



f40 Executive Committee Meeting

Wednesday, September 16, 2020 – Conference Call

1. Attendances, apologies, and changes to committee membership

Present: Cllr James McInnes (Chair); Karen Westcott (Secretary); Emily Proffitt (Staffs headteacher); Margaret Judd (Dorset Council); Cllr Peter Downes (Cambs Schools Forum); Jackie Smith (CEO Brunel SEN MAT & Uplands Educational Trust); Andrew Minall (Hampshire CC); Julia Harnden (ASCL); Cllr Richard Long (Kent CC); Steven Edmonds (NGA); Phil Haslett (Glos CC); Christine Atkinson (East Riding of Yorkshire); Cllr Mary Evans (Suffolk CC); Richard Soper (Worc Community Trust).

Apologies: Carole Thomson (Oxfordshire Schools Forum); Cllr Alex Dale (Derbyshire CC); Matt Western (Labour MP); Howard Emmett (North Yorks CC); Judy Shaw (NAHT); Deborah Myers (East Riding of Yorkshire); Cllr Bob Standley (East Sussex CC).

2. Minutes of the meeting held on 9 July 2020

The minutes were **APPROVED** as a correct record of the meeting.

3. Letter to the DfE re Covid-19 and the impact on education

Members said the letter to the DfE was welcome and they believed follow up letters should be sent as the Covid-19 situation evolved and the impact on schools changed.

It was agreed that a second letter should be sent to the DfE with an update on funding and Coronavirus issues. MJ, AM and KW to write the letter and then circulate it to members.

4. Update on the latest position

- a. All pupils return to school

It was agreed that schools had done remarkably well to be ready for the return of all pupils in September.

PH said they were facing many issues now due to the number of coronavirus cases increasing, and they should have some recognition from the DfE that the delay in testing and lack of guidance was impacting on them.

He said it was very difficult for schools to deal with both teachers and pupils being away from school while they waited prolonged periods for tests. In many cases, people tested negative and so would be able to get back to the classroom, but without tests they were having to stay at home unnecessarily.

EP agreed. She said, as a headteacher, it was very stressful at the moment. She said she was taking numerous phone calls every day from parents wondering whether their children had colds or coronavirus. She said she was not qualified to diagnose anyone.

The lack of available tests had also proven to be a problem at her school, with one parent being asked to travel from Staffordshire to Inverness to get their child tested.

JS said the lack of testing was proving an issue within her academy trust for children with special needs. She said a number of her staff were unable to work because they were isolating and were awaiting tests.

She said there were also added complications because there were huge variances in what different areas were doing to operate around Covid. JS said her trust straddled two different local authority areas, which made matters confusing.

ME said the implications of the pandemic was akin to a financial domino trail – the knock-on effect to other areas was huge. She said there was capacity to test people, but not to process the test results in a lab.

Members said they had all seen a good return to school in September, which was promising. Many said in their areas there had been around a 90% return to class.

b. Budgets and extra costs

JS said the lack of testing was proving an issue within her academy trust for children with special needs. She said a number of her staff were unable to work because their own children had been sent home from their schools with suspected cases, and they were awaiting tests.

As a result, she said she was having to use supply teachers far more than usual, and she had concerns that her teaching costs would be astronomical this year. If they could get tests quicker, they would be able to return to work sooner if they received a negative result.

ME said the implications of the pandemic was like a financial domino trail – the knock-on effect to other areas was huge. She said they had been told there was capacity to test people, but not to run the test results in a lab.

AM said he believed the DfE should support schools on an ongoing basis with Covid. He said he didn't believe this was a situation where the DfE could draw a line in the sand with regards to giving support around extra Covid costs.

PH said he believed the only way schools would get additional staff costs back was by demonstrating the contrast between what they spent last year on staffing, and what they have spent during the pandemic.

AM said it was important that f40 stuck to funding issues when it corresponded with the DfE, as that was the group's remit.

JMcl agreed but said any issues that impacted on school and education budgets should be included, especially where they were seen as directly causing additional funding problems.

He said the lack of testing was an example of this. He said if people were able to get tested more quickly, those with negative results would be back to the classroom immediately, thus removing the need for prolonged use of supply teachers. He said schools needed to be supplied with more testing kits.

He said it was also about confidence of parents, that their children were safe at school. He believed parents' confidence was plummeting. He said the lack of testing was driving both a confidence issue and a staffing and costs issue in schools.

MJ said f40 needed to write a new letter that reiterated the need for additional funds for schools, and highlighted the factors driving them.

SE said he believed the test and trace system was not fit for purpose.

EP said she had also been forced to spend more on teaching resources as the current social distancing guidelines meant children could not share learning equipment and resources, as in the past.

c. School transport

PH said in Gloucestershire they were just coping with regards schools transport. However, he said they didn't know yet what the costs would be for the whole year. He said a rise in costs was expected, but the details were difficult to pin down at present.

AM said in Hampshire the school transport system around Covid was working sufficiently, but it had taken a few days for issues to be ironed out initially.

JMcl said in Devon it was costing the authority an additional £100,000 to pay for school transport measures during Covid – over and above the extra funding it had received from Government to help pay for it.

He said the additional funds from the DfE were only made available up to the October half-term, and he believed more assurances were needed that extra financial support would be provided after that time. He said he believed each authority would need additional money for school transport until May of next year.

JS said it was not just about the cost of school transport. She had concerns about the parameters of it, too. She said children were mixing on school buses, but then going into different support bubbles once they arrived at school. She said at her academy trust they were not involved in who children mixed with on buses.

RL said so far, the additional funding for school transport had been sufficient in Kent, but as more and more children went back to school, it may not be enough. He said they faced the possibility of not taking any more applications for subsidised travel passes in the future.

MJ said in Dorset they were trying to create seating plans for transport to ensure children remained in their school bubbles whilst going to and from school.

EP said in Staffordshire there were also seating plans on the buses to match school bubbles.

ME said in Suffolk they were coping with the numbers and had extra mini-buses on standby in case demand increased.

d. Other issues/challenges

ME said following the return of school in September, Suffolk CC had seen an increase in the number of parents choosing Elective Home Education (EHE).

JMcl said in Devon there had also been a spike in the number of parents choosing to home school their children.

PH said the same spike had been seen in Gloucestershire, and JH said it was an emerging issue across the country.

PH said he believed that children taken out of school to be home schooled, and then brought back into the system later on, may have greater learning needs that the school would need to meet.

And he said despite efforts by the council and the schools to meet short-term special educational needs, they were still seeing a greater number of Education and Health Care Plan (EHCP) applications coming in than they normally would have at this time of year.

JMcl said in Devon, the same pattern was emerging, with EHCP applications continuing to rise. He said the Higher Needs Block deficit budget was a major problem.

He said in the next letter to the DfE, the importance of the SEND review resumption should be voiced.

JH said she believed the strict criteria for schools to claim additional costs between March and July meant not all of the available funding had been claimed, so money remained in the Covid support budget. She hoped the remaining budget would be carried over to assist schools during the autumn term.

She said she believed 14,000 schools had already made a claim to the DfE to recoup extra Covid costs.

JH said the rise in children being home schooled had raised concerns. She said children taken out of school now would not be included in the School Census in October, which counts pupil numbers and helps calculate funding for schools next year.

If some of those children are then brought back into the school system next year, funding for them will not have been included in school budgets. In these cases, schools would have to make their funds stretch.

SE said he had heard that Education Secretary Gavin Williamson had informed the Education Select Committee that the review on SEND would be delayed until 2021.

JS said there were many pressures on the SEND system, and the money needed to go to the right people and places.

JMcl said the letter to the DfE should include evidence on the growing pressure on the SEND sector and the increasing demand for EHCPs due to Covid.

PH said the DfE needed to separate the High Needs issues into two separate areas; sustainable funding for the future and the treatment of the current deficit budgets.

Action: It was agreed that a second letter would be sent to the DfE outlining current funding pressures on schools and the ongoing impact of the pandemic. The letter will include:

- The need for additional funding for schools to cover extra costs – including extraordinary costs
- The lack of testing for teachers and pupils
- Impact on staffing costs
- School transport costs
- The rising number of EHCP applications
- The need for the SEND review to resume
- Issues around growing HNB deficit budgets

5. SEND review

KW said she had contacted Tony McArdle, chair of the SEND Leadership Board and an independent adviser to the SEND review, to find out when it was resuming. She said she was still awaiting a response and would prompt him again.

6. f40 SEND stats

MJ updated members on the SEND statistics f40 was collecting. She said it had been decided that every local authority in England should now be asked to contribute, rather than just the 42 f40 members, so a fuller picture could be created of the SEND funding issue.

Additional questions and detail is also being included in the survey to enable greater comparisons to be drawn. The data from the survey will be used by f40 in the campaign for greater SEND funding and an overhaul of the SEND system.

MJ said she would send the draft form to members of the Executive for their feedback and suggested amends.

JH said it was important that the statistics were used appropriately by the DfE, and not simply used to determine how little SEND funding each local authority could manage on.

She said moving towards a hard funding formula for SEND was not going to happen overnight, and there was still an opportunity to make the funding system work more effectively.

JMcl said the survey needed to be as simple as possible to encourage people to complete it.

PD said he had no idea how local authorities were going to pay off their High Needs deficit budgets, especially those authorities that were earmarked to merge with others during the local government restructure. He said he believed the DfE had put its head in the sand over the issue.

JMcl said his fear was that the DfE looked at what the average deficit budget was, and only offered to pay off that amount for each local authority – with the council being left to pay off the rest of their SEND deficit.

Action: MJ to work with KW and the DTW team to get the survey circulated to local authorities.

7. f40 conference

KW informed members that the LGA office was not yet open for meetings and was not likely to be available for hire for some time.

The decision has been taken not to plan for an f40 conference this year. There may be opportunities to have speakers give presentations via webinar. KW said the preferred option for this would be to have them spread over a number of days, rather than all on one day.

Action: KW to investigate the possibility of setting up webinar presentations from key speakers.

8. Collaboration Group

KW informed members that f40 members MJ, AM and KW would be joining other members of the Collaboration Group for a remote meeting on Tuesday, October 6.

9. FMRT meeting

KW informed members that f40's FMRT group would be meeting on Monday, September 21.

10. Membership invoicing

KW informed that invoicing was now taking place, for the reduced subscription fee of £250 for 2020. Normal invoicing will resume in April 2021. f40 currently has 42 members.

11. Financial update

KW updated the Executive Committee and said f40 had a healthy bank balance.

12. Date of next committee meeting in December 2020

KW suggested the next meeting be held during the first two weeks of December, either Wednesday 2 or 9.

Action: KW to circulate a doodle poll to gauge when is best and then schedule.