
SCHOOLS' BUDGET FORUM 28.6.21

Present: Arwyn Williams (Head of Ysgol Tryfan) (Chair)

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

Head of Finance Department: Dafydd L. Edwards

School Headteachers:

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

Primary: Iona Jones (Ysgol Edmwnd Prys/Bro Cynfal), Menna Wynne Pugh (Ysgol Penybryn), Llion Williams (Ysgol y Garnedd) and Eleri Morgan Davies (Ysgol y Gorlan).

Governors: Godfrey Northam (Ysgol Dyffryn Ogwen), Gwilym Eifion Roberts (Ysgol Godre'r Berwyn) and Gwilym Jones (Ysgol Borth-y-gest).

Church Schools: Elfed Morgan Morris (Ysgol Llandygai)

Special Schools: Donna Roberts (Ysgol Hafod Lon)

Diocese: Tracy Richardson Jones

Observer: Gwenan Davies Jones (Chair of the Federation of Primary Headteachers)

Officers: Owen Owens (Senior Manager Education Resources Service), Kathy Bell (Schools Group Accountant), Ffion Edwards Ellis (Assistant Head of Special Educational Needs and Inclusion), Debbie Jones (Education Corporate Services Manager), Annes Sion (Democracy Team Leader) and Sioned Mai Jones (Democracy Services Officer).

1. ELECTION OF CHAIR

RESOLVED to elect Arwyn Williams, Head of Ysgol Tryfan, as Chair of the Forum for 2021/22.

Godfrey Northam was thanked for his work as Chair of the Forum over recent years.

2. ELECTION OF VICE-CHAIR

RESOLVED to elect Elfed Morgan Morris, Head of Ysgol Llandygai, as Vice-chair of the Forum for 2021/22.

3. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Dafydd Gibbard (Chief Executive), Richard Derwyn Jones (Ysgol Garndolbenmaen), Dewi Bowen (Chair of the Federation of Secondary Headteachers) and Gwern ap Rhisiart (Dwyfor/Meirionnydd Area Education Officer).

4. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

No declarations of personal interest were received.

5. URGENT ITEMS

None to note.

6. MINUTES

The Chair signed the minutes of the previous Forum meeting held on 26 April 2021 as a true record.

7. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES

It was stated that funding received as a result of the pandemic had been paid over the last year.

It was noted in terms of Schools' Projections that schools had identified £160,000 of savings to contribute towards unsuccessful education bids. It was explained that a discussion on the matter had been held at the Strategic Forum and that the bids addressed necessary posts. It was noted that the amount was now much lower after identifying additional funding.

8. SCHOOL BALANCES FOR THE 2020/21 FINANCIAL YEAR

The report was presented noting that the year had been exceptional as a result of COVID-19. It was explained that there had been a significant increase of £10.7 million. It was noted that the report provided a school by school breakdown. It was stated that the increase in funding was due to the closure of schools for a period of six months during the lockdown period and the receipt of grants from the Welsh Government. It was emphasised that as a result of this, all schools' balances had increased. The implementation procedure for the Guidance Plan on the Use of Balances was highlighted, noting that it continued as last year.

Gratitude was expressed for the report, asking why the Government was requesting a guidance plan on the use of balances for schools with more than a 5% balance remaining or the £100,000 threshold in secondary schools. The argument was emphasised that higher balances indicated better financial management than lower balances. It was noted that carrying over significant balances was a concern as it was difficult to justify obtaining extra funding if carrying over large balances. It was explained that this year had seen a huge increase in balances and there was a need to ensure that the schools made the best use of their money.

It was stated that the department was very protective of schools this year as the schools and Authority had received funding late and had often committed the funding before it was allocated. It was emphasised that this year had been exceptional.

It was highlighted that the implementation procedure for the Guidance Plan on the Use of Balances stipulated 5% but that the guidelines were not statutory and it was emphasised that the Authority had never used the power to take money from a school.

RESOLVED to accept the report, and for the Education Department and the Finance Department to continue to work closely with schools to make prudent use of the significant balances available in 2021/22 and to continue to monitor schools' budgets.

9. SCHOOL GRANTS 2021/22

Submitted, for information - a report by the Schools Group Accountant summarising the school grants for 2021/22 announced to date.

It was noted that it was customary to report on the level of these grants, which goes some way to explaining how dependent schools were on the grants. Appreciation was expressed for the receipt of this money, although there was no guarantee of receiving it year on year.

The Schools Group Accountant reported that the estimated Education Improvement Grant was £34k more than what was received. It was noted that £900k was being allocated to help schools close the numeracy/literacy gap and carry out catch-up work due to COVID-19.

In addition, one million would be available for additional employment over the summer term under the Accelerating Learning Programme Grant. Confirmation had been received on the morning of the meeting that a further Accelerating Grant worth 1.1 million would be available from September onwards; it was hoped that schools could continue to employ the people who were already in place as a result of receiving this update. It was noted that the conditions were not yet clear and the Schools Group Accountant would pass on the information once confirmation of the conditions had been received.

To conclude the report, it was noted that the Minister for Education had confirmed that an additional 150 million would be invested this term to support learners and that a percentage of this money would be available to Gwynedd schools. It was asked which elements of this funding were new. It was confirmed that of the 150 million, 33 million was new, the rest had already been announced back in March under former Minister for Education, Kirsty Williams.

Some headteachers expressed the view that a million to spend in a term was a challenge and that the time limit attached to some grants could be difficult.

The reduction in the Education Improvement Grant was questioned. The Schools Group Accountant reported that this was due to the settlement from the Welsh Government and that we had received reduced funding.

RESOLVED to accept the information.

10. SCHOOLS' GROUNDS MAINTENANCE ALLOCATION

The report was submitted, indicating that it was seeking approval to commence consultation with schools on the proposed change to the method of allocating schools' grounds maintenance funding for the financial year 2022-23. It was explained that back in 2018, the Forum had discussed an item on the Grounds Maintenance Funding Allocation Method to look at the needs of the site rather than the historical basis. At the time, the Forum did not disagree in principle to the change, however, schools needed to be forewarned if they were to receive less money.

The two possible allocation models were highlighted and it was emphasised that the appendix showed the impact per school of using both models in comparison with the grounds maintenance funding allocation. It was stated that there would be a need to consult with the schools and then come back to the Forum with an analysis before making the decision.

Concerns were expressed as to whether the money offered would be sufficient to cover the level of service. It was explained that the money available would be measured according to the nature of the site.

RESOLVED to approve the Education Department to commence consultation with schools on the proposed change to the method of allocating schools' grounds maintenance funding for the financial year 2022-23.

11. SCHOOLS' DIGITAL STRATEGY

It was explained that a discussion, with options and renewal costs, would take place at the Strategic Group. It was emphasised that a timetable would be proposed to ensure that all schools had sufficient time before committing.

12. ALN FINANCE WORKING GROUP UPDATE

Submitted, for information - a report providing an update on the ALN Finance Working Group by the Assistant Head of Special Educational Needs and Inclusion.

It was noted that the working group had considered seven models for funding and that model number 7 was preferred. However, it was noted that further work needed to be done on this model to look at some elements such as flexibility. It was reported that further work would be done on model 7 until September and it was hoped to be able to offer a final model for the next Schools' Budget Forum in the autumn. The intention was to commence implementation in September 2022 or April 2023.

It was confirmed that consistency in the use of PLASC across the County would be required. Some headteachers expressed their gratitude and noted that they welcomed the consistency of PLASC across all schools; there was recognition that this was not easy and it would be good to have more information on progress in the future.

The Assistant Head of Special Educational Needs and Inclusion noted that there was an intention to update the Headteacher Forums and there would be further consultation with Strategic groups. It was agreed to seek discussions with Headteacher Forums prior to the next Budget Forum meeting.

RESOLVED to accept the information and to receive a further update at the next meeting.

13. THE IMMERSION EDUCATION SYSTEM TOWARDS 2032 AND BEYOND

The report was presented noting that the position of Immersion Education was now completely different from that seen three years ago. It was explained that immersion education had been central to Gwynedd's education language policy and that the department had been drawing up a new vision for immersion education that would build on the strengths and successes of the Language Centres.

It was explained that Gwynedd's situation was unique as the language centres had been in place since the 1980s. It was emphasised that Estyn had commissioned a report to look at successes and support over the pandemic period and that the language centres' work and the way in which they had adapted were to be commended. It was explained that the centres had re-purposed and in doing so had reached more children and expanded the service.

As a result of this, the plans were building on this work to ensure that the centres become a greater part of schools rather than isolated units. It was explained that the new plans were looking at opening two additional centres in Tywyn and Bangor. It was stated that there would only be capital funding for these centres and that the revenue funding would need to be looked at. It was emphasised that there was no detail yet as it was dependent on Cabinet support.

It was stated that the department intended to fund the revenue element through three different sources - EIG, Schools and the Education Department. It was explained that the EIG funding alone was not sufficient to fully fund the provision. It was added that the department intended to ask the schools for a small contribution which would be a means of securing joint ownership. It was explained that the department needed a decision that the Forum agreed in principle.

The report was welcomed but it was highlighted that schools were also required to contribute to other initiatives such as the Digital Strategy and ALN.

It was noted that the plan was an exciting one and that the principles of the plan were to be welcomed. Concerns were highlighted and questions raised as to whether it would be possible for schools to withdraw from the financial contribution as it could pose major risks to the plan. It was noted that this was not possible and that this contribution highlighted the partnership working between the school and the centres. The need to discuss with governing bodies was also highlighted in order to have the golden opportunity to emphasise the need for joint ownership.

RESOLVED to support in principle.

14. WORK PROGRAMME AND DATES OF MEETINGS FOR THE 2021/22 ACADEMIC YEAR

The Chair noted that some meetings had been postponed in the past because there were no items to discuss. The next meeting would be held in September.

It was suggested that we look at what needs to be done for the next academic year and put a programme together based on this. It was agreed that the Chair contact the Schools Group Accountant for further discussions.

It was also noted to request suggestions from headteachers' groups; it was agreed for the Chair to raise this issue.

The Governor of Ysgol Dyffryn Ogwen noted that were some standing items from looking at previous agendas:

- November - Schools' Grants for the year to come
Draft settlement
Schools' Budget Projections
- February - April - Council Budget
Service Level Agreements
- June - Schools' Final Balances

He noted that apart from these six standing items, there was no other discernible pattern.

The Chair noted that the above would be taken into account when preparing agendas. The Head of Finance Department commented that the above was correct, but as a result of the Comprehensive Spending Review the draft settlement would be announced nearer Christmas this year.

RESOLVED that the Chair and Schools Group Accountant conduct a discussion on further dates and prepare a programme.

The meeting commenced at 3.30 p.m. and concluded at 4.50 p.m.