

Minutes of Schools Forum Meeting 20th September 2023 at 2.30 pm

<i>Members</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Voting</i>	<i>Attendance</i>
Vacancy	Primary Maintained Headteacher	Voting	In process
Vacancy	Special Maintained Headteacher	Voting	n/a
Victoria Richmond	Primary Academy Headteacher	Voting	Absent
Paul Jackson (Vice Chair)	Secondary Academy Headteacher	Voting	Present
Vacancy	Special/PRU Academy Headteacher	Voting	n/a
Kyle Taylor	CFO Multi Academy Trust	Voting	Present
Richard Warnham	Governor Primary Maintained	Voting	Present
Barbara Fincham	Governor Primary Academy	Voting	Present
Vacancy	Governor Secondary Maintained	Voting	n/a
Peter Martin (Chair)	Governor Secondary Academy	Voting	Present
Justin Stuart	Governor Special and PRU	Voting	Present
Hannah Cartwright	Early Years Representative	Non-voting	Present
Simon Cook	16-19 Provider Representative	Non-voting	Absent
Hillary Sanders – can this also be opened up for the CEO	C of E Diocese Representative	Voting	Present
Vacancy - Proposed Ms Catherine Thacker SP to obtain agreement from the RC Diocese	RC Diocese Representative	Voting	n/a
Vacancy	Teaching Unions Representative	Non-voting	n/a
Stuart Gardner	CEO Multi Academy Trust	Voting	Present
Vacancy	SPI over 19 Provisions	Non-voting	n/a
<i>In Attendance</i>			
Celia Buxton	Assistant Director of Education and SEND LA		In attendance
Maria Beaney	Finance Business Partner LA		In attendance
Sarah Phillipson	Governance Professional		In attendance
Tracey Coombs	Portfolio Holder for Education		Not in attendance
Paul Clarke	Strategic Head of Education; Planning and Access		In attendance
Leanne Farach			In attendance

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Rebecca Smith			In attendance for her agenda points
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It was noted that the new Portfolio Holder for Education, Tracy Coombs, will be invited to attend each meeting.

1. Welcome, attendance and apologies:

As noted above.

Victoria Richmond & Simon Cook were absent.

2. Declarations of Interest:

No changes to the previously disclosed Declaration of Interests and any matters relevant to the agenda.

3. Minutes from the previous meeting 17th May 2023:

05th July 2023 – Cancelled.

The agenda carried over to the 20th September 2023 meeting.

Accuracy:

Agreed as an accurate representative of the meeting.

Matters Arising:

Action - CB to take the communications to the CEO forums. COMPLETED

4. DSG 2022-23 Outturn - Maria Beaney:

MB explained that the report sets out the updated position on the school's budget for 2022-23.

The 2022-23 provisional outturn table set out the position on the school's budgets as of 31 March 2023, and the forum noted a deficit of £21,440 million on the DSG reserve.

MB explained that the authority has entered a safety valve DSG Deficit Management Plan with the DfE. Members will be updated on this plan later in the agenda.

2022-23 Key Variances:

variances of +/- £50,000 are explained below:

(A detailed 2022-23 school budget breakdown was shared separately)

The Schools Block:

The block is forecasting an overspend of £129,295 on the growth fund budget due to:

- a) £192,000 - The requirement to pay for 60 places at one primary academy rather than the budgeted 30 places and 30 additional places at one secondary academy.
- b) The payment to one academy as the correct funding was not received through the GAG. Medway will recover this funding via a reduced recoupment academy deduction then budgeted for and has now been resolved.

This overspend will need to be reclaimed in 2024-25.

Central provision funded by maintained schools (De-delegated Education Functions):

MB advised that the budget for these services is shown as part of the school block because the funding is top-sliced from maintained school's ISB budgets to pay for education functions the Local Authority operates on their behalf as approved by the Schools forum. Academies can opt to purchase these services as a buy-back service via SLA online.

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There is an underspend of £117,942 on the school improvement budget principally due to increased grant income from the school monitoring brokerage grant, which was unbudgeted and is not anticipated as an additional grant next year.

Central Services Schools Block:

The overall position on the Central Services Schools Block is a pressure of £115,562 due to increased venue and staffing costs on the Admissions and Medway Test Service.

High Needs Block:

Despite a significant funding increase, a pressure of £ 2,656 million arose as expected in 2022-23 due to increased numbers of EHCPs, the complexity of need and the continued move to out-of-area independent providers.

Early Years:

The overall position on the Early Years Block is a pressure of £102,923 due to increased nursery provider payments from increased pupil hours/numbers. While this is an overspend, early years DSG funding is lagged, and Medway fully expects to recoup this overspend from additional funding in the new financial year.

The Schools forum **NOTED** the above information.

5. 2023-24 DSG Budget Allocation update – MB:

MB report advised that the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) requires all Local Authorities (LA) to provide information to its Schools forum about its Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) regularly.

The LA uses its DSG grant to fund educational activities across Medway through direct payments to schools/academies and other educational providers or, if approved, centrally retained for education purposes.

The LA's retained DSG allocation is adjusted several times yearly when maintained schools convert to academies.

Current 2023 - 2024 DSG Allocation:

The changes to Medway's DSG allocation by the ESFA in March 2022 were shared. It was noted that the LA's DSG SB allocation was reduced by £ 189.580 million, and the HNB was increased by £ 0.278 million for academy recoupment, which the ESFA pays to academies.

All funding is allocated on a per-pupil basis, and for 2023-24, Medway's allocations are as follows:

- School Block - Primary £4,715.89, an increase of £220.47 or 4.90% on last year
- School Block – Secondary £6,220.61, an increase of £297.38 or 5.02% on last year.
- High Needs Block - £4,665.18, an increase of 5p on last year.

The Schools Forum **NOTED** the above points.

6. Safety Valve Recovery Plan update – Celia Buxton:

(Two reports, one from a cancelled meeting and the updated July data)
Confidential report not to be shared outside of the forum membership.

Overall headlines:

CB advised that the LA are ~~or is predicted~~ **forecasting** to be operating this year within the in-year balance on a positive £1 million. The plan expected a £2 million positive in-year balance at the

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end of this financial year. The reason for the variation is due to a more significant inward migration of children. The forecast for pupil numbers over the duration of time was 1%. Growth in pupil numbers over the four years and a 1% growth in the last year. Calculating the additional pupils that increase the overall costs.

The LA has also put out £490,000 in SEND notional budget top-ups to schools. 30 schools that have more or greater than the national average proportion of pupils with the EHCP in their schools. The initial calculation used last October's census base when the LA was writing the plan, and one school met that costing £30,000. Due to this significant increase, the LA used the January census rather than the last October census, increasing the output into schools. The 30 schools received additional funding in their SEND notional budget.

CB advised that the report shared is a follow-up and outlined the actions taken by the LA. Moving forward, CB stated that there is an expectation that the high-needs block to increase given the increased population. So, this year, the LA have had to cope with the additional cost.

There has been a lot of ongoing procurement work around school services, with more to come. Different Headteacher groups are reviewing the system to bring support inclusion paper and the further development work needed there.

In terms of the proportion of children in the mainstream with an EHCP. The LA forecast was to be at around 36% by next January, currently, this is 33.8%, an increase. The LA went from 31.2% and is now seeing an increase, which is going in the right direction.

Development in the building and sufficiency. There is an additional temporary provision on the Royans site, pre-Bbeaches, for Primary SEMH, to recognise that the Bbeaches will come on board to start building that provision. The LA has also put an additional provision into Inspire SEMH school so they can still take the capacity needed in preparation for their larger free school.

Resource provisions in the selective schools: The LA have one planned and is waiting for the outcome of the Co-ed proposals so that another one can go in. There has been a significant increase in the number of young people with SEND needs, particularly with ASD, sitting the Medway test. A 70% increase in children (192) requiring special arrangements with SEND needs. This flow of children will fill some of those spaces and show a start to raise the aspiration of parents for those children so that they can access selective education.

CB noted that the second report highlighted the risks for each area.

Q – The £1 million we are missing now is due to top-ups, but it is also due to the increase of children to £600,000. Is that because of the significant number of SEND children coming into school, or are we educating more, which would come from the DSG?

A – We have seen a 1% increase in the pupil population since January, over and above forecast. The LA calculates those at the average cost per EHCP. Because the safety valve plan calculates an average cost per EHCP – This is £600,000 additional costs to the High Needs Block.

Q - 32 additional children are coming into Medway with EHCPs. How many children in general have increased across the population?

A - It is 1% from last year, and we have seen an increase in Gillingham and Chatham areas due to the NHS recruitment.

Q – Are we attracting a higher-than-normal amount of children with ECHPs?

A - We do not have this data yet, but the expectation is that this aligns with the general population, not mainly due to ECHPs.

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A forum member noted he was interested to see if this was due to the poor press around Kent and their provisions for EHCP children.

PC added that 70 additional pupils are arriving in primary per month. (2 years ago, this was 40) This was up until May. Since then, there has been a more significant increase in pupils entering the area. The population of SEND is unknown; however, many pupils are coming from Nigeria and Zimbabwe, as well as from London. They arrive without EHCPs, but they are then required. The NHS recruitment process is only a third into its drive, which could bring an additional 200 pupils.

**Q - Will the Notional SEND Policy be based in January this year or October?
I am conscious of the delay in getting the EHCP through.**

A - We aim to do this in January and would like to get the forum views.

MB added that all funding is based on the October census. However, mainstream schools are taking in extra pupils, and there is a backlog in the EHCP. As a Local Authority, we need to keep pace with the schools and base it on the January census, especially with this backlog. I must point out that it goes against the rest of the school funding.

The Schools forum agreed that it would be beneficial to use the January Census.

Q - Early Years: We see vast SEND levels across the sector. One of the questions was, as free entitlement frees up two-year-olds, will there be High Needs Support Funding because, currently, High Needs Funding is only for three and four?

The Government stated there are 15 free hours for two-year-old working parents in September, and the sector will likely see another big batch of two-year-olds. This increases in 2025 to 30 hours. The two-year-olds sector is seeing children with extremely complex SEND needs. EHCPs are taking nine to 12 months to get through, with paediatrician appointments ranging from 18 months to two years for a diagnosis. This limits access to specialised schools and the EHCPs. **Increasing support is required within this sector with no additional funding.**

A - Regarding the SENAS funding the top slice of 1%, I do not think it is confirmed yet whether that will be the same grant arrangements as there are for three to four-year-olds. What came out clearly from the consultation with schools is that the LA needs to do more work around the Early Years and Primary regarding the additional support, training, etc. The LA sent a paper called System for Inclusion outlining everything the LA has done with schools. I will forward that to you so you can look at the next steps, a working group will be arranged to look specifically at the support for Early Years.

A Schools forum member noted that the sector is severely underfunded, and the schools are also underfunded. The delay of the diagnoses is causing the sector to suspend children who they know will go into the mainstream with no support due to the significant delays.

**Q - Can Medway regularly publish the current timeframe you are working to?
This currently causes frustration within the schools.**

A - We are working on this. The EHCP backlog, the LA have doubled the panel being heard so that they are progressing quicker. There is now a fully staffed EP team, a new trainee, and assistant EPs. We are publishing advice to parents on public EP assessments, advising if they wish to do this, they need to go to those with the statutory requirements so that they can be used in the EHCP process. We are also bringing in an assessment team to address the backlog. The timeframe to clear this is April; we are currently on target. We aim to return to the 20-week timeframe and publish each phase's timeframes.

7. School Improvement Update - School Effectiveness Service - Rebecca Smith:

RS report explained that Medway Council shares the ambition to ensure that all children and young people receive a high standard of education locally that prepares them well for a

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successful future and that schools are rich, diverse communities that are inclusive of all children and young people. This includes a focus on supporting learners with special educational needs to be educated alongside their peers in their local schools.

The School Effectiveness Service receives £269k from the Schools Block. [De-delegation and central services schools block](#).

Function of the School Effectiveness Service:

The School Effectiveness Service works in partnership with education leaders, governing bodies, trusts, the Regional Director, the Department for Education and Ofsted to secure this ambition.

It also works alongside leaders to collaborate with wider stakeholders and supports strategic education partnerships within Medway and South East. The service fulfils the Council's statutory duties, broadly contained within the 1996 Education Act 13a, to promote high standards within education, permeating all aspects of the Council's plans. This educational excellence role is the responsibility of the Director of Children and Adult Services and the Lead Member for Children's Services, supported by the portfolio holder for Educational Attainment and Improvement.

The first strategic council plan priority, enabling all children to achieve their potential in education, is the driver for all work of the School Effectiveness Service. To achieve this priority, School Effectiveness works in partnership with the following strategic groups:

- Medway Education Partnership Group (MEPG)
- Medway headteacher associations (MELA & MSHA)
- The four primary zones
- SEND Partnership Board
- Medway Governor Association (MGA)
- Inclusive Education Oversight Group
- Medway Children's Safeguarding Partnership (MCSP)
- Medway Cultural Strategy
- Child-Friendly Medway
- Thames Gateway Teaching School Hub Partnership Board
- Medway and Swale HCP Children's Core 20 Plus 5 Board

Operational Role of the Service:

The School Effectiveness Service champions children's best interests by monitoring the performance of all Medway schools, whether academies, community schools, voluntary aided or controlled schools or free schools.

The service draws on the full range of information available to it, including quantitative performance data, national tests, examination results, inclusion data and Ofsted reports, and softer intelligence such as levels of complaints and compliments. There is a sharp focus on providing support for those identified as vulnerable or dealing with particularly challenging circumstances, whether as an individual pupil, group or whole school concern. Tracking is used to provide an evidence base for priorities and strategic planning.

Working within the context outlined above, School Effectiveness Service is:

- A strategic partner within MEPG identifying priorities based on various measures, broadly focusing on the Quality of Education, Leadership and Management, Inclusion and Health and Wellbeing.
- Responsible for coordinating intelligence and registering risk across the education service beyond school effectiveness, including attendance, inclusion, safeguarding, SEND, admissions, finance, governance, health and safety, human resources and property.

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- Responsible for the analysis of performance at key stages 2, 4 and 5, identifying strategic strengths and areas for development and communicating this to all stakeholders, ensuring a coherent message of performance is known to inform improvement planning.
- Responsible for quality assurance across a range of measures, responsible for the administration of statutory assessment through statutory briefings on delivering the phonic check and key stage two assessments, monitoring the administration of statutory assessment tests, and delivering moderation and the consensus of standards in reading, writing and mathematics against the key stage two teacher assessment framework.
- A developer of system leadership through the promotion of best practices within learning zones and online collaboration.
- A conduit for integrated working between schools and the Council. It promotes and engages schools with Council initiatives, including Child-Friendly Medway, Family and Schools Together: Healthy Eating programme, and Climate Change.
- The connection between schools and SACRE
- Responsible for the role of Local Authorities in the intervention of Schools Causing Concern for Local Authority Maintained Schools (in line with the July 2023 DfE guidance for Local Authorities and RDs)

Current School Effectiveness Service Priorities:

RS report noted that the School Effectiveness service builds an effective school-to-school support system based on collaboration and shared effort that supports schools to be increasingly autonomous and responsible for their improvement through:

- Strengthening locality-based working so that there is more coordinated and integrated work between schools, early years settings, post-16 providers, Early Help services, health, Social Care and other partners.
- Identifying the best-performing schools (Ofsted, attainment and progress) teachers and school leaders and use them across the System to develop and disseminate best practice.
- Promoting and supporting the use of Leaders of Education, National and Local and deploy them well to support improvement in other schools.
- Supporting governors to carry out their role effectively by becoming better informed about best practices, using data to plan for school improvement, keeping the performance of their schools under review, and taking prompt action where necessary.
- Promoting more effective partnerships, working with academy sponsors, academy trusts, employers, health commissioners, providers, and other key stakeholders to build capacity for system-wide improvements.
- Providing information and support for schools so that pupil outcomes across key stages improve, achievement gaps close for pupils on free school meals, children in care, young offenders and pupils with special educational needs and disabilities.
- Actively championing an Inclusive Education System
- Promoting and facilitating a smooth transition between education phases and into post-16 provision such that progression provides a route to skilled employment and higher learning.

School Effectiveness Statutory Duties:

Local authorities in England have a statutory duty to provide services to their communities. A complete list was shared with the Schools forum.

The report outlined that in addition to statutory duties placed upon Local Authorities, specific statutory duties are placed upon the Director of Children's Services and Lead members. The

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fulfilment of education duties is broadly addressed by and through the School Effectiveness Service.

Statutory guidance on the roles and responsibilities of the Director of Children's Services and the Lead Member for Children's Services For Local Authorities April 2013.

Section 25: Educational Excellence - working with headteachers, school governors, academy sponsors and principals, local authorities should promote educational excellence for all children and young people and be ambitious in tackling underperformance. More specifically, the Director of children's services and lead member should be in their respective roles:

- Take rapid and decisive action in relation to poorly performing schools, including using their intervention powers concerning maintained schools and considering alternative structural and operational solutions.
- Develop robust school improvement strategies, including choosing whether to offer such services in a competitive and open school improvement market, working beyond local authority boundaries.
- Promote high standards in education by supporting effective school-to-school collaboration and providing local leadership for tackling issues needing attention which cut across more than one school, such as poor performance in a particular subject area across a cluster of schools.
- Support maintained schools in delivering an appropriate National Curriculum and early years providers in meeting the requirements of the Early Years Foundation Stage (as outlined in the EYFS Statutory Framework)
- Establish a School forum for their area, maintain a scheme for financing-maintained schools and provide financial information
- Undertake specified responsibilities concerning staffing and governance of maintained schools.

The Schools Forum **NOTED** the update on the School Effectiveness Service report.

**Q – Will there be any conversation around this weird position where you have Local Authorities responsible for a small number of schools in an increasingly Academy world?
Has there been any conversation with the DfE on this?**

A - There was the White Paper, which shows the school improvement duties have been largely removed from the LA due to the Academy drive. The White Paper shows the breakdown of responsibilities of the LA, and it is a changing landscape.

RS noted that the LA is keen to illustrate it is working for and across all schools, as the landscape is very different. So, the LA must work with the **MELLOR-MELA** and MSHA Groups and the zones in response to what is most helpful and valuable across various services. The move from school improvement has changed immeasurably into that school effectiveness role.

8. Medway Test Arrangements & Review – Paul Clarke:

PC briefing report set out the rationale for considering the removal of the review process for the Medway Test and the amendment to the format of the testing papers. These proposals are considered with the proposal of three grammar schools to change to co-educational. The decision sits with the Regional Director, and the proposals are reconsidered in the autumn with determination early in 2024.

Proposal to the Remove Review Process:

The Medway Test and Admissions Services are paid from the central service schools block of the DSG. The 2023-24 budget for this service is £433,120, with the round one monitoring forecasting anticipating a small 0.02% overspend of c£8,000. The proposals in this briefing note will help balance the 2024-25 budget.

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The Medway Test process results in a pass mark of 23% of the Medway year cohort. There is also an allowance for another 2% to be admitted via the academic review process.

The review process is parent-led and provides the opportunity to have academic work reviewed by the panel where a pupil has not reached the pass mark of that year's Medway test. The pass mark will fluctuate dependent upon the number of the Medway cohort, although the fluctuations are relatively small year by year. Schools must then provide schoolwork for that child on an agreed range of subjects.

The review panel comprises 12 panels comprising a grammar school teacher and a primary head/SLT, so it is a significant upheaval for schools to release staff for the day.

PC report noted that generally, only a small number of pupils are successful at the panel review, and last year, the 15 pupils who were granted a pass at review, out of 200+ who went through the review process, equated to less than 0.5% of the cohort. This means that of the 2% of places left available for the review process, the remaining 1.5%+ of spaces were available to be taken up by out-of-area pupils.

Rationale for Proposal to the Remove Review Process:

The proposal to remove the review from the process has been discussed in workshops with headteachers, including all grammar school heads. Unanimously, they felt the review process was unfit for purpose and outdated and that there had to be a better, more efficient way of determining the pupils who achieved a pass mark. Some of the views of the workshop were:

- The review relies on the attitude of primary schools, which can be unsupportive.
- Biased depending on the support or not of the primary school.
- The process is unfit for purpose.
- The process is not statutory.
- The preference is to use 25% of the cohort for pass marks.

Another option was to rely upon the primary school headteacher to recommend whether the pupil should be considered for grammar school instead of the review.

- Our grammar schools do not support the HT recommendation process.
- Schoolwork does not always reflect the HT recommendation.
- Disadvantages a child at appeal if they have gone through the review process – heard as an assessment appeal only.
- Grammars would rather see parents appeal to a grammar school and sit a CAT test in the casual admissions process.
- SEN equalities - school work does not necessarily demonstrate cognitive ability.

Risk and Consideration:

This focuses on Medway children to enable more significant numbers to be admitted into Medway schools ahead of out-of-area children.

Three things may cause issues, though:

- Sibling links from out-of-area families
- Some Kent children will live closer to some grammar schools than some Medway children.
- Some Medway families will avoid certain schools due to preference.
- About 190 out of area children get into our grammar schools each year. The LA would need to factor a certain % of those in still, i.e., those for whom Medway secondary schools are their closest.

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- Many more out-of-area children will be assessed for grammar through the increased cut-off %, but would not necessarily acquire a place due to the school's admissions criteria.
- If you look at the boy/girl split at 25%, - it will be very close to the limit for boys. The LA would potentially need more boy's places. (This will be addressed if the co-ed proposal is approved, and the % could increase further.)

Recommendation:

PC report stated that the LA recommendation is to remove the review process from the Test and increase the pass mark to include up to a maximum of 25% of the cohort, dependent upon the cohort size and to be determined annually at the point of the admissions consultation, which takes place each autumn. This will result in more Medway pupils achieving a pass mark, likely including those who miss out and the small number currently thriving in the review process.

It is expected that should this change take effect, around 80 additional Medway pupils will become eligible for a grammar school place, reducing the number of out-of-area pupils able to acquire a place.

Next Steps:

There is a need to consult on the change, which will be included in the admissions consultation in the autumn. The proposed date to commence the change would be for the 2024 test (2025 intake)

Implications:

The removal of the review process would reduce costs by approximately £10,000, which is the cost of hiring the venue, staffing release costs, refreshments, and internal staffing costs, as well as reducing the burden on schools to provide work in such a short turnaround, deliver the work to Gun Wharf and remove the pressure on schools when releasing staff for the day.

The change would then enable parents whose child did not pass the Test to appeal directly to the school and take a CAT test. In contrast, they can only appeal to the Independent Appeals Panel at the school without any schoolwork considered if they fail at the review.

Q - I do not understand how that means more Medway children and fewer out-of-area children?

A - The arrangement currently creates a disparity between girl's and boy's places. We must set the Medway test pass to enable the LA to fill boy places, leaving many girl's places spare. Quite often, the school will have a large gap on offer day, so consequently, those out of area places are taken by out-of-area girls coming in, particularly from distant North Kent and London areas. Taking away that 2% will feed into the overall pass mark, which will effectively be reduced. It is based on the number of Medway pupils in the cohort, not the number of pupils taking the test. This will result in an extra 80 Medway pupils being able to access the grammar schools.

Q - Would you still have the issue of a disparity between the boy's and girls' places?

Are you still going to have more girl's places than boys?

A - Yes, but that 2% between the 23 and 25 includes that disparity. So, this will bring that disparity into the overall and remove that 2% from girls being taken on appeal.

Q - If we were at 23% passing the Test and a potential of 2% going through the review and getting only 0.5%, we have 1.5 % left over. We are now going to a place where we have 25%, and then, on top of that, you will have those going to appeal, of which there is always a number. Does that not mean there will be more children in Medway who will split the school? In other words, 27% or 28% of children will be selective either through the test 25% or the appeals process?

A - It could be potentially. The appeal is always done directly with the schools. The expectation is schools are full at the point of admission, so at the point of appeal, the number of places that

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schools will have available will be less. Some PANs are set at less than they are expecting to take due to expecting to take children on appeal.

A Schools forum member noted that some schools have PANs set, knowing that children will get through on appeal – to manage appeals.

It was noted that this percentage is likely to fluctuate, so there may be a need to consult annually.

Q – Is this a change to local policy? The conservative position always wanted to stick with 25%, no matter how the population would change. So, are we getting a sense that this has changed? Is there a realisation that as the population rises, the proportion of going through Grammar School will decline because of the totality of places, and we cannot build new grammar schools?

A - I think it is inevitable that the LA have spoken to the new members about their views of Grammar Schools and selective systems. They have a saying: Carry on as you are, with no change. Inevitably at some point, the percentage will have to decrease as numbers ~~liberalise~~ rise significantly.

Proposal to Remove and Replace the Writing Test from the Medway Test:

PC explained that the test currently comprises three tests (a writing test, which is longhand, and mathematics with non-verbal reasoning, and verbal skills tests, which are multiple choice) Grammar School Headteachers generally favour replacing the writing test with an English test, which includes grammar, spelling, comprehension, vocabulary and punctuation.

The proposal also includes creating three multiple-choice tests: the English Test (replacing the Writing test), the individual mathematics test, and a joint non-verbal and verbal reasoning skills test. This will ensure that pupils are tested on a wide range of skills whilst continuing to ensure that the Test provides appropriate outcomes for pupils.

Implications:

The overall test day will remain the same length. The outcome will be a process which will test pupils across a broader range of skills and be fairer as the writing test can be subjectively marked and does not suit all pupil's abilities.

Benefits to End User (i.e., pupil sitting a replacement writing test and grammar school entry):

- Aspects of English will be assessed in a more controlled context, i.e., the test provider trialled and standardised questions.
- Not asking pupils to write a cold task is rarely used in classroom practice.
- The pupil is not affected by the length of each existing test paper because the test duration of the English, Maths NVR and Verbal Skills tests stay the same, at around 1 hour each.
- There is no change in the number of tests for the pupil to sit.
- Removes subjective marking and, therefore, inconsistencies in marking regardless of moderation.

Benefits to Medway Council, School Services for Replacing the Writing Test:

- Provides testing consistency because the provider will provide all test papers/assessments. This improves the inflexibility of the existing Test should the LA experience government restrictions, e.g., lockdowns, pupil bubbles and service strikes.
- The test provider supplies the English Test to reduce time and resources for Medway.
- Significant resource, expertise, marking and trainer time saved on a Moderator and Lead Marker.
- The creative element of the writing test would be lost. However, the transcriptional skills would be assessed by introducing an English test.

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- Removes the limitations on question setting. Only so many questions can be set per test season.
- Balances out the subjects being assessed and the perception that the Medway Test favoured English skills (this was balanced out by weighting).
- Counteracts any perceptions of the topic and gender bias in the current writing test.
- In previous years, pupils scoring low marks on the writing test have been deemed grammar, which questions the assessment value the Test brings to the process.
- Reduces the risk of the writing question being shared with pupils taking the Test at a later date. (Increasing numbers of pupils have been caught answering the task from a previous day's Test – indicating a level of cheating.) despite the questions being different on each test day, which may also disadvantage some pupils, who may have performed better on a different question.

Challenges to Medway Council, School Services for Keeping the Writing Test:

- An increasing number of pupils registering for the Test makes marking and moderating scripts more challenging.
- Difficulties recruiting more markers and, in turn, the number of scripts each marker must mark.
- The timeframe in which an increasing number of scripts are collected, marked, returned, moderated, and marks submitted to the test provider has been reduced (2 days) by the test provider.
- Increasing the number of markers increases the number of moderated test scripts.

Recommendation:

The recommendation is to agree to consult upon the change to the Test to replace the writing test with an English test and create a test of three multiple-choice papers.

Next Steps:

There is a need to consult on the change included in the admissions consultation in the autumn. The proposed date to commence the change would be for the 2024 test (2025 intake).

The Schools forum **NOTED** the proposed changes to the Medway Test ahead of these proposals being taken through formal decision-making Medway Council governance, which will follow a formal consultation.

9. School Place Planning & Growth Funding Forecasts (including Inward Migration) – Paul Clarke:

PC advised that the briefing document sets out the recent, unexpected and unforeseen influx of school-age children and young people into Medway and the impact that has had on school place availability. The briefing provides data and charts highlighting the issue. We are advised that the rise in families is due to a recruitment drive at the hospital, hence why central Gillingham and Chatham are the main areas of inward movement.

As this surge was not planned, the LA have investigated and now have contacts at the NHS to liaise with over their recruitment status. Their recruitment programme is only around a third of the way through, and we are expected to continue to see this impact throughout the academic year to July 2024 and likely beyond.

Inward Migration and Place Availability:

Annual pupil censuses are taken in October and January each year. These are used to gauge the availability and sufficiency of school places compared to forecasted numbers.

Primary:

Between 2016 and 2022, there was an average increase of 24 pupils per month between the October and January census.

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The level of net migration was falling from 2016 to 2019 before being heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Migration since 2020 has risen unexpectedly and continued to do so. Despite falling birth rates, many other local authorities are reporting falling primary rolls and are considering closing primary schools now.

Between January 2023 and July 2023, an average increase of 74 pupils per month has increased. This has rapidly reduced the number of free places available in some year groups in areas of Medway.

Migration caused by new housing is accounted for in forecasts, and these movements exceed what was reasonably expected. Medway has free places available, but these are not in the concentrated demand areas.

There has been significant inward migration from African countries, particularly Nigeria and Zimbabwe, as well as from London.

The areas which are most affected are Gillingham and Chatham. Gillingham has seen 171 free places in October 2022, reduced to 42 places in July 2023. Only Year 1 has any free places. Chatham has seen free places fall in all year groups, but the shortage is particularly in Year 3 to Year 6. This means that schools are going over their published admission number (PAN).

It will require additional capacity in bulge classes or temporary expansions to sustain the expected continued increase in pupil numbers.

Secondary:

Secondary places have also been affected by inward migration. Between October 2022 and January 2023, there was a net increase of 5 pupils in non-selective schools from Year 7 to 11. Between January 2023 and July 2023, there was a net increase of 210 pupils.

Before 2020, there was a net decrease in secondary non-selective pupils between the October and January school censuses. From 2021, there has been a net increase. This net increase was only in Year 7 in 2021 and Years 7 and 8 in 2022. This was in line with increasing primary cohorts coming into secondary schools. However, the increase in 2023 from January to July has been across all year groups.

Conclusion

In both primary and secondary, places are at a premium, and when coupled with the fact that schools are at or over capacity, the longer-term problem becomes evident. It is not possible or feasible for place demand to be met within existing capacity if rates of inward migration continue at current rates, which will burden an already pressurised situation.

The answer is to create bulge classes for certain year groups across both phases to ease demand, which is on top of planned expansions and bulge classes proposed to meet expected demand levels.

The basic need funding available is allocated to projects already in the programme to help meet current and future known demand, and therefore, further additional places will be required, with significant capital funding to provide the extra capacity.

Mitigation:

To mitigate the impact of increased demand from forecasts prior to the recent surge, the following new provisions and bulge classes have been approved and factored into growth funding requests for the academic year 2023-24.

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Primary:

- Hundred of Hoo Primary increase to 2FE, from reception initially growing year on year.
- Rochester Riverside Primary School is opening as a 2FE school from reception and growing yearly.

Secondary:

- Year 7 Bulge classes at Robert Napier, Leigh Academy Rainham, Strood Academy, Hundred of Hoo Academy and St John Fisher.
- Year 9 bulge class at Waterfront UTC.
- The 2023 annual review of the School Place Planning Strategy, presented to the cabinet on 26th September 2023, sets out the bulge class requirement in secondary school until 2029, which will be reflected within the growth funding request at the appropriate time. For the 2024-25 academic year, the LA expect Year 7 bulge classes at Robert Napier, Hundred of Hoo and two bulge classes at Maritime Academy when it moves into its new premises. A further additional one will be required, and discussions with schools are ongoing to determine where that might be.

Conclusion:

As a result of the recent surge in numbers (and the LA has a further 74 primary requests for September, of which 52 are in central Gillingham), the above solutions to meet known demand within the forecasts will not be sufficient in the short to medium term. Whilst the LA can plan for additional capacity in 2024-25, additional capacity is required now for this academic year, and it is recommended that growth funding is provided to enable bulge classes in primary and secondary for the current academic year to meet demand from the extra and significant ongoing inward migration.

Discussions are underway, subject to that funding, with schools regarding who can facilitate a bulge class. One school is not expected to admit bulge classes across all or several year groups, but the burden will be shared across the schools in the areas most affected. Gillingham and Chatham (NHS recruitment) Hoo village (developments and military family inward movement).

Additional Funding Request:

The proposal below represents a request for the maximum amount of funding, costing a maximum additional £2m over and above our growth fund allocation in 2024/25. It must be taken from the main school funding pot as a standard. Discussions are ongoing with the LA ESFA representative regarding this additional pressure to seek additional funding.

The request, therefore, is for funding for one bulge class per year group for 30 pupils per class for years 1 to 5 in Gillingham initially, but Chatham, if no capacity is available in Gillingham, and additional funding for Hundred of Hoo Academy to admit a bulge class per year group for years 1 to 4. A total of nine primary classes.

Additional funding for a bulge class at the secondary phase for academic year 2023-24 for Years 8 and 9 to meet the demand despite bulge classes already being in place in those year groups.

By not agreeing to funding, a number of schools, particularly in the Gillingham area, will be significantly over PAN in most year groups. Admitting further pupils over PAN to meet demand from inward migration would overburden schools.

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It is expected that any bulge classes will be implemented from January so that suitable recruitment can take place and any physical work required undertaken.

Q – Growth in Primary across Gillingham – I am unaware of a massive amount of house building. So, all the families are moving out, and then families are moving in; there must be a point where there are no houses to move into?

A - Most of the addresses are not new builds, and people of moving into established housing. There is often more than one family sharing a house, where they have come from abroad. They may settle and move into their own houses, and this may also be due to the NHS recruitment drives.

Q – The assumption you are making is this increase will continue going forward? Or are you assuming that there will be no more houses available?

A- There will be an impact for another year with NHS recruitment. This is why we are talking about bulge classes.

Q – The Secondary table - Is that comparing PAN with how many places are available originally or with the bulge classes included?

A – It includes all the bulge classes and the agreed intake number.

Q – Funding the school's budget – Do we get this back in full the following year or take it from the schools and never get it back?

A - It is a mixture of both. The Growth Funding Policy is more generous than the National Growth Funding Policy. The LA top slices the lump sum part of the funding formula and takes about £240,000 off. So approximately, the growth fund allocation is about £2 million per year; currently, the LA are paying out about £2.5 million. However, next year's growth fund allocation is all tied up and has already been spent with the new classes, as discussed. So, this is [an extra £2 million on top of the £2 million for growth ss-funding meaning our growth fund pot for 2024-25 will be c£4.5million against a growth funding allocation of c£2million](#). This means the need to top slicing even more from the school block. I have a meeting on Friday to discuss this with the [ESFPA](#) because these numbers are concerning.

Q – This will start impacting the funding the LA can give the other 100 schools. We have all agreed that we will be slightly more generous in the proportions and parameters of a slightly bigger class, but this doubles.

A – Yes [if agreed, this additional cost would have to reduce the funding available for the funding formula-](#)

Q -- The Growth Policy came to the Schools forum, and the LA went away to amend it. This has not come back. Why is this?

A -- This is the first meeting since it came back, and it will be on the next agenda when the LA has consulted with schools. However, this new bulge class issue will probably mean it must be rewritten [to be more inline with national](#).

Q - Will the fall in role policy also be in the same cycle?

A - Yes, it will.

Q - Regarding which schools are selected or negotiated with for the bulge classes. What is the transparency around this and a formal process? Or is the LA reaching out to contacts and negotiating?

A - The LA discusses planning the timescales with the schools. The school place planning strategy is going to the cabinet on the 26th of September. It has a seven-year plan for secondary bulge classes and expansions that the LA have discussed and agreed upon with various schools and trusts. This situation is a sudden surge that needs to be addressed relatively quickly. So, the LA has reached out generally to those schools in Gillingham who can. Some have said they can

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subject to funding, and others cannot. If LA cannot satisfy Gillingham's demand, it would look to Chatham. The LA have not started discussing Chatham schools yet.

Q – Will the NHS recruitment from abroad also affect EAL and SEND numbers in schools?

A - Yes, this is likely.

It was noted that the LA are mindful of Kent's current unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. These children need to find homes. The LA is expected to take approximately 65 children. Due to the number of arrivals, Kent has to find homes for children previously accommodated with hotels via the Home Office, causing an awful lot of pressure. Medway and other local authorities must take ~~above~~ their quota for the National Transfer Scheme.

Q - We are talking about the bulge classes from January. All the budget for this year has been spent, allocated, and given.

How is the LA finding funding until March and then till September for academies?

Where is the funding coming from?

A - If agreed, funding will go over two financial years because the children will not be in place for the October census. Therefore, the LA will have to fund them for the next financial year, the current financial year and partly into the next financial year for academies because they go to September. This is the approximate cost of the £2 million. Based on what we know now, that means a reduction of £20,000 from the lump sum to afford it. The LA have a meeting with the ESFA on Friday to see if they will be willing to fund any of it. However, there is a potential to have a workaround. As part of the funding formula, I had to move on a lump sum of 10% towards the national funding formula. I have to do that, but I could also, for example, freeze the lump sum at the current rate, which gives you 10% or £10,000 this year and £10,000 pounds on next year's funding to do that.

Q – You spoke about several free schools, particularly around secondaries. I wondered if that was still the case. Is the local authority looking at the need for additional schools, and what is the timeline around that if you were?

A – There are many elements to the place planning process. The LA was expecting to have the local plan before now but is back to consultation, which will take another year. There was a plan around this where the LA would know the number of free schools, new schools, expansions and pre-schools needed for the LA's longer-term planning. The LA do think that numbers will plateau. The LA need to get to that point over a few years. That is why there is a seven-year plan in the school place planning strategy, which has all the various expansions and bolt classes for secondary. This was not done for primary because it was not necessary then. It is only the recent pressure on places, but this will level out again due to NHS people coming in. So, the ONS forecast for birth will continue to drop, and the LA forecast of birth is a drop. I suspect a certain amount will be off with inward migration from housing. This is all factored into the forecast for the future, and the school place planning strategy sets that out.

Q - Is there anything more Medway Council can do to protect school budgets in terms of incentivising people to move into those areas where there are school places? And equally, could the Council fund the shortfall instead of it coming from the existing school budget?

A - The answer to the first one is no - people can move where they want. So, if they can find a house, we cannot expect them to move to areas. The second question, there is no appetite to do this because of the financial problems faced by the LA.

Q – What is the minimum the LA can get away with? So, you are asking for nine classes as part of this report, and what do you need immediately? The nine classes cost £2 million, so what is the minimum you need?

A – I have asked for nine primary classes and two secondary ones. Do the secondary ones as a minimum, and we would probably need a minimum of three in Gillingham.

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Q – Will you have to provide mobile classrooms, and is this part of the £2 million?

A - Ideally not; we have spoken to schools on how they can manage with the current capacity. This is not part of the £2million.

Q – Could you pass children on further afield?

A - We could, but that is not ideal. The families do not support this.

Decision - The Schools forum voted and agreed on requesting Additional Funding to support this work, as described in the report.

PJ proposed, and BF seconded the proposal to accept. All relevant members voted and agreed.

10. **Funding Formula Arrangements 2024-25 – Maria Beaney:**

MB noted that The Education and Skills Funding Agency published the National Funding Formula (NFF) operational guidance in July. The LA must engage in open and transparent consultation with all maintained schools, academies and free schools in the area and with its Schools forum about any proposed changes to the funding formula, including the methodology, principles and rules adopted.

The Schools forum must approve expenditures funded from the Schools Block of the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) even if the expenditure has been approved by the Schools forum in previous years, as well as the central services Schools Block of the DSG. The proposed 2024-2025 School and Academy funding formula timetable was shared.

2024-25 National Funding Formula (NFF):

The school's NFF determines the total funding allocation Medway Council will receive to distribute core funding for pupils in mainstream schools. Under the current strategy, LA's can set their local funding formulae (LFF) to distribute the funding it receives across maintained schools and academies in their area – subject to certain constraints. The funding formula is made up of 14 factors.

The NFF also offers two minimum funding guarantees:

1. The minimum per pupil level (MPPL) guarantees a minimum amount of funding for every pupil.
2. The minimum funding floor guarantee (MFFG) ensures that a school's funding is protected year-on-year, i.e., all schools attract a minimum uplift of 0.5% to their pupil-led funding on a per-pupil level.

For 2024-25, the MPPL unit values are £4,655 for Primary, £5,824 for KS3 and £6,389 for KS4. For a secondary school, a weighted average is used for all year groups, i.e., the minimum funding is £6,050.

The 2024-25 MFFG ensures that all schools attract an increase of at least a 0.5% increase in pupil-led funding per pupil basis compared to 2023-24. However, as part of our LFF, we can still set the MFFG between 0% and 0.5%.

The split sites factor targets extra funding to schools operating across multiple sites. Schools receive a £54,300 lump sum payment for each of their additional eligible sites, up to a maximum of three additional sites. Schools whose sites are separated by more than 100 meters may receive distance funding. The distance funding varies depending on how far apart the sites are, up to a maximum of £27,100 for sites at least 500 metres away from the main site. This is a new calculation method, and MB stated this must be introduced as part of our LFF.

Since the introduction of the NFF, LA has been able to operate a falling rolls fund to support

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schools which see a short-term fall in the number of pupils on roll. For the first time, in 2024-25, funding will be allocated to LAs based on falling rolls and growth. It will be based on the movement between the primary and secondary numbers on a roll from the most recent October census, compared to the census in the previous October. There must be a minimum 10% reduction movement. The LA will continue having discretion over operating a falling rolls fund. If the LA do, it can only provide funding where the 2022 school capacity data (SCAP) shows that school places will be required in the subsequent three to five years and the requirement to be a "good" or "outstanding" school has been removed. Medway does not have a falling rolls fund but a school in financial difficulties fund, as discussed in May 2023.

MB noted that the NFF operates on a lagged funding basis whereby schools receive funding in any given year based on pupil numbers from the year before. In addition to the core school funding, also provided a growth fund allocation to manage increases in pupil numbers before the lagged funding system has caught up.

Growth funding is distributed based on the movement between primary and secondary numbers on roll from the most recent October census, compared to the census in the previous October. Growth funds can only be used to:

- Support growth in pre-16 pupil numbers to meet basic needs.
- Support additional classes needed to meet the infant class size regulation.
- Meet the revenue cost of new schools.
- Cannot be used to pay schools for being popular or oversubscribed.

From 2024-25 onwards, LA will need to provide growth funding where a school or academy has agreed to provide an extra class to meet basic needs in the area (either as a bulge class or as an ongoing commitment) through the formula with funding of at least £1,550 for Primary and £2,320 for Secondary. The formula is Growth Factor value * Number of Pupils. There is no change to the methodology for Medway. [Medway pay £55,000 for a primary class and £125,000 for a secondary class.](#)

In 2023-24, Medway continued to mirror the NFF with the only element ([the lump sum](#)) not set at the NFF level ~~was the lump sum~~, which was reduced to compensate for the additional funding paid to support Medway's Growth Fund and the Schools in Financial Difficulty due to PAN class size management Policies which continue to outstrip the funding provided.

Medway's Proposed 2024-25 Local Funding Formula (LFF):

MB stated as in previous years, LAs can set an LFF. However, the LA must move at least 10% closer to the NFF.

The proposed 2024-25 LFF is similar to the formula used in 2023-24; however, we plan to introduce some changes:

- Unit values have been increased as set out in Appendix 2.
- They are based on the most up-to-date school and pupil characteristics data but are always subject to change in December.
- In calculating low prior attainment proportions, data from the 2022 early years foundation stage profile (EYFSP) and the 2022 key stage 2 (KS2) tests are used as a proxy for the 2021 assessments, which were cancelled due to the pandemic. 2019 data continues to be used as a proxy for the missing 2020 assessments.
- The LA must introduce the formularised split sites factor and mirror the NFF, replacing the previous locally determined optional funding.

Once again, it is proposed that Medway continues to mirror the NFF, with the lump sum being the only element not set at the NFF level.

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Decision – The School forum relevant members voted to APPROVE the adoption of the proposed timetable in 2.1 and Appendix 1.

SUPPORT the Council's request to mirror the NFF rates wherever possible in Appendix 2.

SUPPORT the Council's proposals on the consultation with schools and academies as outlined above and use the rates in Appendix 2 as part of the consultation.

Proposer BF and Seconder SG.

Next Steps:

Medway will now consult with all Schools and Academies about the options outlined in this report and report back to the Schools forum.

An e-mail will be sent to all Headteachers, governors and school finance officers for both Schools and Academies, inviting them to offer a consultation response.

11. Funding Support Business Cases – Standard Item:

No cases to review.

12. Membership Update – Sarah Phillipson:

SP recommended altering the membership to allow individual consideration for a candidate's membership in the forum, even if two individuals have links to the same Trust. This is due to the increasing issue around membership, the number of vacancies currently held, and the reduced available candidates. The proposal is to remove this clause.

A Schools forum member stated he would be happy to agree if it was not on an employee level within the same organisation, such as a CEO and a Headteacher.

SP noted that it tended to be on the Governance level, not employee level. SP will invite all schools and provisions to ask for nominations.

Decision - The Schools forum members voted and agreed to remove the clause regarding two members of the same Trust, providing the two members are not at the same employment level.

13. AOB:

MB noted there should have been round one central monitoring at this meeting, but due to the full agenda, it was agreed to push this to the next meeting. However, the next meeting has round two monitoring on it.

MB requested to only present the round two monitoring at the next meeting.

Decision – The School forum members agreed to share the round two monitoring information at the next meeting and for MB not to present round one monitoring.

The meeting closed at 4 pm

Signed by (Chair) Date: