

LANCASHIRE SCHOOLS FORUM
Date of meeting 16 March 2023
Item No: 16

Title of Item: Forum Correspondence

Executive Summary

This report provides appendices of recent communication on behalf of School Forum.

Recommendation

The Forum is asked to:

- a) Note the correspondence;

Background

School Forum is updated on the forum correspondence on every meeting if any was received. There were four different correspondences after last meeting of School Forum.

Correspondence (1)

On the last meeting held on 12 January, Chairs agreed to draft a letter to Cabinet members and Director of Resources about how they are concerned about the consistency in roles of Principal Accountant and Head of Service. The letter is available below and a response to the letter follows.



CC Philippa Williamson, Leader, Lancashire County Council and CC Jayne Rear, Cabinet Member for Education and Skills, Jacqui Old 'Executive Director of Education and Children's Services'

[Redacted]
Date: 12 January 2023

C. Mark Wynn, Neil Kissock and Kirsty Lister

Dear Cabinet,

Schools' Finance Team appointments

I am writing as the Chair of Lancashire School Forum. I am requesting some information about the position of Head of Service for the Schools' Finance Team. Kirsty Lister has been in post as the interim Principal Accountant for the team since September 2022. We have always known that she was only interested in an interim position, so at least one permanent candidate would need to be recruited to lead the team. Where are we in this recruitment process? Members of the Forum have, today, asked me to investigate why there has been such a delay in the recruitment for these posts. Please can you provide some answers?

The link between Lancashire County Council, as the Education Authority, and schools has historically been strong. The fact that so many maintained schools remain with LCC is a testament to this fact – even now we retain a budget of £1.2bn from the Dedicated Schools' Grant. The Lancashire School Forum are concerned that we are lacking the firm commitment to a strong and capable lead at this time – we really need someone to liaise with Kirsty and overlap with her to give schools the confidence they need for the future of our mutually beneficial relationship.

I await your response and a committed timescale for recruitment for the missing post(s) within the Schools' Finance Team.

With best wishes.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Daniel Ballard".

Daniel Ballard
Chair, Lancashire Schools Forum

Daniel

Thank you for your recent letter regarding the appointments within our schools finance team. Apologies if our communications have not been as clear as they should have been in this area as, as you say, we regard our relationship with schools as healthy , important and a priority to us.

I can update you on the fact that Kirsty has agreed to stay around until the end of June, and we are actively in the process of recruiting to these posts.

I hope this gives you reassurance all of this will be in place (subject to the current jobs market of course) in time to allow an effective transition of roles.

I am of course happy to discuss any of this with you further if you so wish

Mark

Regards

Mark

Mark Wynn
Executive Director of Resources
Lancashire County Council

Following up on the correspondence Daniel Ballard the Chair of Forum has contacted Mark Wynn the Executive Director of Resources and scheduled the meeting regarding the leadership void in the School Finance Team.

The Chair has provided update following this meeting;

(It should also be noted that Mark does not formally start work in LCC until 1st March.)

"There is a movement, as in all public sectors, to look at ways of streamlining and being more efficient. This is a continuing process within and across LCC as one would expect. There is, however, no strategy that Mark is aware of that would mean 'cutting to the bone' and seeing staff in existing teams being overworked in order to make financial savings. Many senior staff, including at Executive Director level, have stressed the positive working relationship that schools have historically had with LCC and they want this to continue. Mark will, therefore, be investigating my concerns fully and I have a follow up meeting scheduled for three weeks time – Friday 3rd March."

Correspondence (2)

On the 27 January 2023, Chairs met to consider clawbacks request that requested a urgent consideration. During the meeting, the Chair raised the issue of how he receives further complaints and issues from other Headteachers to represent them in these matters since they do not feel they have a direct contact. Suppliers continue to experience these issues at a high rate, as they are unable to receive their monies and become indebted. During the School Forum, the group discussed how LCC has gone through the worst stage, and it is only going to get better, which does not seem to be the case.

The Chair has agreed to write a letter to outline the issues to be addressed to Glynn Peach and Steven Leaf, who attended the School Forum for Oracle Fusion update. The letter written is available below followed by a response;

Steven Leaf

Glyn Peach

Tel: 01772 336650

Email: head@smsb.lancs.sch.uk

Date: 30th January 2023

Dear Steven & Glyn,

Oracle Fusion Issues - ongoing

I am writing as the Chair of Lancashire Schools' Forum. You both came to our last full meeting, earlier this month, and gave various assurances that you understood the issues that schools faced, you had faced unprecedented issues and that this was a huge undertaking. You did add that things could only get better and that you were about to turn a corner... I am being inundated, as Chair of the Lancashire Schools' Forum, with continued frustrations, unresolved issues and a lack of opportunity to hold colleagues to account.

One headteacher has been waiting since December to access her new Fusion account but emails to the help address have been unanswered. The pressure that this is adding to colleagues – both at the chalk face in Finance and within school offices is undeniable. Again, we were asked to be patient but these delays with reconciliation are causing significant delays in operational procedures for everyone. Was there insufficient testing done prior to going live?

Another headteacher has related to me about staff overpayments that were impacted by delays in processing documentation for staff finishing with their school. Indeed, many similar issues about payroll delays that have led to payment inaccuracies. Especially, during a 'Cost of Living Crisis' this is wholly unacceptable!

Colleagues who work for schools but get paid as contractors – such as sports coaches – is another massive concern. These individuals often work on a self-employed basis and trust us – as LCC – to treat them with fairness, respect and integrity. Anecdotally, another headteacher has frustrations about this point: *"A late payment form was sent to LCC with 3 people on it -only 2 got paid, one has not been paid, but again LCC's response to our emails has been poor. I then have people coming to me.... and I am helpless in giving them an answer as to when they will get paid for hours worked in November/December 2022."* These people are, potentially, in increasing personal debt!

Daniel Ballard
Chair, Lancashire Schools Forum
Sent via email:
head@smsb.lancs.sch.uk

Phone: 01772 535531
Email: Glyn.Peach@lancashire.gov.uk
Your ref:
Our ref: GP/MO
Date: 03 February 2023

Dear Daniel

Oracle Fusion Issues – ongoing

Thank you for your letter date 30 January 2023 about the recent issues experienced in relation to Oracle Fusion.

Lancashire County Council (LCC) are still experiencing issues which is expected when implementing a system of this size and complexity. LCC staff are still working very hard to reconcile the emergency payments that have been completed during the blackout window and are still making emergency payments to assure our schools remain as unaffected as possible.

Rigorous testing has been undertaken throughout the programme implementation including System, unit and payroll testing, however, it does not take account of issues that occur in a live environment and whilst we did everything to resolve the issue prior to go live it is inevitable further issues occur.

LCC understand how serious incorrect pay is at any time of the year especially with the run up to the Christmas period, we have had staff working throughout the Christmas holiday to ensure the payroll process was as accurate as possible. Without the specific details of the schools facing the issues and the affected employees, it is not possible to provide a specific response. Please advise the relevant schools to submit their examples regarding non-payment of salaries to the following email address: payroll-feedback@lancashire.co.uk, in order for the Payroll Service to fully investigate and respond to the relevant school. In relation to the December payroll there were 323 emergency payments made out of 33,578 employees, in comparison to 2021 December payroll when 163 emergency payments were made. In respect of January payroll errors, again the Payroll Service are fully focussed on progressing emergency payments and working extra hours to complete as soon as possible, prioritising those payments where the employee has not received any pay.

In respect of user log-in issues, Digital Services have an on-going designated resource to resolve any issues as soon as possible.

Continued...

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The decision to go live at the beginning of December was largely due to the previous Oracle system being end of life, being unstable and resulting in outages which were not going to be able to support the system. As a result, and with the testing that had taken place, the decision was made to go live.

I would like to assure you that we are doing everything we can to support schools and several measures are in place to assist schools with the transition to the new system:

- Emergency payment process for schools to use to enable the schools' suppliers to be paid is still in place.
- On-going support is being provided to resolve user log-in issues.
- Additional instructor led training sessions in self-service tasks for school employees and administration managers.
- Additional user guidance to provide step by step instructions of the core self-service transactions, to supplement Oracle Guided Learning.
- Schools AskHR will have additional staff to cover the phone lines to provide navigation support.
- Payroll 1:1 transaction support virtual drop-in sessions to be arranged for schools to book onto to obtain specific guidance for transactions that users may be having difficulty with, following attendance on the training courses.

As I am sure you can appreciate; transitioning to new systems to accommodate the complexities of an organisation the size of LCC is a substantial undertaking and it may take a couple of months to iron out all of the initial 'snags'. Every possible effort is being made to stabilise the system as quickly as possible and whilst there are difficulties and challenges, which unfortunately are also impacting school end users, the new system is operational and in the majority of cases; employees and suppliers are being paid.

Please continue to bear with us during this period and be assured that everything possible is being done to address schools' concerns.

Yours sincerely



Glyn Peach
Director of Digital,
Lancashire County Council



Correspondence (3)

In the light with current Oracle Issues a request was submitted to temporary suspend a clawback 2022/23. Another Chairs meeting was held on 10 February to discuss this. Unfortunately, as you cannot suspend clawback temporary and would have to refer to the entire year, all chairs voted for it to remain.

The request for clawback suspension was emailed as seen below;

"I am emailing to continue to express concern over the issues still being had with Oracle Fusion and the impact not only directly on schools but also indirectly when schools are buying services or procuring resources from County Council services. I appreciate that some elements of concern are continuing to be addressed and noted the information provided to forum from those responsible for Fusion rollout. However, after yet another issue has been raised for us:

procuring signage from LCC signage for new road and car park signage to be told they are not in a position to be able to purchase the materials and resources to make the signs because of a directive relating to oracle Fusion.

This was to be a significant amount in terms of purchasing but is compounding in many cases the issues with paying suppliers and will have a direct impact upon end of term balances, which we may or may not be able to access the full reports for in order to effectively manage end of year monitoring and actions relating to any potential clawback position, noting that monies that would have been paid out by year end may still be held in end of year budgets and may lead to incurring clawback positions through no fault of the school.

Has this been considered or is it due to be considered by Forum prior to year end?

If not I would ask that some thought is presented to forum members about the impact the delay to Oracle Fusion and its implementation has had to schools, their budgets the timely payment of suppliers and indirect impact through the use of LCC services and the potential issue that schools may fall foul of the reinstated clawback arrangements because of it and would ask that forum reconsider its reinstatement of clawback temporarily until some stability can be established and Fusion is finally implemented successfully and that schools budgets are no longer affected in the way they have been directly and indirectly."

Correspondence (4)

Following meeting of the Chairs a Vice Chair has written a letter as seen below and a Oracle representative was asked to attend School Forum meeting on 16 March 2023;

Wednesday 15th February 2023

Angie Ridgwell,
Chief Executive and Director of Resources,
Lancashire County Council,
P O Box 78,
County Hall,
Preston
PR1 8XJ

Dear Angie Ridgwell,
Oracle Fusion

As a Primary School governor representative and Vice Chair of the Lancashire Schools Forum I have been asked to express concern about the many complaints which have been made against the introduction of the new 'Oracle Fusion' school accounting system.

So far as I can tell the Forum first heard that the new system would be introduced at the Full Forum meeting held on Tuesday 19th October 2021, a point which means that the Local Authority has had a period of at least fourteen months in preparation before the live introduction of the system in December 2022.

The problems reported fall into four broad categories:

- Inability to log on to the system
- Wages not being paid
- Suppliers not being paid
- A lack of response from the helpline or to emails

A discussion of Oracle Fusion took place on the 10th January 2023 at the Forum Chair's Group meeting where it was said that schools had suffered 'no end of problems' and a whole month of the system not working.

Two representatives from the service came to the Full Forum meeting on the 12th January 2023. There, a number of points were made by Forum members. There was a 'blackout window' for changing over between the old system and the new, this was initially planned for two weeks but over-ran into six. A point was made that the 'emergency payment' system allowed for individual payments, but it did not appear to be possible for the Headteacher to authorise batches of payments, a point which impacted badly on Headteacher stress and workload. Also at this meeting some criticism of the 'user guides' took place. Bursars would get stuck in the middle of processing a payment and by the time they managed to find the directions the transaction would have timed out. It was also pointed out that there were problems with club payments, and an inability to save the page in order to keep a copy of the details in the transaction. The Oracle help-line and the Ask HR help-lines had been swamped. In some cases they could do nothing to help.

Also at the 12th January Full Forum reports were given about mistaken payments, a point which meant an increase in administrative workload. Accounts had not been paid – one example here was a petrol account which meant that a Special School minibus used to collect pupils could not be refuelled. Pay progressions for teachers had not been processed, there were reported difficulties over new starters and retiring teachers.

At the meeting of the Chair's Group held on the 27th January it was reported that the situation was getting worse, with more and more complaints being forwarded to the Forum Chair. Suppliers were forced into debt due to payments not coming through and were having to pay interest, through no fault of their own, or fault of the school. It was claimed that some suppliers had been bankrupted. At this meeting some members of the group spoke of the 'brick wall of unaccountability'.

The situation was felt to be so poor that on the 30th January the Forum Chair wrote a letter of concern. A response to this was received dated the 3rd of February. The second paragraph of this reply states:

Rigorous testing has been undertaken throughout the programme implementation including System, unit and payroll testing However it does not take account of issues that occur in a live environment and whilst we did everything to resolve the issue prior to go live it is inevitable further issues occur.

The situation continued. On Friday the 10th February a Chair's group had to be convened to consider whether to postpone or to cancel the collection of Clawback monies from schools because of the financial chaos caused by Oracle Fusion. This implied that the people applying for the postponement / cancellation did not believe that these many problems could be sorted out by the end of the Financial Year on the 31st March 2023.

At this meeting we were given the example of a school where the Bursar processed a payment for the school telephone bill, but the Oracle did not make the payment and so the school telephones were cut off by the supplier, through no fault of the school.

In my opinion this problem is a serious matter with widespread implications. On Friday I suggested that the Forum should collect together a detailed factual dossier of these problems in order that those responsible for this fiasco could be held responsible, and perhaps that this terrible situation could be sorted out before the end of March.

Obviously the longer this situation is allowed to go on, the greater will be the damage to the relationship between the Authority and schools, and so I hope that firm and prompt action can be taken to put this right.

Yours sincerely

Stephen Booth
Vice Chair, Lancashire Schools Forum

CC: Daniel Ballard, Chair Lancashire Schools Forum,
Sylwia Krajewska, Clerk to the Lancashire Schools Forum