

# Schools Forum Briefing

From the meeting held on 22nd November 2023

This Briefing provides a summary of key discussions and decisions taken by Forum at their most recent meeting. If you want to find more detail, the minutes and papers from all meetings are in the public domain and can be found on the Norfolk Schools website [here](#), along with contact details for Forum representatives.

## Schools Block Recommendations following Fair Funding Consultation

Schools Forum made a number of recommendations as a result of the fair funding consultation carried out.

### Funding Cap/Sparsity funding

Members of Schools Forum voted to recommend reducing unit values and removing the funding cap. The final decision rests with Council members and will be considered at the cabinet meeting in January 2024.

### Falling Roll Fund

It was agreed not to recommend the establishment of a falling roll fund, as at present there is no evidence currently that any Norfolk schools would be eligible. It was agreed however that this position would be reviewed annually.

### Maintained School Financial Audits

Schools Forum asked questions around the implications of any potential top slice, concerning the capacity and choice of any audit service delivery. It was agreed not to top slice a charge for audits for maintained school budget shares for 2024-25.

## Schools Block Transfer to High Needs Block

Schools Forum voted unanimously to continue the movement of 0.5% from the Schools Block to the High Needs Block for 2024-25. In order to release funding for the Local First Inclusion programme, the Department for Education required a view from Schools Forum regarding their support for the additional 1% movement of funds from the Schools Block to the High needs block, in the form of a recorded vote.

This was voted on and agreed unanimously, however Schools Forum expressed concerns around extant financial pressures facing schools and settings, but recognised that this would be an investment in inclusion and that the 1% transfer would see a greater than 1% return over time. Schools Forum members also highlighted the importance of delivery on LFI aims in securing continued support for this transfer.

## Notional SEN

Schools Forum members agreed by vote to begin a three-year incremental move to bring the notional SEN funding in line with the national average, beginning with a 1% increase from April 2024.



## LFI Update to Schools Forum

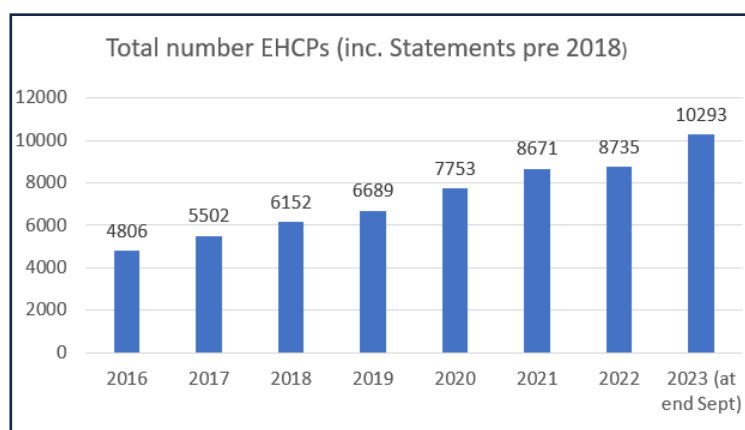
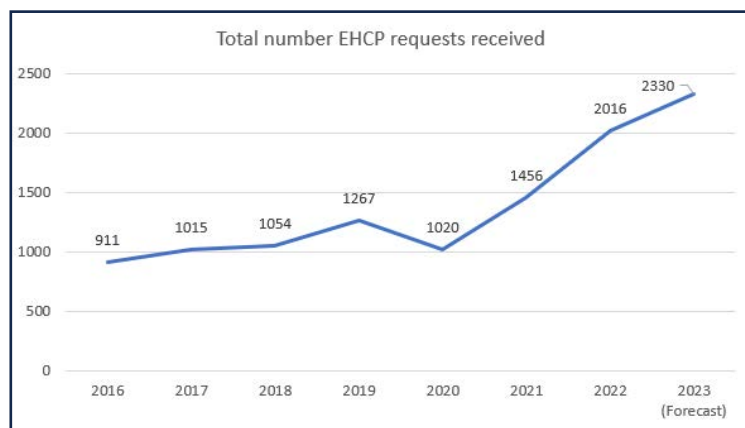
Schools Forum heard an update on the progress of the Local First Inclusion programme. They heard that, as of September 2023, there had been an increase in the issuance of EHCPs and a continued rise in demand for specialist provision ahead of the impact of LFI. This increase has led to a revision of the timeline for the programme's completion, extending the time at which the programme's goal to reduce the in-year and cumulative deficit would be realised by an additional 9 months.

The Department for Education have requested to meet with Norfolk County Council to discuss the change in timeline, and to ensure that the programme will have the planned result, leading to improved outcomes for Children and Young people within a balanced budget. The DfE are meeting with other Local Authorities within the programme, and will need assurance that it will deliver on these aims.

Schools Forum heard that the project was well underway, and that strong progress had been made in delivering against its core aims, and that as the programme had a six-year timescale, the impacts of some actions already taken (such as SRB and AP provision) would take time to be felt by schools, families and children. They heard that Norfolk now had in place 10,000 active EHCPs, which was a significant rise, and that Norfolk had a higher proportion of EHCPs than nationally (4.7% versus 4.1%). Members of Schools Forum were appraised of the high-level timeline of work for the remainder of the financial year, alongside plans for how Schools Forum would be involved.

Schools Forum asked about the implications of not being able to deliver the financial changes required within an agreed timeline, and heard that this would result in the DfE withdrawing their offer of Safety Valve funding, leading to a difficulty in addressing the cumulative budget.

They also raised the issues around balancing demand and supply of school places, particularly in relation to the relationship of extant demand for special school places and the new provision which will exist in the future.



They heard that this would be managed in a new way, and that a pragmatic approach would be taken to ensure that any placements were the most appropriate and effective.

Schools forum also noted that special school operating budgets were under pressure, and that it was important to maintain their success as new provision was put in place. They heard that this would need to be addressed in the LFI programme, to support these schools to be financially sustainable.

Schools Forum asked about the variability of rates of referral across the county, as well as the difference in referral practices of the medical and education sectors. They heard that the LFI plan included mechanisms at zone level for highlighting differential levels of referrals, and supporting and challenging openly. In regard to the alignment of referral practices, they heard that in future, an integrated front door approach would give the LFI programme the opportunity to engage directly with the health sector to promote positive progress.

## **Special Schools funding for GCSE provision**

Schools Forum were asked to take a view on the funding of GCSE provision in special schools from April 2024.

Schools forum heard that since initial funding was considered, special schools have changed and diversified in their provision, and in order to reflect both the increase in scope of provision and range of diverse school settings and contexts, a request was made to fund GCSE fees for those students in special schools.

Schools Forum members highlighted that this element was one part of a wider issue around special school funding, and there was a commitment from Norfolk County Council to consider this as part of a wider review. Schools Forum voted on the view taken, with the majority position being against GCSE funding in isolation, but with the understanding that it would form part of the wider review of funding.

## **De-delegation / Central Services block decisions**

A number of decisions were taken by Schools Forum relating to the de-delegation of services for the budget year 2024-25. Schools Forum agreed to de-delegate primary staff costs, not to de-delegate secondary staff costs and to de-delegate primary and secondary Free School Meals eligibility.

The decision on the buyback of services for maintained nurseries and maintained special schools was deferred, with an agreement to remove the decision for academy special schools as trusts were separately responsible for this decision. Further discussions with those sectors will take place before decisions are made.

Schools Forum members also agreed to approve the centrally retained growth fund, along with its criteria. The admissions funding level for Admissions, Schools Forum and Independent School Fees for pupils without SEN. They also agreed to approve funding for responsibilities held for all schools from Central Schools Services Block, which includes Teachers' Pay Grant, and Teachers' Pension Employer Contribution Grant for centrally employed staff.

## **Early Years Recommendations following consultation**

Schools Forum were asked to make recommendations regarding Early Years funding, following the consultation survey undertaken. Schools Forum members noted that there had been a good response to the survey, supported by a strong Early Years consultative group.

The recommendation to agree that the the new funding formula would take the same approach across all funding streams and only include mandatory supplements was agreed, as was the recommendation to top slice all funding streams equally at the minimum level to fund central costs and a greater SEN Inclusion Fund.

Schools forum also agreed the recommendation to consolidate Teachers' Pay and Pensions Grant funding within the base rate, to distribute to all providers, along with the recommendation to increase the SENIF fund to meet increasing demand. 2023 rates will be determined once Norfolk's base rate funding levels from the Department of Education are agreed.