



f40 Executive Committee Meeting

Monday, June 14, 2021 – Conference call

1. Attendances, apologies, and changes to committee membership

Present: Cllr James McInnes (Chair, Dep Leader at Devon CC); Karen Westcott (Secretary); Emily Proffitt (Staffs primary headteacher and Dep Chair); Margaret Judd (Dorset Council); Andrew Minall (Hampshire CC); Jackie Smith (CEO Brunel SEN MAT & Uplands Educational Trust); Christine Atkinson (East Riding of Yorkshire CC); Carole Thomson (Oxfordshire Schools Forum); Richard Soper (Worc Community Trust); Phil Haslett (Glos CC); Annette Perrington (Swindon BC); Julia Harnden (ASCL); Cllr Andrew Leadbetter (Devon CC); Cllr Bryony Goodliffe (Cambs CC); Cllr Alex Dale (Derbyshire CC); Ed Francis (Worc SEND primary headteacher).

Apologies: Steve Edmonds (NGA); Matt Western MP (Vice Chair); Cllr Bob Standley (East Sussex); Deborah Myers (East Riding).

KW informed members that unfortunately Labour MP Matt Western's office had informed her that he would be standing down from his role as Vice Chair of f40 as he was now Shadow Minister for Universities and felt he did not have the time to commit to the group. JMcl wished to thank MW for his time and efforts with f40 and said he fully understood his reasons for stepping down, although it was unfortunate and a loss to the group.

Action: KW to write to Matt Western to thank him and wish him well.

Action: KW to approach another member of the Labour Party to invite them to become the Labour Vice Chair of f40.

KW also informed the Executive that at the last local elections in May Cllr Mary Evans (Suffolk) and Cllr Peter Downes (Cambs) had both stood down as councillors and so were no longer members of the f40 Executive. And, unfortunately, Cllr Richard Long (Kent) was not re-elected. While they were not present, JMcl thanked them for their efforts and said their contributions to f40 meetings had been much appreciated and they would be missed.

JMcl welcomed new members Cllr Bryony Goodliffe, Cabinet Member for Children and Young People at Cambridgeshire County Council, Cllr Andrew Leadbetter, Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Schools at Devon CC, and Ed Francis, Headteacher at Fort Royal SEND Primary School in Worcestershire.

JMcl also informed members that as of May 2021 he was no longer Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Schools at Devon CC. He was now Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care and Health Services. He said although he was no longer directly involved in education, for continuity, and provided members were in agreement, he would continue as the chairman of f40. He said Cllr Andrew Leadbetter, who had taken over as Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Schools in Devon, was joining the f40 Executive.

KW also informed members that Leicestershire County Council was no longer a member of the f40 group as it was not a member of the LGA and therefore not permitted to join Special Interest Groups.

2. Minutes of the meeting held on 8 March 2021

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

- 3. Pupil Premium survey submitted to the DfE – noted.**
- 4. f40 response to DfE consultation on high needs funding submitted – noted.**
- 5. f40 response to DfE consultation on sparsity submitted – noted.**
- 6. Meeting with f40 Conservative Vice Chair Gary Streeter on March 9 – noted.**

KW said during the meeting with Gary Streeter the issue of rescheduling the f40 conference and holding an MPs' briefing had been discussed. It was agreed that November 2021 would be a good time to hold both the conference and the MPs' briefing. GS kindly offered to sponsor the MPs' briefing and to book a committee room for it at the House of Commons. It was agreed that a Tuesday would probably be the best day – Tuesday, November 9 was agreed.

KW informed members that rooms had been provisionally booked at the LGA for the conference on that day, and she was liaising with Gary Streeter's office about booking a committee room at The Commons. However, she noted that the conference was dependent upon Covid restrictions being lifted and things getting back to normal by then.

It was agreed by members that if the conference could not go ahead, a series of one-hour webinars could be organised, with speakers and Q&A sessions.

Action: KW to progress and investigate.

7. Meeting with the DfE funding team on June 11, 2021 – update.

JMcl updated everyone on the meeting with the DfE on June 11 and said the notes had not yet been finalised.

He briefly gave a synopsis and said he, EP, MJ, AM and KW had had a very good discussion with Tony Foot, Director of Strategic Finance at the DfE, Tom Goldman, Deputy Director of the Funding Policy Unit, and Maria Brennan, School Funding Policy Advisor. He said both parties felt the meetings were beneficial in enabling information and feedback to be shared. The DfE urged f40 to continue sharing any new data and information it received from members as and when it became available.

JMcl said a full note of the meeting would be shared in due course. However, he briefly summarised the meeting:

Fairness of funding

JMcl had informed the DfE that f40's main focus continued to be fairness of funding across schools in England, ensuring that all schools received enough funding to enable them to operate properly, before additional funding was given for deprivation etc.

f40 had also stressed the importance of a continued three-year rolling funding programme to enable schools to plan their budgets more effectively and efficiently. He said f40 had appreciated the announcement of a three-year funding package in 2019 and they wished to see it continue.

JMcl told the Executive that the DfE also saw the value in three-year settlements and felt optimistic that the next Spending Review would bring another three-year funding programme. He said the DfE said steps were being taken to continue levelling up funding.

Pupil Premium

JMcl said f40 had raised the issue of changes in the way Pupil Premium was being calculated this year and the impact it was having on schools.

EP explained to the DfE how the number of pupils receiving free school meals in her school, while relatively low, had increased by about 40% between October and January, but that the increase had not been taken into account in the Pupil Premium funding this year, due to the changes. She said the school was having to meet the shortfall in funding in order to support those extra pupils. She said while the numbers in her school were fairly small, other schools had been impacted more greatly and were, therefore, having to meet greater deficits themselves.

AM said he understood why the DfE had made the changes, to bring all streams of education funding under the October census, but it was difficult for schools this year when they were dealing with Covid.

The DfE team said they understood the impact of the changes to Pupil Premium, but they felt it was important to recognise that the change was being applied across the board, and the NFF was also being moved to the October census, where it would increase allocations.

AM acknowledged that there could be future offsetting gains, but that they were not synchronised into the same year, leading to losses in an extraordinary year where deprivation had become much more of an issue than for a normal year.

National Funding Formula consultation

JMcl said the DfE had indicated that, as expected, they would be consulting on the 'hard' National Funding Formula, however, it would be a series of consultations, rather than one big consultation, although nothing was certain yet.

The DfE said building on experience of previous consultations, it was felt a series of consultations would be more beneficial than one big consultation, so that they could first get the basic architecture and principles right, before moving on to consult on the detail.

AM asked if the seven principles used in the original development of the NFF would continue to be used as a guide during the new consultations, and the DfE said they would be.

f40 was asked where it felt the NFF had drifted away from those original principles. f40 said it believed the Minimum Per Pupil Funding Level (MPPFL) was not judging schools fairly or taking account of pupils' characteristics, and was leaving small schools without sufficient funding.

The DfE team had asked what alternative f40 would like to see instead of the MPPFL. f40 said the issue was how much funding was locked in. f40 said the NFF was meant to be more flexible and fair, but protections locked in some of the old unfairness.

f40 also said Schools NFF and High Needs funding should be interlinked.

The DfE hoped that when the SEND review was published it would enable the link to be made across both School and High Needs funding. The DfE said it hoped any changes in SEND would avoid perverse incentives.

Covid

JMcl said f40 had stressed to the DfE how it believed a long-term plan of investment was required to help schools and pupils recover from Covid. He said f40 had emphasised that it was not a quick fix and while £1.4b had been promised now, they hoped further investment would be made to ensure children were ready to learn and were well supported academically, emotionally, and physically.

JMcl said the DfE indicated this was part of Covid recovery funding and Government would review it again in the run up to the CSR.

He said the DfE team had been eager to hear the experiences and feedback from headteacher EP.

EP had explained to the DfE that teachers and headteachers had worked tirelessly during the past year, with each school facing its own particular pressures and difficulties. She said while additional support was needed, it should be flexible, allowing schools to use additional funding in the best ways that suited them and individual children, and a long-term plan of support was required.

She said the common theme running through schools was that, in the main, younger Foundation Stage children had been most severely impacted academically by the pandemic. She said the school/nursery closures had resulted in many young children not developing at the expected rate, so many were not ready for school or were behind where they would normally be. However, she said older children in primary school had been impacted more emotionally.

EP said unless additional support was offered for those in Early Years, Reception and Year 1, the trend would continue as they progressed further up school. EP also stressed that the mental health of children needed additional support. She said children needed to be immersed in play. JMcl said he believed someone who specialised in mental health of children should be present in every school.

PH said in the f40 Executive meeting that headteachers in Gloucestershire had voiced similar desires, to see flexible funding and support, which they could use how they felt was most suitable to them.

JMcl said f40 had made it clear that it did not support extending the school day or creating weeks of extra learning during the school holidays, particularly where teaching staff were unfamiliar to children. He said f40 believed children needed to be ready to learn and happy before additional tuition was provided through extending the day.

SEND

JMcl said the DfE had indicated that work on the Government SEND review was continuing and it would be published, although no date was given.

JMcl said the issue of deficit SEND budgets had been discussed and the DfE said it would be working with local authorities with the biggest deficits in the hope of getting them onto an even keel in advance of the SEND review having an impact, given that that would take some time.

The DfE said it would be a rolling programme, with other local authorities invited to work with them over time.

The DfE also wanted to support a wider group with less intervention (and less support attached), in order to help them manage their High Needs budgets.

JMcl said Government's long-term plan would come with the review.

The DfE said they had advised local government to set aside the overspend in the High Needs budget in their accounts until 2022/23.

JMcl asked what would happen after that? The DfE said the overall plan across Government was that, over time, future DSG funding would be sufficient to deal with the High Needs deficits.

JMcl said it was reassuring from a local authority perspective to know that the issue was being dealt with.

JMcl said the DfE also hoped more capital funding for SEND could be available in the future to help create additional places at specialist SEND schools.

MJ said much of the discussion around SEND funding with the DfE revolved around Comprehensive Spending Reviews in the future, rather than now, but she said all of the issues were on their radar.

JS said the capital funding that had been made available to SEND had been very welcome, but more was needed. She said it was a drop in the ocean when comparing how many additional places were required.

JS also said the change in the regulations, which meant the responsibility for commissioning new SEND Free Schools sat at local authority level, was a problem as local authority budgets were under so much strain. She said if budgets were tight, local authorities may not get the support they needed to actually commission a new school. JS said policy was the biggest issue in SEND and understanding just how much additional funding was needed. She said the problem was far bigger than Government realised.

EF said his SEND primary school was originally built for 140 pupils, but it now had 240 pupils. He said the school was bursting at the seams. He had tried to encourage Worcestershire County Council to borrow money to build a new special school, as had been done in Norfolk. However, he said his suggestion had so far not progressed.

EF said two years ago, changes to teacher salaries and pensions increased his wage bill by £200,000 but his budget had not increased accordingly. He said SEND funding was a postcode lottery, depending on how generous the local authority was with regards its top-up funding. Top-up funding in Worcestershire had not increased since 2013, he said.

JMcl said he hoped the SEND review would give guidance to all local authorities on how much support they should be giving to SEND.

PH agreed and said more capital funding was needed for SEND. He said Gloucestershire County Council received £2.8m in extra funding. A new school would have cost £7m, so they could only afford to extend a current facility. It's just not enough, he said.

JH said if the Spending Review gave more long-term funding plans, maybe over four or five years, it would enable local authorities to plan budgets more efficiently and effectively. She said it was just hand to mouth, at the moment.

PH said recent investment in SEND, along with the three-year funding package, was welcome and had made an impact. He said continued investment and visibility of what funding was coming would help authorities and schools to plan.

AM said f40 made it clear to the DfE that everyone in education was having to run just to stand still at the moment.

JS said the capital funding issue was very significant. She said she had just hired a fundraiser at her SEND MAT, with the target of raising a six-figure sum in order to provide sensory rooms and splash pools at her schools – which were basic requirements.

She said the red tape was impossible to overcome and if SEND school buildings did not provide the right sort of environment for pupils, Ofsted inspections would be unsuccessful.

Early Years

JMcl said the f40 group raised concerns around Early Years funding with the DfE. EP said the DfE said the challenges with Early Years were on their radar.

MJ said f40 repeatedly stressed the importance of ensuring that the youngest children were ready to learn in order to get the foundations right so they could reach their potential throughout their schooling and in later life.

EP had explained to the DfE how Early Years had been hugely impacted by Covid, particularly with regards to the readiness of children. She said many children in the Foundation Stage were not ready to learn, and both their development and emotional well-being had been impacted.

She welcomed the announcement last week for Covid catch-up funding for Early Years, but said additional investment was required.

EP said to the DfE that if she was to specify where extra Covid catch-up funding should be targeted she would ask for additional funding for Early Years and Key Stage 1 and extra funding for mental and emotional well-being of all pupils. She said that had been missing from the funding announcement last week.

The DfE said the feedback was helpful and they would make sure it was shared.

Action: KW to provide the full notes of the meeting with the DfE to members of f40.

8. Covid impact on schools

PH said in the main, in Gloucestershire the maintained schools had come out of Covid very well, many with increased balances, and the main concern now was around young children being ready for school. However, he said he did not believe schools had yet felt the full impact of Covid and the impact on budgets, and that would likely come much later down the line.

JMcl agreed and said he had seen similar in Devon and felt the DfE could not use the past year as an example of how well schools were coping. He agreed that the long-term implications of Covid may not be felt for some time.

MJ said she believed the increases in balances was a one-off, and that it was probably due to schools being closed for long periods, so not having to spend the same amount, rather than being able to make savings. She said it would be wrong for the DfE to use this past year as a benchmark.

JS said at her SEND MAT, any savings that were made were wiped out by extra expenditure on PPE. She said schools have had to spend their budget differently. However, she said Covid was not over, and she still had staff off sick with Covid, or isolating, and she was anticipating another wave.

EF said at his SEND primary school there had been a lot of extra costs, including cleaning. He also said some of his staff were off with Covid, or shielding, and three people were off with Long Covid. He said the costs continued to rise.

PH agreed that specialist provision had been hit hard, so the DfE had to differentiate between the different providers.

EP said she believed all schools may be affected by Long Covid and felt schools had not yet felt the maximum impact of the pandemic.

9. Consultation on the National Funding Formula

It was agreed that the f40 Executive and the Financial Managers Research Team (FMRT) may meet to discuss the consultation, and f40's response, once dates were announced.

Action: KW to monitor and arrange meetings as required.

10. LGA annual report requested

KW informed members that the LGA had requested an annual report by the end of June.

Action: KW to draft the annual report and provide it to the LGA.

11. Membership invoicing

KW said more than half of f40 members had now paid their subscription fee for the year.

12. Financial update

KW updated members on the financial position and said the bank balance was healthy.

13. Update on tender process for f40 Secretariat role

KW and JMcl updated members on the current discussions with the procurement officer at Derbyshire County Council around the re-tendering process for the Secretariat role. They said they were waiting for an update on what steps f40 needed to take.

AD said as he was an elected member for Derbyshire County Council, he would be happy to liaise and get involved, which was appreciated.

Action: KW to email the procurement officer again, copying in AD and JMcl, so he was included in the discussions.

14. Any other business

There was no other business.

15. Date of next meeting

It was agreed that the next Executive Committee meeting would be held in mid-September via Microsoft Teams.

Action: KW to circulate a doodle poll to ascertain the most convenient date.

[Post meeting note, the next f40 Executive Committee meeting has been scheduled for Monday, September 20, at 2pm.]