

## Warrington Schools Forum

Minutes – 21 March 2023 (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			
Maintained Nursery School Senior Staff (1)	Primary Headteachers Group	Marcia Atherton	A	P	P					
Special School Staff (1)	Special School Headteachers Group	Lucinda Duffy	P	P	P					
Special School Governor (1)	Governors Forum	Hazel Coen	P	P	P					
PRU (1)	PRU Management Board	Lindsay Regan	A	A	A					
Academy – all phases (9)  Agreed this should be: (5 secondary including UTC) (4 primary)	Academy Schools (secondary)	Gwyn Williams	P	P	P					
		Vacant	-	-	-					
		John Carlin	A	P	P					
		Christian Wilcocks	P	P	A					
	Academy Schools (primary)	Gary Cunningham <b>CHAIR - Schools Forum</b>	P	P	P					
		Paula Warding	A	A	A					
		Cath Cooke	P	P	P					
		Craig Burgess	P	P	P					
	UTC	Chris Hatherall	A	P	A					
Maintained Primary School Sector (6)	WAPH and Governors Forum	Siobhan Bentley	P	A	P					
		Kathryn Berry	A	A	P					
		Zoe Jones	A	P	P					
		Ian Moss	A	P	P					
		Janet Lazarus Governor	P	P	P					
		Donna Kendal Governor	A	P	A					
Maintained Secondary School Sector (2)	WASCL	Chris Hunt	P	P	A					
		Ed McGlinchey	P	P	A					
Private Voluntary and Independent Providers (1)	PVI Providers Forum	Kelda Willians	P	A	A					

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

Representing		11 October 2022	17 January 2023	21 March 2023	20 June 2023	10 October 2023		
		<b>Warrington Borough Council</b>						
Director, Early Help, Education and SEND	Paula Worthington	P	A	P				
Head of Service – Quality Education and Learning	Louise Atkin	A	P	P				
Finance Manager	James Campbell	S	P	P				
Senior Accountant (Schools)	Garry Bradbury	P	P	P				
Executive Member for Children and Young People's Services	Cllr Sarah Hall	A	A	A				

**Key:**

**P** ~ Present

**A** ~ Apologies

**X** ~ Absent with no apologies

**C** ~ Meeting cancelled

**S** ~ Substitute

- ~ Vacancy

**O** ~ Observer

**Presenting Item:**

Simon Bleckly

Shelley Gerrard

**Minutes:**

Gill Sykes

## 1. Apologies and Welcome

The chairperson, Gary Cunningham, welcomed everyone to the meeting and noted that apologies would be recorded in the minutes.

## 2. Minutes and Matters Arising (from 17 January 2023)

The minutes were accepted as a true record and no one raised any discrepancies.

## 3. Membership

Noted that the October census will be used to make sure the forum membership is reflective of the maintained, academy, primary and secondary sectors. Zoe raised that her school is planning to move into the academy sector from 1 April 2023 which may require us to look for a maintained primary rep to replace her. It was suggested that we need to contact the diocese as their reps have not been in attendance at recent meetings. Damian reminded that there is also a vacancy for a secondary academy rep. Hazel noted that Andrea is a parent governor and has previously been nominated via Governors Forum to be a parent governor rep on Schools Forum. Paula thanked Hazel for the nomination and noted that the opportunity for a parent rep may be broadened.

**Action: Paula Worthington to write to the diocese reps on behalf of forum regarding membership.**

**Action: Paula Worthington to write to Andrea.**

## 4. Annual School Audit Report

Simon Bleckly presented his report to the forum and noted they are aware it has been a number of years since they have been to some schools. The team only has capacity to undertake 10 or 12 audits a year and this is not enough to see all schools every 3-4 years. The team will be focusing on schools not audited for a number of years and will look at whether there is a way to do the audits more frequently.

From the priority and recommendations from the audits completed in the last couple of years it is good to see schools management and financial control is commended in the current environment. The report highlights some issues taken from the NW audit group with some of the key points raised in Warrington and regionally. There are a couple of new recommendations in the last year, running periodic reports on the financial system to guard against the risk of phishing attacks and scam attacks and retaining clear records/documentary evidence to demonstrate GDPR training of staff. Schools are still a target for external fraudsters and scammers. We have the schools anti-fraud toolkit and the new manager in place will be looking at updating the toolkit and planning training on that.

Audit results will be fed into the annual governance statements. The report concludes that we are satisfied that there is an effective framework for reporting our findings and recommendations to governors and senior managers and for appropriate action to be taken to improve existing controls. We therefore conclude that, subject to the limitation in scope imposed by the number of schools that we have been able to audit, there is Satisfactory Assurance that Warrington schools have effective systems of governance and internal control in place.

Comments/queries:

- The chair asked if the staffing levels are maintained and more schools convert to academy is there an impact. Simon noted yes there would be an impact and the audit committee has asked him to look at this. There is core work for maintained and external to chargeable clients and we want to know there is an appropriate level of resource which will factor into the review.
- Hazel noted that in the academy sector there is an audit every year as part of an external audit and asked about schools that have not been audited for over seven years. We appreciate the value an internal audit has for schools governance and asked if these schools could be made a priority this year. Simon noted that they do try to prioritise the schools that have not been audited for some years. Simon noted that it would be good to have formal representation from Schools Forum that the audit service is valued and schools would like a more frequent audit cycle. Hazel agreed to send an email to Simon.

Recommendation:

- (i) The Forum is asked to note and comment on the contents of the report. **NOTED**

## 5. Academy conversions

Paula Worthington presented Felicity Wisken's report to the forum on charging maintained schools for costs associated with facilitating academy conversions. The local authority has previously not levied charges as part of the academy process, but has recovered some of the costs, however there has been inconsistency. The process is quite resource intensive for the local authority and although the DfE provides a one-off grant of £25K to each school going through the conversion process the local authority does not receive any additional funding for this. Work has been undertaken to quantify the cost to the local authority around legal, property, education services to try to ascertain what would be a reasonable cost. Continuing to absorb the costs associated with academy conversions is not sustainable for the local authority and a figure of £10K per school was considered realistic. This report is being brought to the forum for transparency and to prompt a conversation as part of the academisation process. It has been to the senior leadership team to let them know this is something that is being considered.

Comments/queries:

- Ian Moss: The diocese tend to look at a group of VA schools and may perhaps want academisation at the same time and in the same period, which could be up to 19 schools. This would have a massive effect if it were to happen over a period of one year. With reference to cost, we understand that costs need to be covered and appreciate the comments about having a conversation around that. I've only asked for one piece of information to submit from the local authority and it was sent back within an hour and a half as it was existing information, so assume what happens after that is where most of the costs are incurred. Would like to note that there is a significant difference between a one form primary and a secondary school converting and therefore a difference in the costs involved.  
Paula noted we will have a separate conversation with diocese reps around the approach they may take with academisation. There is a lot of work that goes on behind the scenes to facilitate academisation and Paula asked if the forum wanted a smaller group to meet to gain an understanding of the local authority perspective.
- Zoe Jones: Being at the point of planned conversion on 1 April 2023 it is quite difficult to plan when suddenly hearing about the charges. As a maintained school rep Zoe noted she will feed back to maintained schools that they need a heightened awareness of the proportion of the grant to put aside for the local authority. Zoe raised concern for her school as it is very late in the process to hear of this charge to have conversations and raise awareness with governors. It is difficult to compare with other local authorities without knowing the detail. Zoe explained it is a year since her school decided to convert and the LA charge won't come from the £25K DfE grant as it is late in the process and all the audits and due diligence increased tremendously. Zoe acknowledged the idea of conversations and that looking at individual situations would be welcomed. Paula noted she will take away specifically the case of Appleton Thorn to address it as quickly as possible.
- Damian McGuire: Noted that the report says for information and Damian challenged this as it was not presented as something open for discussion. One clause says if we do not pay the fee the local authority will not sign the document and thereby delay the conversion. Although we are happy to pay a charge we disagree with the amount being £10K (which is 40% of the grant) and feel the fee should be reasonable. The majority of the work is undertaken by the headteacher and business manager in school, all the TUPE is extracted from the database and checked by school, legal comes as prewritten documents from school and for ICT most schools stay with their SLA. Although there is no issue with paying a charge it has been presented at the last minute for one particular conversion and caused concern and we tried negotiation for a fairer payment. Compared to nationally the charge is above what is suitable and Appleton Thorn is a straight forward conversion. Concern was expressed at the tone of the report and the feeling that it should have been handled in a different way with plenty of notice for schools being informed. Damian conducted an exercise and found ten other authorities with a policy document and not one has a fee for £10k, they distinguish between VA, community, primary and secondary and have separate negotiations. Their charges ranged from £2K (for primary) to £9K (for secondary). The £2-20K mentioned in the report referred to a national audit office report.
- Hazel Coen: Noted there is a difference with VA and VA controlled schools and to have a conversation to discuss the charge would feel much fairer than a set fee of £10K for each school.

- Craig Burgess: Although take on board comments, some of the costs when a school converts can be due to their choice, however, solicitors will break down what they look for in a contract. There may need to be some scoping on what parts are for the local authority and there could be a spectrum of costs. Acknowledge that negotiations around land can be difficult.
- Louise Atkin: Noted that Felicity (author of the report) attended forums on this and has researched the costings. The information Damian brought is of interest and will be noted. There have been costs for some schools which have been high due to questions and challenges around land. Louise shared that she meets with the diocese and talks about how schools may move forward together as a group of schools or individually. Having this information helps to plan effectively especially as we are a small local authority.

The Chair summarised that the local authority should not absorb all the costs, but the £10K applicable for all does not feel fair and on behalf of the forum asked the local authority to look at a greater breakdown. Schools need to be informed there is a charge and the amount should be on a case by case basis. It was felt it should be a reasonable charge, reviewed annually and taken from the school balance at the appropriate time. Schools should be informed it may be around £10K and for there to be discussion and more detail to negotiate the cost so it appears to be fair.

Paula noted that the local authority are in a position whereby schools make the choice to academise and the local authority don't have a place in the decision making process. Felicity's aim was not for the paper to be perceived in the way suggested, it was as a way to open up the conversation. Louise will take away the comments and work with Felicity. Paula shared that there have been cases where the local authority costs have exceeded £10K.

The Chair referred to the recommendations from the report that were noted and that the value of the charge was not agreed by the forum. Asked for there to be further discussion around the amount to be charged, for there to be more detail and for this to be discussed with individual schools in order to negotiate.

Recommendations:

Schools Forum is asked to note:

- (i) The change in approach to charge for costs incurred by the local authority in order that the conversion process can be managed efficiently and effectively in support of the school's decision to convert. **NOTED**
- (ii) The value of the charge at £10,000 per conversion. This is based on the cost of a typical conversion and the rationale that this is affordable within the grant of £25,000 which each converting school receives to facilitate their conversion. **NOT AGREED**
- (iii) That as part of the conversion process, the local authority will deduct the charge from the converting school's balance and that failure to agree payment of the charge prior to conversion could result in delaying completion of the conversion process. **NOTED**
- (iv) That in the event a conversion is deferred for any reason, and costs have already been incurred by the local authority, reasonable charges will still apply. **NOTED**
- (v) The charge will be reviewed annually so that consideration can be given to any change in circumstance, for example inflation or deflation in the specific areas of work. **NOTED**

## 6. Early Years Update 2023/24

Garry Bradbury presented his and Lorna Davies' report to the forum and the following was noted:

- The EY single funding formula group met 6 months ago and for the first time in a few years the funding rate for the local authority and the actual numbers had both increased at the same time. Overall if comparing year on year the EY block settlement was around £1m higher than the previous settlement. We reported that £1m was from the funding increase and this superficially seemed very good.
- Warrington EY funding remains low, although there are 44 local authorities that are slightly less funded than us. Our funding is about 40p per hour below the national average.
- Subsequent to the EYSF meeting noted that the HN block funding is intended to cover SEN from 0-25 years. Up to this point SEND, outreach and EY coordinators were accommodated from the EY block. We are now

recommending to schools forum from next year onwards that the posts in the areas of SEN previously funded from the EY block will be funded from the HN block.

Because we are suggesting some funding should be used from the HN block Shelley Gerrard will give an outline of the posts and why it is a very wise use of the HN block.

- EY SEND support is particularly good at early identification, as soon as receive notification from the health visitor. From then would support through home visits or access to specific groups. HN would fund an additional two from EH and one from HN.
- SEND outreach – one from HN to support settings and improve the development of children so less need of EHCP. SEND outreach also support transitions e.g. last year one child didn't get an EHCP and the SEND outreach worker would go to reception and support those children in the first term. EH would also fund an additional two posts.
- EY SENCOs manage the posts and give oversight at the inclusion panel to make sure assessments are completed to a good quality and give advice and guidance at that panel.

Comments/queries:

- Marcia: Some EY providers have been closing due to financial pressures. The creativity of this suggestion enables the full increase of the hourly rate to be passed on which will be welcomed by providers to enable them to continue to stay open. Also, the support from the SEND outreach will be really helpful.
- Shelley noted that EH work closely with Louise Atkin and the EHCP team making sure the children who need to be identified are and they also work closely with the Educational Psychologists. We are confident we are moving in the right direction.
- Louise noted that one of the things that is really exciting is about supporting nursery and into reception. The team have worked hard so that children are being rightly placed. There is more of a joined up approach from EY and into primary and secondary.
- The Chair noted that if SEND is from 0-25 years why have we not done this in the past. Garry Bradbury noted that this was never considered, we know that in the past 2-3 years the HN block had been under immense pressure and there hadn't been any scope for the HN block to help support the EY block. We think it is prudent and wise now we are in a situation where we had a reasonable HN block settlement and we are out of deficit with HN. We have never known the level of need that is coming from EY.

The Chair asked forum members to vote on the proposal and local authority officers were reminded they were not included in the voting process. The Chair confirmed that the majority voted to accept the proposal.

Recommendations:

- (i) It is recommended that Schools Forum members note the contents of the report. **NOTED**
- (ii) Schools Forum members representing phases with Early Years provisions (primary schools, nursery schools and private/voluntary/independent providers) are asked to ratify the proposals presented in section 3.6 of the report, in order to apply them from 1st April 2023. **AGREED**

## 7. Dedicated Schools Grant Budgets 2023/24

Garry Bradbury presented his report to the forum and noted that the purpose of the report is to illustrate how the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) settlement for Warrington for 2023/24 has been allocated to individual budgets. It follows previous funding discussion around the Schools Block of DSG (and the resulting mainstream school budgets) at the 17 January 2023 Schools Forum meeting. The following was noted:

- From the four blocks of DSG funding the largest block is the schools day to day mainstream school budgets.
- We haven't fully allocated HN block and central to projects as the SEND inspection may have implications on where to direct resources. Any contingency from HN and central is still to be allocated against particular projects and updates will be brought to Schools Forum as and when available.

## Comments/queries:

- Ian Moss: Noted he has spoken to a number of schools in the WA4 area and there is a lot of concern around budget deficits moving forward. Really shocked and surprised at the level of deficit, mainly with one form entry. Every school is potentially or nearly full, generating their own income and all are looking at a deficit of around £100k. It is really concerning and having a massive effect on the headteachers themselves. We are very appreciative of rising SEND awards for additional children and need more support and more opportunity to help drill down and help around staffing. Ian asked if there is anything more the team in finance can do to support these schools. Garry Bradbury noted that he is aware there are some schools in severe difficulty. The fundamental issue is that Warrington remains a badly funded authority in the national picture for per pupil funding. Unless there is movement on that then things are going to remain difficult for the foreseeable future. Because we implement NFF in our local formula that won't change if the nationally directed hard formula ever comes in.
- Ian acknowledged Garry's comments and noted that we may have to prepare ourselves as headteachers and a local authority as we may be looking at massive reputational damage for individual schools if they have to cut support for vulnerable pupils and interventions. Ian felt we need to bring more pressure to bear as an authority around school funding and informed he is going to see Andy Carter MP on this issue.
- Lucie Humphreys shared that the NEU is currently lobbying all MP's with regards to school funding, including Andy Carter MP.
- Garry noted that the higher percentage of overall cost is staffing and once economies have been made, there will be schools where staffing is the last and only remaining resource to reduce. The Chair shared that it is not just WA4, there are other colleagues struggling.
- Hazel asked about the delay to the ASD free school and it not going ahead until 2025/26. Paula noted this is the latest timeframe from the DfE and this will impact on Fox Wood and the DPS at Green Lane. Garry and his team are looking at the wider impact on the budget going forward. There will be more pressure on schools to take children and looking at how we can take that forward as for the next few years the ASD free school won't be there. The demand for children with SEND is across the town and it is a general demand for increased funding.

Paula reassured forum that we are constantly modelling for now and the future and are frustrated at the DfE delay around the free school. Also all Directors across the region are discussing these same issues and applying pressure through government and policy structures. A key part of our SEND inspection was to show our financial modelling going forward in terms of sustainability and capacity.

Louise shared that work is ongoing from the joint strategic needs assessment three years ago and is being constantly updated. There is a finance group looking at DPs and we will then consider special schools again. Hazel referred to Green Lane School and a number of issues that could be raised separately outside this meeting. Louise noted we plan to look at all special schools together and do modelling with headteachers and governors and take suggestions going forward. The rise in referrals has been significant and work is being undertaken with Marcia from Sandy Lane around EY projections.

## Recommendation:

- (i) It is recommended that Schools Forum members note the contents of the report. **NOTED**

## 8. Update on Growth Fund

The Chair explained that a working party was identified and tasked with considering proposals for the £728K. It was discussed at length, is a finite amount of money and we wanted to check that any proposal was affordable. We needed to look at census data and do modelling for last year and what it would look like for 2023 going forwards.

Garry Bradbury summarised that we have to work on the assumption the £728K is a one-off pot of money. It was generated from headroom funding once NFF had been implemented, there may be headroom year on year we don't know. The cost of implementing a contingency fund will pivot on those two issues. Trying to speculate what would happen in the future is not ideal so we decided to look at modelling how the £728K would have been allocated in this financial year. A follow up meeting is scheduled for Friday 31 March 2023 and work done so far on the modelling will

be shared. There are a number of scenarios to consider and once the group has discussed the options and agreed a couple of justifiable scenarios they can be presented back to forum. We now have access to the January 2023 census and admissions can give a prediction for September on numbers to see whether the models will be able to be applied to future numbers. John Carlin noted that the pressures Ian raised are complicating the issue and are worth noting.

**9. AOB – no items were brought forward to discuss**

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

Meeting schedule for 2023:

- 20 June 2023
- 10 October 2023

All Tuesdays at 4.30 – 6.30 pm via Teams