total funding available to providers in 2024-25. The final indicative budget was based on estimates from a combination of the DfE Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) NFF allocations published in December 2023 and local intelligence of actual reported number of hours delivered during 2023-2024.

From April 2024, working parents of 2-year-olds will become eligible for 15 hours provision per week. The potential uptake of this offer is unknown, and a survey will be carried out with parents to get an indication of this. Changes to Universal Credit from April will mean that parents of 2-year old children will be expected to return to work. The DfE have provided estimate figures for the number of 9-month-old infants.

From September 2024, national wrap-around support will begin. A co-ordinator will be employed to support schools.

The budget includes contingency, and the aim is to ensure that all funding is passported to schools and PVI settings. Any unspent budget would need to be returned to the DfE. The DfE will be introducing termly census to support the estimates.

Centrally retained funding at 5% has been modelled for the expanded offers for the initial set up period. For the first time in many years, the funding rates were above what parents would be charged. Previously, the proximity of Canary Wharf had made the borough ineligible for the EL2 funding. The challenge to this had succeeded after many years.

A member asked if parents in receipt of benefits were now forced back to work

earlier. Jess confirmed that from April 2024, parents of 2-year-olds in receipt of benefits would need to start working. From September 2024, parents of 9-month-old children would need to return to work. This may result in sustainability issues for schools and the EY team would be on hand to support schools to explore expanded hours.

A member asked why schools may experience sustainability challenges. Jess replied that most schools were currently offering 3 hours of childcare provision. With the upcoming changes parents may require longer opening hours and schools would need to start exploring how they can offer these or risk parents choosing other providers.

The Schools Forum AGREED the 5% retained funding.

AGENDA ITEM 10: AOB

PRESENTING: Chair

There were no additional items for discussion.

AGENDA ITEM 12: Date of Next Meeting

Schools Forum AGREED to cancel the next meeting scheduled to take place in March as there were no major decisions which needed to be agreed.

The meeting finished at 9:57

Summary of action points

Share the PowerPoint presentation with all members. Clerk.
Provide frequent updates to the Schools Forum on the staff cost supply cover block.
Nikki Parsons