Oldham Council

Spring Term 2025

Minutes

Meeting of the Oldham Schools Forum

Wednesday 26 March 2025
via Microsoft Teams
at 4.00pm

PRESENT:		
Stewart Ash	Pinnacle Trust (CFO)	Primary Academy Representative
Joe Brownridge	E-ACT (CFO)	Secondary Academy Representative
Tracey Cavanagh	Holy Rosary RC Primary School (Headteacher)	Primary Maintained Representative
Kate Anais Hoggard	Channings	Early Years Representative- PVI
Paul McGrath	St Thomas CE Primary School, Werneth	Primary Academy Representative
Garry Needle	St Jospeh's	Primary Maintained Representative
Liz Travis (Chair)	Holy Trinity CE Primary School (Headteacher)	Primary Maintained Representative
N Woodworth- attending for Claire John	Newbridge Group	Special Sector Representative

IN ATTENDANCE:	
Nicola Barrett	Clerk
Matthew Bulmer	Director of Education, Oldham Council
Amber Burton	Assistant Director SEND and Inclusion, Oldham Council
Andy Cooper	Senior Finance Manager, Oldham Council
Victoria Hayes	Senior Accountant, Oldham Council
Clare Roper	Senior Accountant, Oldham Council
Tony Shepherd	Assistant Director of Education, Oldham Council
Jennifer Wright	Early Years Funding and Sufficiency Manager

ABSENT:		
Leon Ashton	Crompton House School (Governor)	Secondary Academy Representative

Sharon Costello	Harmony Trust (CFO)	Primary Academy Representative
Rob Higgins	Blue Coat School, The Cranmer Trust (Headteacher)	Secondary Academy Representative
Clare John	New Bridge Trust (CEO)	Special School Representative
Anthony Leighton	The Cranmer Trust (CFO)	Secondary Academy Representative
Karl Newell	Crompton House School, New Bridge Academy (Headteacher)	Secondary Academy Representative
Emmett Patel	Kingsland School (PRU) (Headteacher)	Special School Representative
Jeremy Sutcliffe	Kingfisher Special School (Governor)	Special School Representative
Iain Windeatt		Trade Union Representative

Prior to the start of the meeting, the Clerk confirmed the meeting was quorate (40% of members in post).

1. WELCOME AND APOLOGIES

1.1 Welcome

The Chair welcomed everyone present and opened the meeting at 4.04pm.

1.2 Apologies for Absence

There were no apologies for absence.

1.3 Business, Pecuniary and Personal Interests

No declarations of interests were shared.

2. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING AND MATTERS ARISING

2.1 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

RESOLVED: that the minutes of the meeting held on 15 January 2025 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair, subject to the following amendment:.

- Minute 4.3 (Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) Update)

The Forum had approved the de-delegation of funding areas however it had been deferred to secondary heads for final approval. There was a brief discussion and the Director of Education advised that because secondary schools no longer de-delegate, the approval to de-delegate is not necessary. The Chair was in agreement that the deferral for approval was not needed in this sense.

The wording ‘However in the absence of representation from the Sector at the meeting this will (as in 23/24) be deferred to the Secondary Heads for final approval’ be removed from the minutes.

ACTION: Chair

2.2 Matters Arising from the Previous Minutes

There were no matters arising from the minutes of the previous meeting that were not covered elsewhere on the agenda.

3. DEDICATED SCHOOLS GRANT (DSG) UPDATE

3.1 The Dedicated Schools Grant 2024-2025 and 2025-2026 joint report, from the Director of Finance and the Director of Education, Early Years and Skills, had been shared in advance of the meeting.

3.2 The Senior Finance Manager highlighted Table 1 - DSG Management Plan 2023-2024 to 2025-2026.

The Senior Finance Manager advised that the local authority's Financial Statements for 2023-2024 were approved by the Audit Committee on 26 February 2025. The outturn was confirmed as a net surplus of £3.702m across the four blocks of the DSG.

The Senior Finance Manager explained that whilst there are a number of days left in the financial year and the figures could change, no significant change would be anticipated. An in-year deficit of £4.911m is forecast for 2024-2025 resulting in a projected outturn deficit of £1.209m. There has been a £1.429m underspend in growth funding within the schools block, which reverses the deficit, producing an estimated surplus of £0.220m for 2024-2025. This surplus is £0.793m better than the surplus reported in the previous meeting, which was £0.573m.

The Senior Finance Manager advised that the forecast deficit for 2025-2026 is £5.967m and assuming the growth funding brought forward from 2024-2025 is fully spent, the year-end deficit would be £5.747m. This is £2.400m worse than the £3,347m deficit reported in the previous meeting.

3.3 The Senior Finance Manager highlighted Table 2 – DSG Management Plan Variances which highlights movement in income and expenditure. In 2024/25 the main increase in expenditure was in relation to the High Needs block; an increase of £0.743m compared to the position reported to the January meeting. The previously forecast pressure of £0.220m in the early years provision is now expected to be £0.063million

In terms of 2025-2026, the Schools Block funding has increased by £0.879million and there is continued pressure on the high needs block. The cost of out of borough provision was highlighted.

3.4 Growth Funding

The Senior Finance Manager advised that there was a carry-forward agreement in principle at the last meeting and the carry-forward is confirmed to be £1.429million.

There is concern about the increase in expenditure within the high needs block and it is recognised that Oldham is not the only authority to be experiencing the increase. There was discussion regarding the position in other Greater Manchester authorities and it was recognised that whilst Oldham's position is not ideal, it is better than some authority positions.

Q. Is there is a wider view that the statutory override on the local authorities will be extended.
The forum heard that anecdotally this has been heard among finance colleagues; there has not been any formal confirmation. The view among finance professionals is that it is likely to be extended.

It was noted that the local authority approach is that it is better to hold a deficit within high needs than it would be not to pay for the support for children with SEND. The forum heard that politicians support the approach. It is recognised that it is a risk for the authority but leaders feel it is important to maintain SEND support.

Q. Can the local authority continue like this?
Not indefinitely, but the authority is not unique in this regard. Mr Bulmer advised that this means that leaders do not spend with reckless abandonment. Mr Bulmer advised that the finance team at the authority was asked to reforecast the deficit on the high needs block and it is not a worse-case scenario; leaders believe it is a realistic position. The forum heard that it is felt that the forecast at the end of next year is proportionate and the risk can be managed, and the forum will continue to be advised throughout the next year.

Q. Is the cost of out-of-borough care increasing because of the rise in need and lack of places in the authority?
No, it is mostly around the increased cost of the independent providers. There was a discussion around these costs, with a recent report from the government recognising that it is an unfettered industry. There is nothing leaders can do in regard to the increasing costs in some circumstances when there are not alternative options.

RESOLVED: i) that the Forum noted the current forecast position in relation to the DSG; and

ii) that the Forum noted that the previously approved in principle 2024-2025 Schools Block Growth Funding, to be carried forward and deployed in 2025-2026, is now confirmed as £1,429million.

4. EARLY YEARS FUNDING CONSULTATION: OUTCOME

Jennifer Wright updated the forum regarding the consultation outcome.

A consultation outcome report had been shared in advance of the meeting. It was noted that 27% of eligible providers responded to the survey and the preferred options were explained.

Following the consultation, the early years funding rates for 2025-2026 have been approved. The table depicting the funding rates was reviewed and it was noted that the SENIF will be consulted upon separately and the total to be allocated for 2025-2026 will be £188,569.

RESOLVED: that the Forum noted the outcome of the Provider Early Years Funding consultation 2025-2026 as summarised.

5. DATES AND TIMES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

RESOLVED:

- Wednesday 11 June 2025 at 4.00pm- rearranged to 25 June 2025
- TBC November 2025 at 4.00pm
- TBC March 2026 at 4.00pm

6. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

There were no urgent items to consider.

The Chair thanked the Senior Finance Manager for preparing all the papers for the meeting.

(There being no further business, attendees were thanked for their attendance and the meeting was declared closed at 4.20pm).

SIGNED as approved: _____ (Chair)

DATE: _____

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