
SCHOOLS FINANCE FORUM 26/04/21

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

Cabinet Member: Councillor Cemlyn Williams (Education)

Head of Finance Department: Dafydd L. Edwards

School Headteachers:

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

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

Governors: Edward Bleddyn Jones (Ysgol Tregarth), Gwilym Eifion Roberts (Ysgol Godre'r Berwyn) and Gwilym Jones (Ysgol Borth-y-gest).

Church Schools: Elfed Morgan Morris (Ysgol Llandygai)

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

Officers: Owen Owens (Senior Manager Education Resources Service), Kathy Bell (Schools Group Accountant) and Eirian Roberts (Democratic Services Officer).

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillor Ioan Thomas (Cabinet Member for Finance), Dilwyn Williams (Chief Executive), Dewi Lake (Head of Ysgol y Moelwyn), Alan Wynn Jones (Head of Ysgol Cymerau) and Donna Roberts (Special Schools).

The Chair noted that two vacancies remained on the Forum – one for a primary governor from Meirionnydd, the other for a secondary governor from Dwyfor. He also noted that the Diocesan representative did not attend the Forum meetings. The Democratic Services Officer stated that she would pursue these matters by the next meeting.

The Senior Manager Education Resources Service noted that Neil Foden had relinquished his role as NEU representative on the Teachers' Union Forum, and it was hoped to appoint a successor to him by the next meeting. It was agreed to send Neil Foden a note thanking him for his service and contribution to the work of this Forum.

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 25 January 2021 as a true record.

5. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES

Item 5 – Matters arising from the Minutes of the Meeting held on 28 September 2020

- COVID-19 Financial Matters
It was confirmed that a refund had been received for the loss of income with school meals. It was noted that the 2021/22 accounts were closed today, and that schools would receive approximately £700,000 from the COVID fund, with £400,000 compensating the secondary sector for loss of catering income to the end of the financial year.
- Additional Learning Needs (ALN) Funding
Following discussions in the Strategic Group, it was decided to report back by March 2022, rather than 2021, on the outcome of discussions regarding the allocation basis of the inclusion strategy allocation in the formula, as the headteachers wished to have more time to consider the different options.

It was noted that a large proportion of the grants received needed to be spent by 31 March this year, but that the Welsh Government had allowed the councils to carry over the part of the Accelerated Learning grant received into the summer.

Item 6 – School Projections

It was noted that, as usual, effects of demography and inflation funding had been received. It was unclear at the time whether some bids would be successful, and schools had identified £160,000 of savings in 2021/22 to contribute towards unsuccessful education bids. The level of Council Tax was increased to fund the bid of approximately £225,000 to strengthen early years ALN provision, and the schools budget did not have to be cut to fund this.

It was noted that confirmation was still awaited from the Welsh Government regarding the 2021/22 grants. A message was received today regarding the pupil development grant which is allocated on the basis of the number of school pupils who receive free school meals, but Gwynedd would not receive the grant until after the election on 6 May. In the meantime, it would estimate the value of the grant so as to move forward.

Item 8 – Schools' Digital Strategy

It was noted that discussions were ongoing at Gwynedd Council Chief Executive level in conjunction with Anglesey Council and Cynnal.

Item 9 – Service Level Agreements 2021-24

It was noted, while explaining the service level agreements, that it would be necessary to look at reallocating the money going to schools on a different basis. This had already been agreed in principle, but it was not yet clear what the impact would be on the individual schools, and this would have to be brought to the Forum for action by next year.

Item 10 – Date of the Next Meeting

The Chair noted that the 1 March meeting of the Forum had been cancelled as there were no matters to discuss, but as he had received a complaint regarding this from two members, today's meeting was arranged as an additional meeting of the Forum. He added that it had not been possible to get an earlier date than this.

6. SERVICE LEVEL AGREEMENTS – 2021-24

Submitted – a report by the Senior Manager Education Resources Service – noting that the following contracts ended on 31/3/21:-

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

It was explained -

- That the Catering, Cleaning and Caretaking and the Education Business Centre agreements were offered for the period 1/4/21 to 31/3/24.
- That the Grounds Maintenance agreement was offered for one year (1/4/21 to 31/3/22) as work continued on modelling the allocations for schools' Grounds Maintenance, in order that they better reflect the grounds maintenance requirements of individual sites.
- That a consultation process had been conducted with schools regarding the Service Level Agreements that would be offered to them in April 2021.
- That schools had received copies of the draft SLAs submitted by the services, highlighting the changes in them in comparison with previous SLAs.

Submitted – a summary of the schools' responses, and the schools' observations on the various agreements.

Referring to the schools' observations on the grounds maintenance agreement, it was asked why so many were either using, or looking for a contractor themselves. In response, it was noted that the last year had not been a normal year to be able to give an opinion on the service, as the grass-cutting operation had been suspended for a time due to the lockdown period. It was further noted that the central service offered a guarantee on issues such as health and safety, and insurance, etc., unlike external contracts, but it was recognised that the service needed to sell itself better to the schools.

The Chair expressed his concern that Ysgol Dyffryn Ogwen was spending more on running the catering service than other schools did. In response, it was noted that the menu varied across the county, and that schools could make more profit by selling full meals, rather than snacks. Between COVID, and other circumstances, it had not been easy to have normal times to see what exactly was behind this, but they intended to look at the situation over the next few weeks.

The Headteacher of Ysgol Tryfan expressed his appreciation of the additional cleaning capacity that had been made available to schools during the COVID period, noting that this had greatly facilitated matters, and had increased the confidence of staff and pupils.

RESOLVED to accept the information.

7. ITEMS FOR THE NEXT MEETING

The Forum was asked to consider items for the next meeting.

The desire was expressed to put the request for items to the headteachers' meeting.

Concern was expressed that so many grants had arrived at the last minute, making it impossible to spend the money before the end of the financial year. The importance of

conveying that message was emphasised, lest people misinterpret the schools' financial positions and think they have higher balances than they actually have.

The Head of Finance Department echoed the comment by noting that the Council was also in a similar position with regard to grants received from the Welsh Government, and although those grants were very welcome, they conveyed a somewhat false position at the end of the financial year. He further noted that he, together with the Cabinet Member, ensured that the reason for this was clearly communicated by them at every meeting they attended.

The Senior Manager Education Resources Service noted that it was important for schools to identify the committed resources in the questionnaire when they received the end-of-year balances.

The Schools Group Accountant outlined the situation regarding school balances, noting that she would report in full on this to the next Forum meeting in June. She noted that the balances had increased from £4.3m to £10.7m up to 31 March 2021. Grants of £3m were received, along with £1m from GwE to the end of the financial year. In the primary sector, as the schools were closed for almost six months of the year, an underspend of £400,000 was seen in the Absences Scheme.

In response to a question, it was explained that there had been no discussion about the different thresholds, as the thresholds of £50,000 in the primary, and £100,000 in the secondary, had been set by the Welsh Government, and that what is important is how we interpret above those thresholds.

The Head of Finance Department noted that consideration needed to be given to how we had reached the current position. As a funding body, if the Welsh Government did not spend the money during the year, it was returned to the UK Government, and it was better to see the money being hoarded by the Council for a year, rather than losing it.

8. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

It was noted that the next Forum meeting will take place at 3.30 p.m. on Monday, 28 June 2021.

The Schools Group Accountant explained that the Forum had historically been meeting once a term, depending on the Welsh Government settlement timetable, with a second meeting during the Spring Term if required.

Members were asked to consider between now and the next meeting what the Forum needs to discuss, and when, so that a work programme for the year can be established at the June meeting.

The meeting commenced at 3.30 pm and concluded at 4.10 pm

CHAIR