
SCHOOLS FINANCE FORUM 25/01/21

Present: Mr Godfrey Northam (Ysgol Dyffryn Ogwen Governor) (Chair).

Cabinet Members: Councillors Ioan Thomas (Finance) and Cemlyn Williams (Education)

School Headteachers:

Secondary: Dylan Davies (Ysgol Dyffryn Ogwen), Dewi Lake (Ysgol y Moelwyn), Dylan Minnice (Ysgol Botwnnog) and Arwyn Williams (Ysgol Tryfan).

Primary: Iona Jones (Ysgol Edmwnd Prys / Bro Cynfal), Menna Wynne Pugh (Ysgol Penybryn), Alan Wynn Jones (Ysgol Cymerau), Richard Derwyn Hughes (Ysgol Garndolbenmaen) and Eleri Morgan Davies (Ysgol y Gorlan).

Teachers' Unions: Neil Foden (Ysgol Friars)

Governors: Edward Bleddyn Jones (Ysgol Tregarth), Gwilym Eifion Roberts (Ysgol Godre'r Berwyn) and Gwilym Jones (Ysgol Borthygest).

Church Schools: Elfed Morgan Morris (Ysgol Llandygai)

Special Schools: Donna Roberts (Ysgol Hafod Lon)

Observers: Gwenan Davies Jones (Chair of the Gwynedd Federation of Primary Headteachers) and Ellen Williams (Chair of the Gwynedd Federation of Secondary Headteachers).

Officers: Dafydd Edwards (Head of Finance), Garem Jackson (Head of Education), Owen Owens (Senior Education Resources Service Manager), Kathy Bell (Schools Group Accountant), Gwern ap Rhisiart (Dwyfor / Meirion Area Education Officer), Ffion Ellis Edwards (Assistant Head of Special Educational Needs and Inclusion) and Eirian Roberts (Democratic Services Officer).

Gwilym Eifion Roberts (Ysgol Godre'r Berwyn) was welcomed to his first meeting of the forum.

Best wishes were extended to Dilwyn Williams, Chief Executive, on his retirement in March, and he was thanked for his service.

1. APOLOGIES

Anest Gray Frazer (Diocese)

2. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

No declarations of personal interest were received.

3. URGENT ITEMS

None to note.

4. MINUTES

The Chair signed the minutes of the previous Forum meeting held on 28 September, 2020 as a true record.

5. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES

Item 9 - COVID-19 Financial Matters

The Schools Group Accountant noted:-

- It had been previously reported that we had claimed nearly £50,000 on behalf of schools due to the additional costs as a result of COVID, and a further application had been submitted to Welsh Government by now for a little over £100,000.
- As a result of submitting a report on the Council's revenue budget to the Cabinet on 26 January, we will know if the grant to schools will be allowed to be transferred, in the hope that this could be done by the end of January.

In response to a request for an update regarding school meals, the Schools Group Accountant explained that individual schools did not claim the grant, but this happened at a strategic level by the Education Department. This had already occurred for the summer term, and a further application had been submitted by now for the loss of income with school meals.

Item 11 - Additional Learning Needs (ALN)

The Schools Group Accountant noted, via consultation with headteachers, that £160,000 of the ALN grant to support pupils in need had been shared between the secondary schools; 50% was based on the numbers who receive free school meals, and 50% was based on Behavioural, Emotional and Social Difficulties (BESD), namely a special needs category.

It was emphasised that if the BESD data is used for budgeting from now on, it was necessary to be certain that this basis was consistent across every school in Gwynedd. In response, the Assistant Head of ALN and Inclusion agreed that consistency was needed, and it was confirmed that the service and officers who support schools should address this.

This one-off grant was welcomed, however, it was noted that the method of allocation raised a question regarding how the annual county allocation of nearly £1,000,000 was shared between schools. It was suggested that this should be looked at again, and to consider how many children need consistent inclusion support, in order that the money is shared in an appropriate way to respond to the needs of those children.

It was asked if it was necessary to spend the education grants by 31 March this year, although the schools had closed. In response, the Schools Group Accountant confirmed that the money must be spent by then. Every school in Wales would be in the same position, and national guidance was likely on this.

It was further asked if Gwynedd was discussing the matter with Welsh Government. In response, the Schools Group Accountant noted that she had not been part of any discussions thus far, however, she could raise the matter at the Wales accountants meeting next week.

The Head of Education noted that we were in unfounded territory, and bound to Welsh Government regulations. According to the Government's interpretation, schools had not closed but were open and undertaking distance learning. The situation was frustrating for schools and education authorities, however, as noted this would be raised at the accountants meeting, and it had also been raised by authorities throughout Wales.

It was RESOLVED to conduct a discussion with secondary headteachers regarding the allocation basis of the inclusion strategy allocation in the formula, and report back on the results of those discussions to the next meeting.

6. SCHOOL FORECASTS

Submitted, for information - a report by the Schools Group Accountant detailing the three-year financial forecasts for schools at the start of December 2020 based on the calculation of the number of pupils in September 2020.

It was noted that the statistics indicated that primary numbers were reducing as older pupils were moving to the secondary sector, and the numbers commencing in primary had / were decreasing. As a result, over the three years, a reduction of approximately £1m was anticipated in our primary schools - equivalent to approximately 18 fewer teachers, and an increase in the secondary sector equivalent to an increase of 15 teachers.

Reference was made to a situation in the past when the primary sector assisted the secondary sector, and it was asked if it would be possible for the secondary sector to repay the favour if difficulties arose in the primary sector. In response, the Schools Group Accountant explained that this had occurred at a time when schools were facing savings of £4.3m, and rather than sharing the savings equally, there was more pressure on the primary sector to find savings to assist the secondary sector. The Head of the Finance Department added that the situation was not as bad now, as the Council was not asking services or schools for new additional savings plans by 2021/22, and that individual establishments had planned for the scenario regarding demography, where money will follow pupils. Also, it was noted, compared to 2019/20 data of the 22 Welsh education authorities, that funding per primary pupil in Gwynedd was the highest throughout Wales on a gross basis and second on a net basis. At the same time, funding per secondary pupil in Gwynedd was the 8th highest on a gross basis and 13th on a net basis. Consequently, it may be concluded that Gwynedd appears to fund the primary sector quite honourably, compared to the secondary sector. In light of this, it was not deemed that we were in a position to currently ask the secondary sector to subsidise the primary sector.

It was also noted that specific school grants for 2021/22 had not been confirmed, and there was no guarantee that every grant would continue, or increase/reduce for next year.

In response, the Head of the Finance Department suggested that there was a strong possibility that the majority of grants would remain at the same level, as 'flat cash', because from what had been received from the settlement, no major changes were to be seen yet. However, he noted that the Government reduced the level of school specific grants in April/May 2020, therefore some uncertainty would remain until the official confirmation is received from Welsh Government.

RESOLVED to accept the information.

7. 2021/22 COUNCIL BUDGET

Submitted – an oral report and slide presentation by the Head of the Finance Department on the Council's 2021/22 budget, highlighting the likely impact on schools finances.

The timetable for determination on the 2021/22 budget and tax was noted, full provision on the September 2020 teachers pay agreement (3.1% for 5 months in the summer), together with £250 each for ancillary staff on pay lower than £24k, funding teachers pay increments, provision for inflation on supplies, energy, pupil taxi transport (£207k), etc. and demography (£187k) based on net increase in the number of pupils.

The likelihood of one off funding bids for taxi transport (£145k) and the 21st Century Schools Programme (£42.5k), together with the permanent taxi transport bids (another £145k) and free school meals (£124k) were noted.

However, it was explained that the Welsh Government grant settlement of £7m addressed inflation of £6.9m, but was insufficient to meet with the increase in demand for services.

Therefore, it was noted that the outcome of the bid will strengthen Early Years ALN; (£226k) depending on the willingness of Gwynedd councillors to increase the Council Tax level, while a number of taxpayers are suffering financially due to the COVID crisis.

The Head of the Finance Department emphasised that figures were continuing to move, and members were requested not to release this information.

RESOLVED to accept the information.

8. SCHOOLS' DIGITAL STRATEGY

Submitted - an oral report by the Dwyfor / Meirionnydd Area Education Officer noting that the high-level discussion continued regarding the options. It was confirmed that there was no new additional financial commitment for schools next year, and the forum members would be informed of any developments over the next few months.

RESOLVED to accept the information.

9. SERVICE LEVEL AGREEMENTS 2021-24

Submitted – a report by the Senior Manager – Education Resources Services who noted that the following contracts end on 31/3/21:-

- Catering, Cleaning and Care-taking and Grounds Maintenance (primary / secondary / special and all-through)
- Education Business Centre (primary)

It was explained that the Catering, Cleaning and Care-taking and the Education Business Centre were offered again for the period 1/4/21 - 31/3/24, however, Grounds Maintenance was offered for a year only (1/4/21 - 31/3/22) as the work continued to model the allocations for schools Ground Maintenance, in order that they better reflect the ground maintenance requirements of individual sites.

It was further noted:-

- That a consultation process had been conducted with schools regarding the Service Level Agreements that would be offered to them in April 2021.
- Schools had received copies of the draft Service Level Agreements submitted by the services, highlighting the changes and comparing the current agreements, and schools were invited to present any observations by 12 February, 2021.

RESOLVED to accept the information.

10. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

It was noted that the next Forum meeting will take place at 3.30pm on Monday, 1 March, 2021.

The meeting commenced at 3.30 pm and concluded at 4.25 pm

CHAIRMAN