

Warrington Schools Forum

Minutes – 18 June 2024 (via Teams)

Membership

Membership with differentiated voting rights ~ Total Membership of 28, of whom 22 are entitled to vote on funding formula issues											
Sector Representation (22)	Appointed by the Council following election by:	Member	Dates and Attendance								
			11 October 2022	17 January 2023	21 March 2023	20 June 2023	10 October 2023	16 January 2024	19 March 2024	18 June 2024	
Maintained Nursery School Senior Staff (1)	Primary Headteachers Group	Marcia Atherton	A	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	
Special School Staff (1)	Special School Headteachers Group	Lucinda Duffy	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	
Special School Governor (1)	Governors Forum	Hazel Coen	P	P	P	A	P	P	P	P	
PRU (1)	PRU Management Board	Lindsay Regan	A	A	A	A	X	A	A	X	
Academy – all phases (9) Agreed this should be: (5 secondary including UTC) (4 primary)	Academy Schools (secondary)	Gwyn Williams	P	P	P	P	A	P	A	P	
		Emma Mills (from June 2024)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	A
		John Carlin	A	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	A
		Christian Wilcocks	P	P	A	A	S	P	P	P	A
	Academy Schools (primary)	Gary Cunningham CHAIR - Schools Forum	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P
		Jane Rooney (from March 2024)	A	A	A	P	A	-	P	P	
		Sarah Morris (from June 2024)	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P
		Craig Burgess	P	P	P	A	P	P	P	P	P
	UTC	Chris Hatherall	A	P	A	A	P	A	P	A	
	Maintained Primary School Sector (6)	WAPH and Governors Forum	Siobhan Bentley	P	A	P	A	P	P	A	A
Kathryn Berry			A	A	P	P	P	P	A	A	
Andy Hayes (from March 2024)			A	P	P	P	P	-	A	P	
Ian Moss			A	P	P	A	A	P	P	A	
Vacant (from June 24) Governor			P	P	P	A	X	P	P	-	
Donna Kendal Governor			A	P	A	A	P	P	A	A	
Maintained Secondary School Sector (2)	WASCL	Chris Hunt	P	P	A	A	S	P	P	P	
		Ed McGlinchey	P	P	A	A	A	A	A	A	
Private Voluntary and Independent Providers (1)	PVI Providers Forum	Vacant	P	A	A	A	X	A	A	-	

Representing	Member	Dates and Attendance							
		11 October 2022	17 January 2023	21 March 2023	20 June 2023	10 October 2023	16 January 2024	19 March 2024	18 June 2024
Non-Schools Members (6)									
Anglican Diocese (1)	Jane Griffiths	A	A	A	X	X	P	A	P
Roman Catholic Diocese (1)	Vacant	A	A	A	X	-	-	-	-
16-19 Institutions (1)	Damian McGuire	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P
Parent Governor (1)	Vacant	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
NEU (Trades Union)	Lucie Humphreys	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P
NASUWT (Trades Union)	Laura Watson	P	A	P	P	P	P	P	P

Representing		11 October 2022	17 January 2023	21 March 2023	20 June 2023	10 October 2023	16 January 2024	19 March 2024	18 June 2024
Warrington Borough Council									
Director of Education and Inclusion (Deputy DCS)	Paula Worthington	P	A	P	P	A	P	P	P
Head of Service – Quality Education and Learning	Louise Atkin	A	P	P	P	P	P	P	P
Finance Manager	Janet Davies (from Jan 2024)	S	P	P	P	-	P	P	P
Senior Accountant (Schools)	Emma Norman (from March 2024)	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P

Key:

P ~ Present

A ~ Apologies

X ~ Absent with no apologies

C ~ Meeting cancelled

S ~ Substitute

- ~ Vacancy

O ~ Observer

Presenting item:

Felicity Wisken

for item 7

Minutes:

Gill Sykes

1. Apologies and Welcome

The chairperson, Gary Cunningham, welcomed everyone to the meeting and apologies were noted.

With regard to membership:

- Janet Lazarus (Governor) has stepped down from Schools Forum and asked for her good wishes to be passed onto forum members. The chair wanted to note thanks to Janet for her long service and dedication to Schools Forum.
- Kathryn Berry (St Lewis) retires at the end of this academic year and the chair thanked Kathryn for her engagement with Schools Forum. With effect from the new academic year, Helen Graham (Cherry Tree) will take on the Schools Forum vacancy for Maintained Primary Schools left by Kathryn.
- Emma Mills was welcomed as a secondary academy rep.

2. Minutes and Matters Arising (from 19 March 2024)

The minutes were accepted as a true record and the following was noted:

- Page 7 bullet point 8: Lucinda noted that where it says “they” met with Stephen McNulty it was just Lucinda who met with him.
- Page 6 bullet point 5: Hazel referred to £154K shortfall identified and the minutes saying, “Lucinda noted there have been conversations previously and it is worth noting there is a difference in the level of need reflected in the level of funding, it is important to review it.” Hazel stated that she felt it was herself and Lucinda who made this comment. Lucinda clarified that she had made the comment and recalled herself doing so and that for the purposes of accuracy of the minutes, she can confirm that they are an accurate account of what she said.

Hazel noted there has been a change in the level of need and the difference is not as great as it was previously and Green Lane children are presenting with higher levels of need. The chair noted that Hazel is a special schools rep at Schools Forum and the discussion around assessing the level of need is for the SEND Review Board and is not a Schools Forum matter. The chair suggested this could be picked up as an agenda item at SEND Review Board. Louise clarified that this discussion is not for this group and has been picked up through different channels.

3. SLAs – response to in-year increase

Stephen McNulty sent his apologies and will provide written responses to all the queries already raised. This will be forwarded with the minutes.

4. Outturn Report

Emma Norman presented her report to the forum which is to notify Schools Forum of the confirmed outturn position for the central Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) allocations for 2023/24. This includes whole-school activities and central education functions, but excludes individual school balances, which are reported on separately. It also briefs on the wider closing position for Education and SEND.

There is an underspend of £1.6m in DSG and the majority is EY funding which will be held in a balance until we have had the recalculation of funding in July and after that will distribute any funding remaining. We do anticipate all money will be spent across the financial year which is apart from the underspend last year. With regards to de-delegation there wasn't anything to redistribute with maintained schools, it was all spent. With the wider education budget there is an overspend of £100K and there has been a change to

the structure of education and SEND with EH now under Children's Social Care, this would be the main difference. The overall picture for Families and Wellbeing is £15.8m overspend in adults and children's social care and we have never been at that level before. For adults it is in the under 65s with increased demand around mental health problems and within children's social care it is providing residential support by private providers for children with significant needs which is demand led.

Janet Davies noted that across families and wellbeing it is commissioned care that has the biggest spends and individual placements are rising because of demand across the country. In Adult social care there is a growing need with the under 65s and with others living longer. Adult social care can claim back some monies in client contributions.

The chair invited questions or comments and none were made.

Recommendations:

- (i) Schools Forum is asked to note the 2023/24 outturn position for DSG, and that this underspend will be brought forward in anticipation of an adjustment from the ESFA. **NOTED**
- (ii) Maintained school representatives are asked to note that no additional balances are due to be returned in respect of de-delegated services. **NOTED**

5. Maintained Balances

Emma Norman presented her report to the forum which is to notify Schools Forum members of the final individual balances for Warrington maintained schools as at the end of the 2023/24 financial year, and to compare the overall picture with the corresponding situation in the previous year. For the first time in several years, there were no in-year conversions to academy for Warrington schools, so the two financial year out-turns are directly comparable.

The aggregate of school balances for Warrington maintained schools at the end of the previous financial year was £10.2m which is an increase from last year's figure of £9m. There was a 3% increase on the amount of interest and it increased balances significantly for those schools. Settings with an excess balance which may merit deeper investigations are 24 primaries, 3 secondaries, 3 special including one 6th form provision plus the nursery school. They recorded balances over the recommended 8% for primaries and specials and 5% for secondaries and this is slightly more than last year. Emma recommended the figures are taken with caution as schools funding is not changing but costs are increasing dramatically year on year. Some schools with high balances this year may be using this to set a budget and there is context behind the balances. Emma noted that they inform these settings of the excess and there is notional clawback, from pre-meetings there are some caveats to putting in clawback and would impact the schools for using the balances in the next year. The finance team has been in discussion with schools about this.

Questions/Comments:

- Gary asked for a brief explanation of why the excessive balances are carried forward. Emma noted they are looking at the committed balances rather than the carried forward. 95% is committed balances and there are decisions in the future around maintaining levels of funding and expenditure.
- Chris Hunt noted it was perverse the minimum schools can clawback whereas academies can build up reserves. There are probably capital projects in the future and reasons for the amounts of money. It is not just trying to hold the money, it is to set budgets for the future.
- Paula urged a note of caution, people take away the papers and read the numbers but don't necessarily have the context.

- Paula noted that individual budget meetings were held with all schools with a deficit budget and they are doing everything they can within their powers to address.

Recommendations:

- (i) Schools Forum members are asked to note the level of maintained school balances recorded at the end of 2023/24. **NOTED**
- (ii) Schools Forum members representing WAPH and WASCL are asked to consider whether to recommend that schools evaluate internally their closing 2023/24 balances. **NOTED**

6. DSG High Needs update

Emma Norman presented her report to the forum to illustrate that after discussion with the local authority Deputy Chief Executive (Lynton Green) agreement was reached around changes to the planned spend of the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) settlement for Warrington for 2024/25 to ensure that we are in line with current legislation.

Emma noted that last time we looked at different elements of High Needs (HN), areas of historical commitments, transport and support for inclusion. The change in legislation means the DSG should not be funding transport costs. Emma and Paula met with Lynton and it was agreed that £3.5m allocated to transport from HN will now be picked up corporately. The £3.5m will go back into the HN pot and will help support funding for SEND children across the borough. The historical commitments within the Central funding block of £401K were also discussed and will be picked up corporately. It is proposed to allocate the £401K to the growth allocation fund increasing the fund to £643,558 for 2024/25. In view of this, the headroom of £447,135 will go into the HN block to help support increasing pressures.

There is £1.75m support to inclusion, which is a contribution across children's services to support SEND. We are trying to look at how to reallocate into HN and whether it could be put in as a corporate pressure for 2025/26. When looking at 2024/25 it is not confirmed if it can be put in as corporate pressure but is still up for discussion. It is positive that we have £3.5m added to the HN pot and will continue to press for the additional £1.75m to be freed up to go into HN.

Paula and Louise will agree transport costs even though the budget for transport will now be held corporately. Noted that if we are able to invest more in the local offer it will decrease spending on transporting children out of borough and trying to bring more in-house within Warrington.

Questions/Comments:

- Paula noted that this will look like a lot of money coming our way. We legitimately conceded SEND transport to HN and as the ESFA changed the rules without consultation all local authorities had to make decisions to introduce corporate pressures. This has created a problem corporately and challenges for us in the service. It is important to put the £401K into growth allocation as there are real challenges around place planning and sufficiency, although there is only so much we can do with a limited amount of money. With the additional £1.75m if we can get this resolved it will become a corporate pressure. Whilst it is great to bring a bonus into the system it is at a time when we are asked to deliver savings across our services.
- Gary asked if it is going to be difficult for our families to procure transport with the cost pressures within the council. Paula noted that we will always provide where we can and there may be some decisions we have to make about Post 16 for SEN which we don't have to provide but have always provided on a discretionary basis. There may need to be conversations with more parents about paying mileage allowance and encouraging parents use their own cars or use public transport. Perhaps send form if they have car and if can use public transport.

- Paula noted another issue being faced is that people who used to run private hire companies get more money to deliver packages/parcels and are handing in their licenses so we are struggling to get contracts for children. We are looking at any way to release the local authority fleet back into the system, to use for children as well as separately to transport adults to day centres.
- Gary asked if the growth additional fund working party will still be in place. Emma confirmed it would and that the criteria will need to be met. Louise noted that the growth criteria has been in place for over a year now and some primary schools have asked us to consider the criteria again. The funding has largely accommodated secondary growth and we will look to encompass some of our primary schools. The criteria will be tabled at the next growth meeting and James Bancroft is already working on that. Any proposal about the criteria will go back to Schools Forum for approval. Gary noted that the group worked well and was made up of forum members.

The chair asked if everyone was happy with the recommendation to transfer £447,135 from the school's block into the high needs block. Forum members agreed to the transfer and no one objected.

Recommendations:

- (i) It is recommended that School Forum Members note the contents of this report and support the decision to reallocate the headroom transfer of £447,135 from the school's block to further support spending in the high needs block in 2024/25. **NOTED AND AGREED TO THE TRANSFER TO HN**

7. Academy Conversions (update)

Felicity Wisken presented her report to the forum to provide Schools Forum with an update on the academy conversion charging model currently being trialled. The report provided a brief overview of two reports from last year for fees associated with academy conversion. The preference was for a flat fee but the local authority took on board concerns and agreed to trial a case by case model using timesheets for specific cost. Today's paper gives an overview of the current position in Warrington schools. There are 45% academies, 5% in the process and 50% yet to convert. The DfE recently updated guidance and a key change from 1 September 2024 is that the £25K grant won't be available to individual schools, instead it will be £75K for groups of three schools. The council therefore expects future requests will come in groups of three.

For the three conversions currently taking place where timesheets are being trialled, two are under the proposed flat fee of £10K (one over £8K and one £8.5K) and one looking at over £12.5K. The conversion specific model has challenges with additional work capturing hours and increased time facilitating conversations when resources are stretched. Capturing this in the Commercial Transfer Agreement (CTA) has presented challenges because of the timeline, a lot of the work happens in the final month or after conversion. Payroll and finance have found it difficult to give a figure given a significant amount of their work is carried out post CTA signature and legal officers work to Solicitors guideline hourly rates (though have striven to offer a discounted rate of £2K per lease and £2K per CTA). In light of the DfE looking to change the model with three or more converting at the same time there is an increased risk that legal will have to outsource work and costs will exceed the £2K per document. There is a preference for simplicity, reducing the amount of time the process takes, allowing officers to focus on the conversion itself. The local authority continues to prefer to move to a fixed fee. Felicity noted that we wanted to give an update on the process of the trial and ask whether forum members thought it would be worth bringing the review forward to before the end of the 12 month trial. One of the three has exceeded the £10K and there is an increased risk others could meet or exceed £10K.

Questions/Comments:

- Hazel asked if exceeding the £10K was for a church school with land etc. Felicity noted it is a complex site but it is a community school. Although there can be issues around land transactions with faith schools, the issue this time is a community school with a shared site. One model doesn't fit all and complexities can be small or large whether faith or community school.
- Gary asked what timescales are being considered for a review. Felicity noted that sooner rather than later would be best. Some schools are converting on 1 September 2024 so we need to make sure the review is done after that.

The chair proposed for the review to be started in September 2024 and forum members agreed.

It is recommended that Schools Forum:

- (i) Consider the model be reviewed earlier than the original 12 months, seeking a model that is more efficient, less onerous and attempts to overcome the challenges noted in point 4 of the report and/or, **NOTED**
- (ii) Accept that costs may exceed £10K per conversion. **NOTED**

8. AOB – no items were brought forward to discuss

9. Meeting schedule for 2024

All dates are Tuesdays at 4:30pm–6:30pm via Teams:

- 8 October 2024

Suggested dates for 2025 were agreed by forum members:

- 14 January 2025 (face to face)
- 18 March 2025
- 17 June 2025
- 14 October 2025

The chairperson thanked everyone for attending and the meeting was closed.