

CITY OF SUNDERLAND

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE SUNDERLAND SCHOOLS FORUM HELD ON THURSDAY 3RD FEBRUARY 2005 AT SUNDERLAND CIVIC CENTRE

The following members of the Forum were present: -

Mrs Y Gray (Headteacher Rep. – Primary Sunderland South) – Chair of Forum
Mr D Ambrose (Governor Rep. – Secondary)
Mr J Busfield (Headteacher Rep. – Primary Washington)
Mrs S Carter (Headteacher Rep. – Nursery)
Mr J E Clarke (Governor Rep. – Secondary)
Mrs S. Collingwood – Early Years & Childcare Partnership
Dr P B D Collins (Governor Rep. – Secondary)
Mr A Falconer (Governor Rep. – Primary)
Mrs P. Gibson (Governor Rep. – Secondary)
Mrs J Hobbs (Headteacher Rep. – Primary Hetton/Houghton)
Mr J Lishman (Governor Rep. – Primary)
Mr M. Foster (Headteacher Rep. – Secondary)
Mrs A Mackay (Headteacher Rep. – Primary Sunderland North)
Mr J. McKnight (Headteacher Rep. – Special)
Mr K McDermid (Headteacher Rep. – Secondary)
Mr C Short (Governor Rep. – Primary)

Together with: -

Mr J.G. Robinson – Governor Support Manager, Sunderland LEA
Mrs G. Wall – Head of Strategy & Performance
Mrs S. Mitchell – Acting Head of Service (Strategy & Performance), LEA
Ms V. Thompson – Financial Controller, LEA
Mr T.H. Walsh - Head of Standards & Quality

The Forum agreed to the attendance of all of the LEA officers at the meeting.

Councillor P. Smith had now been replaced as Early Years & Childcare Partnership representative on the Schools Forum by Sally Collingwood. Councillor Smith had requested that she be invited to attend meetings of the Forum in her capacity as Portfolio Holder for Education. Members of the Forum readily agreed to this request.

05/01 Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from:

Mrs D. Elliott (Governor Rep. – Special)
Dr E. Yeates (Headteacher Rep. – Secondary)
Mr V. Bovill (Non-schools Group – Teaching Associations)
Mr H. Brown (Governor Rep. – Primary)

Action Points

Agreed that Councillor P. Smith would be invited to attend meetings of the Forum as Portfolio Holder for Education

05/02 Standards Fund Update

Terry Walsh was welcomed to the meeting. He distributed papers at the meeting and drew attention to the underspends that would be clawed back from the LEA by the DfES. The LEA had objected to this and made representations to the DfES. The outcome was that between 90% and 95% had not been clawed back on this occasion. In future, however, it was made clear that underspent monies would be clawed back. Standards Fund was approaching £40 million in value. It was important to emphasise the need to spend this, and to assist in this monthly statements would be given to budget holders. The financial year for standards fund remained sixteen months long.

There were major underspends on grants and the reasons for this were explained. Expenditure in respect of 2004/05 was largely as expected but some grants had a late start.

Details of the School Development Grant were tabled at the meeting. This was 100% delegated to schools and was brought together by the amalgamation of eight former grants. The criteria for allocation included an element of deprivation, so it was not just based on pupil numbers. A 4% increase for schools was clearly shown in the documentation.

It was recommended that: -

1. All schools receive £1,000 to promote and develop work on self-evaluation knowledge and skills. The total for this was £120,000
2. A sum of £36,000 be allocated to a science recovery programme in key stage 3
3. Additional funding be provided to the Study Support programme. The money would be used to maintain and improve current programmes and promote new developments. Total £148,276.

With regard to recommendation 1, members of the Forum questioned whether the funding (£1,000 per school) would be required to be signed off by the SIO. Terry Walsh answered that there was no corporate decision to link this to the school development plan and he did not wish to restrict schools' flexibility in using standards fund. Targeting self-evaluation would help to promote the work ongoing in some schools but there were no plans to monitor the spending of this. Schools would find the money useful in working towards 20th May 2005 when every school needed to have a live SEF.

The Science Recovery Programme would benefit all of the schools. Key stage 3 Headteachers would use this to target some pupils and examples of the measures that could be used were given. Mr Walsh indicated that this would be around £2,000 for each secondary school. It was acknowledged that all secondary schools needed to give science extra attention.

The Forum then discussed recommendation 3. Mr Walsh confirmed that there had been very large grants in the past but when these were reduced the LEA had tried to support the activities. It would

eventually disappear but the LEA was trying to minimise the loss of this funding gradually. Costs were high because of the success achieved by Sunderland. The £148,276 was likely to be distributed according to pupil numbers.

Having discussed the recommendations, the Forum unanimously agreed to the proposals.

05/03 **Excellence In Cities**

Mr Lishman had raised a question about EiC funding and mini-EAZ areas. He pointed out that some schools had benefited from investment and he did not wish to see these resources lost to the schools when EiC ended in 2006. In addition, Mr Lishman drew attention to the need for ICT technical support in schools and this could be an opportune time to review provision of funding for this purpose. Mr Lishman made reference to an 'exit strategy' and he asked that the Forum consider affordability and sustainability.

Terry Walsh replied that this year's standards fund grant was around £40 million but he doubted that there was sufficient spare money in the budget to give full protection to schools involved in the mini-EAZ areas. DfES had said that money would not cease but would not be ring-fenced. By late 2005 the standards fund circular would be received which would be more specific about this. At some point, LEAs would ask schools to identify which staff were paid from these grants. This would be a complex picture. Schools were already looking at shared arrangements and more information was needed. Mr Walsh added that the LEA would be making representations at a national level to receive information as soon as possible.

In response to Mr Lishman's proposal, Mr Short remarked that it was unfair to take money from the overall funding to protect a small number of schools.

Mr McKnight pointed out that special schools had never benefited from this funding and he asked the Forum to consider this. Mr Walsh answered that the rules of EiC involved only secondary schools but they could involve clusters if they wished. This was the historical pattern. Mr McKnight added that special schools had lobbied and had again been turned down. He believed that this was unfair. Mrs Collingwood referred to the primary roll-out of EiC and questioned whether special schools could have benefited from this. Mr Walsh indicated that there were specific rules from the DfES. Mr Walsh informed colleagues that the exclusion of primary and special schools had been raised at a national level but the DfES had reinforced that secondary schools were the target for this funding.

The Chair commented that EiC funding was something that the Schools Forum had not been asked to consider. She felt that it was appropriate to bring this to the Forum, as there was a substantial amount of money involved. Mr Walsh felt that the role of the Schools Forum was to consider how to use funding that would no longer be ring-fenced. It was agreed that the issue of EiC funding would be brought back on to the agenda for a future meeting.

Action Points

Agreed to LEA's proposals that School Development Grant be allocated £120,000 to promote self-evaluation, £36,000 for KS3 science recovery programme and £148,276 for Study Support

EiC funding to appear on the agenda for a subsequent meeting of the Forum

05/04 Minutes of previous meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 14th December 2004 were approved as a true record.

05/05 Matters arising from the minutes

04/16 Grant funding for U3 progression – The Forum requested that they be provided with details of the amount of grant funding involved in the upper pay spine grant. Val Thompson undertook to provide these details.

Val Thompson to provide figures on upper pay spine grant funding for next meeting

05/06 Membership of Sub-Groups

Further to a request at a previous meeting of the Forum, a list of members of the LMS/LMSS Review Group and Standards Fund Monitoring Group had been circulated with the agenda papers.

It was noted that there were no terms of reference given for these groups. It was also felt that the methods of appointment should be made clear as the Schools Forum had not appointed these members.

05/07 Changing Role of the Schools Forum

It was reiterated that Schools Forums would become a statutory body with decision making powers. The Chair stressed that it was important that there was good strong support by members of the Forum. Communication was important and the LEA's agenda booklet and briefing sessions were to be used as mechanisms to enhance this. The work of the Forum was fed back to Primary Headteachers through the area groups. The Chair encouraged Secondary Headteachers to consider providing feedback to their group and copies of minutes.

Mr Short offered to attend meetings of school Governing Bodies to give them feedback from the Schools Forum. A further report from the Forum would appear in a future edition of the LEA's Agenda Booklet. Governing Bodies would be asked to pass back issues that they wished the Forum to consider.

Further reports to be included in LEA's termly agenda booklet

05/08 Budget Setting 2005/06

A report had been circulated in advance of the meeting. Since the report had been written there had been further developments and Sandra provided an update at the meeting.

The paper referred to the funding discrepancy referred to at the previous meeting and the need to find Council resources to protect schools.

Sandra explained that there had been discussions about supporting schools in financial difficulty and the allocation of additional headroom. As a result of the requirement for additional resources required to fund schools at the MFG level there would be no scope to support schools in excess of this level and no additional headroom.

The LMS/LMSS review group had been considering changes to the formula to reflect updating and also to change the formula in certain areas. Examples of the issues that had been discussed were given at the meeting (e.g. EAL funding). Because of the current funding position, it was not possible to progress changes at this stage.

Schools most severely affected by falling budgets had, in the past, been supported by the re-allocation of a limited sum in each sector. Without headroom it was difficult to target support at particular schools that were most adversely affected (mainly those with the sharpest falling pupil numbers). The LEA was seeking to remove this money at the base to make it fairer. This applied only to those schools that received additional support. The proposal would give some flexibility. The Forum discussed the proposal and it was generally felt by some members that it was unfair to target funding just at schools that were downsizing.

Mr McDermid asked about schools that were closing down. He stressed the need for support in these circumstances. Sandra Mitchell replied that the LEA would seek to support such schools. Mr McDermid added that the Schools Forum had never established the scale of support needed. However, some members of the Forum were cautious about substantial amounts of money being taken out of the system to support an individual school. Sandra Mitchell added that the position was changing all the time but it was not intended to take a substantial amount out of the ISB to support a single school. Mr McDermid repeated his view that the principle needed to be clear and needed to be agreed by the Forum. This was important in view of the possibility of future closures.

Sandra reported that the LEA was looking at data from the PLASC. It was likely that it would be possible to fund schools at MFG without the £1 million additional council resources. Because pupil numbers were now lower on PLASC, the £1 million was now not needed. Instead it was proposed that a sum of £0.5 million be put into the ISB and the remaining £0.5 million be used to support redundancy costs. In real terms, this meant that £0.5 million was now available for distribution. Sandra therefore tabled some proposals for the distribution of additional resources. The proposals were as follows: -

Additional funding was to be distributed £7,000 (nursery), £242,000 (primary), £253,000 (secondary) and £30,000 (special). This total of £532,000 was broadly in line with the ISB. It included elements for the cost of re-alignment of EAL (primary schools only), cost of transitional arrangements for re-calculated IMD (primary and secondary schools) and the amount potentially available to distribute via formula (all sectors).

Separate calculations were shown in respect of potential additional funding. This was targeted funding where budgets fell below 4% in primary schools 3% in special and secondary schools. The amounts involved were £122,000 (primary), £165,000 (secondary) and £21,000 (special). In addition, there was £170,000 for infant class size funding.

Sandra invited the Forum's views on the proposals. Sally Collingwood asked for clarification of EAL distribution in respect of nursery pupils. Sandra confirmed that nursery pupils were included. Sally then asked about the allocation in respect of ethnicity. She referred to a discrepancy in ethnicity and second language pupils. Sally had made Headteachers aware of the need to look at their data.

Members of the LMS/LMSS Review Group would continue to address these matters at their next meeting (scheduled for 4th February) and there would be a further report back to the Forum at their next meeting.

The Forum was pleased to note the ability to make progress on using IMD data and EAL. They therefore agreed to the Authority's proposals.

05/09 Policy on Application for School Surpluses

There had been discussions at an earlier meeting concerning the possibility of reviewing the criteria for licensed surpluses.

The Forum was reminded of the criteria that were applied in the case of licensed surplus applications. It had been feared that Governing Bodies would be over-cautious in budget expenditure in view of the over-funding of schools in the current year. However, Val Thompson did not feel that it would be appropriate to adjust the 5%/8% criteria that currently existed, particularly as these were the limits that would be applied by OFSTED. The Forum could, however, consider whether falling pupil numbers or other factors could be considered to be sufficient justification of allowing a licensed surplus. Mr Foster believed that a school would be storing up trouble for itself if it were to maintain a sizeable surplus to protect staff against falling pupil numbers. Val Thompson confirmed that schools should have a management plan in such circumstances.

Nevertheless, Dr Collins felt that it was natural for a Governing Body to be careful with expenditure in the light of discussions about reduction in funding.

Mr McKnight commented that budgets were becoming more complex because of funding streams. It was noted that schools that worked with other agencies found that some Health and Social Services monies were paid into the school budget in March. This led to difficulties for Headteachers. This point was noted.

Having considered the matter and the recommendation from the LEA, it was agreed that no changes would be made to the current percentages for licensed surpluses. It was further agreed that planning would be more detailed.

05/10 Schools Block Funding

In response to the request made at the last meeting for a breakdown of how schools block funding was used, Sandra Mitchell drew attention to the Section 52 statement.

Action Points

Agreed to approve LEA proposals on revenue budget 2005/06 including the use of additional funding and potential additional funding

Agreed to maintain current limits on surpluses (5% secondary, 8% other schools).

Mr McDermid asked for clarification of which areas were statutory requirements and those that could be determined by the Schools Forum. He also asked for clarification of how decisions were made.

It was agreed that this matter would be considered in greater depth at the full day session that would take place during the summer term.

Schools Block Funding to appear on agenda for full day session in summer term.

05/11 BSF Update

Dr Comiskey and Harry O'Neill joined the meeting at this point.

Dr Comiskey began by explaining the factors involved in decision making on the local and national agenda. As a City Council the vision was to improve prosperity and inclusion (example – new jobs). Central to the vision of BSF was raising standards for all, high quality data and ICT, delivery through partnerships and the 'hubs and spokes' model. The key drivers were City regeneration, BSF (the City needed to consider whether to have an Academy), successful implementation of the Children Act (integrated services) which was contrary to an academy, a response to the Tomlinson report on 14-19 provision (Sunderland was ahead on this) and the response to the LEA OFSTED inspection.

Harry O'Neill explained how City academies and BSF were interwoven. He began by giving an update on BSF areas 1 & 2. The initial bid was for part of the City based on low achievement and high free meals as required by BSF bid rules and taking account of closure in the Washington area. This would include Oxclose, Washington, Biddick, Castle View, Pennywell, Barbara Priestman and St. Robert of Newminster. There were fifteen waves of BSF activity. Sunderland's other schools (Monkwearmouth, Farrington, Southmoor, Thornhill, Houghton Kepier, Hetton, St. Anthony's and St. Aidan's) would not benefit for the programme until around 2010-2015. This was to some extent disappointing.

The new September guidelines would mean a reduction in funding (£95.4 million). The minimum funding guarantee was to build to area guidelines. This meant no swimming pools and no all-weather sports pitches, despite initial promises.

Academies were a key issue. Affordability was obviously a key issue to the Schools Forum. Pupil number planning was also a major issue. Harry detailed the timescale and focussed on four schools (Biddick, Castle View, Hylton Red House and Washington). Design teams (private sector partners) were being asked to put forward designs. An outline business case would be presented to Cabinet in March. Treasury approval would be given in April 2005. The Private Sector Partner would be appointed in February 2006. The issues around academies were slowing down the process.

Harry explained that a City Academy was a school with a sponsor putting in around 8% of the funding but getting a major influence. The Governing Body of the academy determined the admissions policy. Some existing academies were reluctant to include SEN pupils and

were excluding pupils in high numbers. There was no effective collaboration with local schools. An Academy could make life difficult for other local schools. If the Academy had a sixth form this could also create difficulties for Sunderland and could jeopardise the current high success. The image of the sponsor affected expectations and perceptions. Furthermore, an academy was not bound by national conditions of service for staff. Harry felt that the term 'academy' could be misleading.

It had been found that there were some options on who could become sponsors of City Academies. It could be a sole sponsor or could be a consortium. The advantages of a consortium were set out. The message was that there were other models that the City could explore. The LEA could not be a sole sponsor but could be one of the partners involved in a consortium.

Academies tended to be low achieving schools and it was suggested that Pennywell could become vulnerable in view of the recent OFSTED inspection.

Issues of affordability needed to be considered. Revenue costs for PFI, facilities management services, other revenue costs, utility and insurance costs etc. were cited. An affordability gap of £250-£500 per pupil depended on the level of facilities management delegation to the PFI contractor. These were significant issues. A list of measures that could be used to address the affordability gap was given. Harry drew particular attention to school reorganisation. Fewer schools meant lower capital costs and greater capacity to deal with the funding gap. Figures were shown at the meeting that showed the number of live births. These had dropped to their lowest level in 2002 and there had been little increase since then. This would first have an impact on primary schools and then secondary schools. A further decline in secondary school numbers was therefore predicted. The Council was committed to address the falling population but numbers would never recover to past maximum levels. It was calculated that there would be a 25% drop in secondary school population although this would affect some schools more than others. Further secondary re-organisation (amalgamations or closure) was therefore possible.

The affordability gap would be reduced if an academy were established. However, there could be an impact on central services if an academy was created.

In the next round of planning the Director advised that the education budget would be affected by decisions that were taken. Difficult decisions would need to be taken by all Councils including Sunderland. It was clear that an academy could have a devastating impact on plans. There would be a presentation to DfES officials, MPs, representatives of local businesses and others. The Portfolio Holder for Education, Dr Comiskey and Harry O'Neill would be present at the meeting. Information would become available when the issue went to Cabinet and would be shared with the Schools Forum (possibly around March).

A question was raised about the affordability gap in respect of Sandhill

Action Points

Further information re. BSF and Academies to be supplied to the Schools Forum

View School. It was explained that Sandhill View had been established at an early stage in PFI schools. Effectively all schools paid for Sandhill View School in some way and costs were incorporated into budget plans (in the ISB). It continued to be the case that the PFI factor was included in budget plans.

The Chair thanked Harry O'Neill and Dr Comiskey for their presentation.

05/12 The possibility of an Academy

This had been a separate item on the agenda but had been covered under the previous item's discussion on BSF.

05/13 Date and time of next meetings

The Forum would meet on Monday 7th March 2005 at 2.30 p.m. in Committee Room 1, Sunderland Civic Centre.

The full day session in the summer term was scheduled for Monday 20th June 2005. A possible venue for this meeting was the Sunderland Glass Centre.

Action Points

Signed _____
Mrs Y. Gray
Chair of Schools Forum