

# Norfolk Schools Forum

Minutes of the Meeting held on Friday 20 September 2024 at 9am, Cranworth Room, County Hall,

## Present

Martin White (Chair)  
Stephen Beeson  
Martin Colbourne  
Steven Dewing  
Lacey Douglass  
Mike Grimble  
Bob Groome  
Glyn Hambling  
Carole Jacques  
Sarah Porter  
Rachel Quick  
Sarah Shirras  
Matthew Smith  
Daniel Thrower  
Joanna Tuttle

## Organisation

Nebula Federation  
Norwich Diocesan Board of Education  
City College Norwich  
Sapientia Education Trust  
Freelance Early Years Advisor  
Avenue Junior School  
National Education Union  
Unity Education Trust  
Earlham Nursery School  
Unity Schools Partnership  
The Wherry School  
St. Williams Primary School  
Sheringham Woodfields School  
Wensum Academy Trust  
Aylsham High School

## Representing

Maintained Primary Governors  
Church Representative  
16-19 Representative  
Academies  
Early Years Representative  
Maintained Primary Governors  
Joint Consultative Committee  
Alternative Provision  
Nursery Schools  
Academies  
Special School Academy  
Maintained Primary Schools  
Maintained Special Schools  
Academies  
Maintained Secondary Schools

## Also Present:

Michael Bateman	Assistant Director – SEND Strategic Improvement and Partnerships
Dawn Filtness	Finance Business Partner
Samantha Fletcher	Assistant Director – Education Infrastructure and Partnerships
Jane Hayman	Assistant Director – Sufficiency, Planning and Education Strategy
Sarah Jones	Director of Commissioning, Partnerships and Resources
Jonathan Nice	Senior Adviser – Teaching and Learning
Kate Philpin	HR Business Partner (Schools)
Adrian Thompson	Assistant Director of Finance (Audit)
Laine Tisdall	Committee Officer, Democratic Services
Sara Tough OBE	Executive Director of Children’s Services
Joshua Warnes	Internal Audit Manager
James Wilson	Director for Sufficiency Planning and Education Strategy

## 1. Apologies and substitutions

1.1 Apologies were received from Adrian Ball, Joanne Philpott, John Crowley, and Martin Brock

## 2. Minutes

2.1 The minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday 10 July 2024 were approved as an accurate record of proceedings.

## 3. Matters Arising

3.1 A summary of Schools Forum actions for the 2023/24 academic year was due to be uploaded to the website forthwith.

## 4. Strategic Planning (including Local First Inclusion)

4.1 Forum Members received the annexed report (4).

4.2 Officers introduced the report, which provided an update on the revised shape and governance of the Local First Inclusion (LFI) programme, along with information regarding the comprehensive report considered by Norfolk County Council's Cabinet earlier in September. A brief update in relation to the ongoing discussions with the Department for Education (DfE) was also included.

4.3 The following key elements were highlighted to the Schools Forum:

- There were encouraging signs from the new government relating to Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) issues. There was a possibility of increased admission powers being devolved to local authorities, which would improve the local picture.
- It was noted that Norfolk County Council was still within the DfE's safety valve plan. An update was expected from the 1 October 2024 onwards. Officers expressed optimism that the new government would introduce reforms to the system, which would change the workings of the safety valve plan.
- A new independent chair of the LFI Executive Board, Mark Vickers, had been appointed from the beginning of the 2024/25 academic year.
- The Element 3 working group had proven useful during its term of operation. This had now changed its remit to become the LFI Reference Group. Officers planned to engage with this body in more detail over the coming months, as its findings would prove useful in the upcoming Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) consultation in Autumn 2024. The membership of the reference group had not yet been finalised.
- Confirmation had been received from Norfolk County Council's Cabinet at their September 2024 meeting of a £35m uplift in Element 3 'top-up' funding for mainstream schools, to cover the 2024/25 financial year.
- While the report contained the latest SEND data from the DfE, it was acknowledged that the publishing of national statistics was now occurring later in the year.
- A deep dive into capital sufficiency and Specialist Resource Bases (SRBs) was due to be undertaken next week at the first meeting of the LFI Reference Group.
- The different types of SRBs were highlighted to the Schools Forum, covering different specialities. Speech Language & Communication Needs was currently at 100% occupancy, with Autism Primary at 98% and Secondary at 93%, respectively. It was noted that 80% occupancy was an optimum figure, as this provided enough space to allow children to be placed close to their home without excessive travel costs.
- The Learning & Cognition SRB was currently over-subscribed at 108% occupancy, which was part of the reason why further SRBs were being constructed.
- The Social, Emotional & Mental Health SRB was only at 79% occupancy, which required monitoring to see the underlying trends as to why this was under-occupancy. One of the SRBs in this category currently had a pause on new admissions, which had a resulting effect on the dynamics.

4.4 The following points were raised and discussed:

- The Chair stated that while the formation of the LFI Reference Group was a positive step forward, there were concerns that the membership could be dominated by a small number of people, potentially skewing the debate. The Element 3 working group saw its numbers increase during its operations, with the same scenario potentially occurring with the LFI Reference Group. Officers stated that the membership was under review to ensure it was representative and proportionate to all sectors. It was agreed that although the new group was originally focussed on mainstream provision, it should also reflect the needs of the 0-25 SEND cohort. Over 50% of the initial membership had confirmed their attendance for its first meeting in October 2024.

- The Chair queried the choice of the 80% optimum figure for SRB occupancy, given the higher occupancy rates in some SRB categories at present. Officers stated there was a delicate balance between strategic planning and ensuring the correct level of provision across Norfolk. There were also instances where some children moved on roll to an SRB, which then became their school, which meant more flux in the system. It was suggested that the LFI Reference Group could look at the data on a termly arrears basis, to ensure reconciliation term by term and to see turnaround figures.
- The Vice-Chair noted that the establishment of SRBs followed a process rather than magically appearing fully operational. An update on SRB phases was requested. Officers stated that the LFI Reference Group would be able to take a deep dive into this on a termly basis.
- A Forum Member requested a deep dive on where SRBs had rejected a placement due to them not being able to meet the needs, as this appeared to be an issue. Officers stated this could be investigated in detail once zone working was fully operational. It was suggested that workshop sessions on the SRB process could be organised for the future, given the level of feedback on this issue.
- The Vice-Chair noted that further SRB construction did not satisfy all needs geographically, as there had to be a fundamental understanding of children's needs.

4.5 The Norfolk Schools Forum **RESOLVED** the following:

- To **CONSIDER** the updated information on the LFI programme, in terms of the revised shape and governance.
- To **PROVIDE** comments and feedback that the local authority could utilise to support the advancement and success of LFI.

## 5. Provisional DSG Allocations for 2025/26 and Autumn DSG Consultation

5.1 Forum Members received the annexed report (5).

5.2 Officers introduced the report, which covered the range of issues that the local authority intended to include within the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) consultation in Autumn 2024. The consultation was anticipated to be the most extensive undertaken for a significant period of time, seeking to significantly increase the level of engagement with the sector achieved in recent years. The consultation was planned to be a combination of technical questions, along with engagement regarding the system transformation needed, with open-ended questions to enable schools to be actively involved.

5.3 The following key elements were highlighted to the Schools Forum:

- The DfE had not currently provided information regarding allocations, with no indication of a forthcoming announcement. This presented challenges for both officers and schools, potentially affecting the technical papers for the consultation.
- Officers stated it was sensible to consult on the SEND system in Norfolk and LFI in general, with it being proposed that at engagement sessions, broader questions were posed regarding the system.
- The Secretary of State for Education had not given any indication of the deadline for disapplication requests. In past years, this deadline had been the end of November, but currently there was no provisional information available for local authorities across the country to consult schools with. Officers were working on the basis that the deadline would remain the same as before. It was agreed that conversations with schools would not be delayed despite the DfE still needing to confirm provisional allocations.

- Consideration was given to potentially extending the consultation depending on updates from the DfE and responses. The deadline for agreeing an extension would be the October half-term. However, this would have a knock-on effect on the November 2024 meeting of the Schools Forum, with there being a potential need for additional meetings of the Schools Forum to consider the outcomes.
- The Executive Director for Children's Services was prepared to write directly to the Secretary of State regarding the disapplication request if there was still no update from the DfE. Ministers in the DfE had requested conversations regarding local authorities within the safety valve programme at the beginning of November 2024, which could potentially be in relation to disapplication requests.
- There were proposals to continue Notional SEN funding in line with the 2024/25 agreement, which had increased the percentage from 6.6% to 7.6%. This increase had brought Notional SEN closer towards the national average. A further increase of 1.5% was proposed for 2025/36, bringing the percentage to 9.1% as opposed to the national average of 11.5%. There was another option within the consultation to match Notional SEN funding in Norfolk with the national average, as there were expectations that the DfE could compel the local authority to move into line.
- Special Schools Outreach formed part of the consultation, with a question posed as to how this function could be expanded to mainstream schools without a monetary element involved. It was intended for outreach to move from a per pupil approach to referrals to a more strategic approach over a longer timescale. The consultation aimed to ask schools whether they wanted more provision built into the system.
- Element 3 funding principles were highlighted to the Schools Forum. It was stressed that as the current funding model could not be retained, the aim of the consultation was to help provide detail for a new model, designed in collaboration between the local authority and the education sector. It had been noted that there had been a number of different responses from the Element 3 working group to this proposal.
- Shared Parental Leave and Maternity Leave was in the consultation for maintained schools only. Shared Parental Leave was not currently reimbursed from the de-delegated maternity budget, with issues causing financial impacts on the budgets of some schools. Three options were up for consultation, which were to either de-delegate Shared Parental Leave costs for 2025-26 for statutory costs only, to do this and include associated salary costs covering periods of school holidays, or to keep the current system in place.
- It was noted that Maternity Leave was currently reimbursed from the de-delegated Maternity budget, with this being estimated at a cost of £101,000. An £80,000 overspend was currently forecast for the de-delegated fund. The consultation aimed to consider whether this should continue to be paid in the current manner.
- Proposed changes to internal audits for maintained schools were highlighted. It was intended to consult on whether schools agreed that the principle of the local authority maintaining funding for minimum risk-based assurance. There was a requirement for the Section 151 Officer at Norfolk County Council to provide assurance regarding Council finances and funding to the government. The proposal was that rather than auditing all schools every five years, a rolling cycle of audits would be conducted under the minimum risk-based assurance principle. The new approach was risk-based, which would enable best auditing practices to be applied to schools. It would also use less resources than the current auditing approach. The Section 151 Officer had indicated his approval of the risk-based approach, as this would provide assurance to him.

#### 5.4 The following points were raised and discussed:

- The Chair requested confirmation that the consultation events had been finalised and schools contacted. Officers stated that letters were sent to schools at the end of summer 2024. Six events were planned, three of which would be held virtually on Teams, the other three being in-person across different areas of Norfolk. Of the in-person venues, these would be held at Great Yarmouth Library, King's Lynn Academy, and County Hall in Norwich. A hybrid approach was not intended. There was a drive within the team to increase engagement compared to past consultations. Feedback from the consultation would be filtered back to the Schools Forum for discussion and consideration.
- Forum Members commented that discussions relating to fair funding formulas had spanned several years. Consideration had to be given to how the local authority would engage schools, as was important to emphasise that this was an actual consultation which would shape the future direction of DSG rather than a tickbox exercise.
- Forum Members expressed concern that the consultation events were not in people's diaries and that there would be a lack of notice. Officers agreed to send urgent invitations once the meeting had concluded.
- A Forum Member noted that the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) was due to be merged into the DfE and queried how the system would function both nationally and locally once the merger had occurred. Officers stated that current indications suggested the ESFA would cease to exist in March 2025. Schools would not see any differences over the next six months. It was expected that schools' budgets would be calculated by the end of January 2025. Final DSG allocations were usually not confirmed until the week before Christmas.
- A Forum Member commented that it would be unwise to publish data and figures based on the 2023/24 academic year, as this would give schools a degree of certainty that was not based on reality at present.
- Forum Members stated that expectations management was key to a successful consultation. There was a need to emphasise the Element 3 pot but place less emphasis on the allocation mechanism.
- Forum Members highlighted that the provision of context within the consultation materials would produce beneficial results. This would help explain concepts such as notional SEN and special school outreach. Officers agreed to provide plain English context during consultation events where possible, to ensure that nuances were clear. There was the possibility to produce a technical paper laying out options and percentages relating to Notional SEN.
- The Chair queried as to what the consultation would include regarding special school outreach. Officers confirmed the consultation would provide schools an opportunity to request increased funding for this function, which would form part of the High Needs Block. Norfolk County Council would continue to support early needs in the county.
- The Vice-Chair commented there was a nervousness within the sector as to where the staffing for special school outreach was being sourced from. Officers stated that conversations were being held with the heads of special schools regarding indicators and capacity. The aim was to provide sufficient outreach capacity across the whole of Norfolk. The Vice-Chair stated there was a need for transparency to build confidence in the sector, while also illustrating the overlap between school teams and community teams. It was confirmed that officers would seek feedback regarding the principles of special school outreach.
- A Forum Member stated it needed to be made clear that special school outreach was funded through contributions from schools and the High Needs Block. This arrangement explained why the system was limited in size at present. Officers acknowledged the need to clarify the arrangements within the reports and consultation documents.

- The Chair queried the construction of the Element 3 part of the consultation, as to whether questions would be posed regarding proxy indicators or if moving to a formula approach was preferable. Concern was expressed that opinions on a formula approach could delay decisions on Element 3, as schools would be unaware where they stood. Officers stated they would provide context and data towards the proposal in the consultation documents. At present, the proposal was that there would be a formula implemented to allocation a portion of the Element 3 money, with the specific question being where to set the limits, whether this would be done by percentages or on a child-by-child basis. There were concerns that Norfolk did not have an even spread of children across districts which would fit the national funding formula and SEND requirements set by the government. A debate was required to find the best way forward.
- A Forum Member asked if the consultation was considering either a March 2025 or September 2025 change to Element 3. Officers stated that at present, a final decision was unknown. However, a summary of the model as it currently stood could be provided, which would show the breakdown of funding for the next couple of years plus the rationale behind it.
- A Forum Member commented that the 1.5% transfer from the Schools Block to the High Needs Block would have a noticeable impact on the consultation results. Officers clarified that transfers between blocks were an element of the safety valve plan. The LFI programme was operated on the basis that block transfers would continue in the usual way. However, if it was decided to cease these, this would require plans and modelling to be amended. If block transfers were not approved, this would result in a significant reduction in funding for mainstream schools, as the local authority could not effectively fund the programme twice.
- A Forum Member noted that the 1.5% block transfer was an assumption and queried how the decision would be made. Officers stated that any block transfer decisions above the 0.5% threshold had to be signed off by the Secretary of State. Bridget Phillipson had indicated that the DfE was seeking evidence that schools supported the transfer before the decision was signed off. If support was not forthcoming, there was a risk that the transfer would not be approved, potentially jeopardising the safety valve programme. It was unknown whether the new government wished to continue the safety valve programme under the current parameters. There was also a need to emphasise the consequences if the block transfer was not approved.
- The Chair queried as to how many local authorities across England had a block transfer mechanism, as the statistics could highlight areas for future consideration. Officers stated that historical data on block transfers could be provided in a report for the November 2024 meeting of the Schools Forum, although it was acknowledged this would be a time-consuming package of work.
- A Forum Member queried if it would be worth contacting local Members of Parliament to lobby the Secretary of State. Officers confirmed that letters had been sent to Bridget Phillipson during the summer, and that local MPs would be convened for an update in early October. Given the turnover of MPs due to the General Election, it was important that they were kept fully informed regarding the issues around DSG allocations.
- Forum Members expressed concern regarding the difference between the £101,000 figure for reimbursement and the proposed £6,000 delegation cost for statutory Shared Parental Leave. Officers stated that the £6,000 cost was a statutory payment in line with government legislation.
- Forum Members expressed concerns regarding assumptions for maintained funding for Shared Parental Leave within the reports, as there was the possibility that those in the consultation would choose option three to maintain the current system. as the other two options were unclear. Officers agreed to produce context relating to the three options, to be looked at in detail by The Chair and Maintained School Reps.
- A Forum Member noted that school contracts tended not to split up holiday pay, expressing slight concern that the split within the consultation appeared to be arbitrary.

- The Chair asked if officers were intending to create separate blocks for Shared Parental Leave and Maternity Leave within the accounting, or whether this would be a shared sum of money. Officers stated that the intention was for to share the same block, as this would be an easier approach to take.
- The Chair queried if the minimum risk-based approach involved conversations with Children’s Services regarding which schools would be targeted for audits, as some schools might be audited more frequently given circumstances. Officers confirmed this was the case.
- The Chair pressed upon the timeline cycle for audits. Officers stated that the key principle regarding governance and risk was the responsibility of school governors and headteachers. Questions had to be raised whether the current system of auditing every school every five years was adding value to the system or a best use of resources. The current audit system did not pick up many issues which needed remedial work. It was acknowledged that a number of schools which were considered low risk would not be visited by the auditors, with this being the responsibility of governors and headteachers.
- A Forum Member asked if there was a way for governors of low-risk schools to be made aware of feedback and to be given reassurance as to why their school was not being audited. Officers stated that the report set out an option for governors to use their budgets to request more frequent assurance from Audit Services.
- A Forum Member queried if the audit offer covered all elements of the school estate, such as infrastructure and utilities Officers clarified that the audits only covered financial matters rather being an all-purpose audit.
- A Forum Member expressed concern that the current five-year audit system did not take payroll into consideration, given that this represented a large portion of expenditure for some schools. Clarification was requested as to whether the minimum risk-based assurance model would still see the half-day assessments that were undertaken at red and amber rated schools using the existing framework or if a new approach would be taken. An officer suggested holding engagement sessions on the new model to provide details and to illustrate its effectiveness.
- The Chair stated it would be ideal if a Forum Member could be present at all of the consultation events if possible, although it was acknowledged that representation at the face-to-face events would be challenging to achieve due to prior commitments.

5.5 The Norfolk Schools Forum **RESOLVED** the following:

1. To **CONSIDER** and **COMMENT** on the proposed content of the Local Authority’s consultation with schools.
2. To **PROVIDE** suggestions regarding how the funding formula part of the consultation could be carried out if the DfE did not provide the provisional DSG allocations in a timely way.
3. To **CONSIDER** and **COMMENT** on the proposed content of the Local Authority’s consultation with maintained schools

## 6. Norfolk Audit Services – School Audits Update

6.1 Forum Members received the annexed report (6).

6.2 Officers introduced the report, which provided an update on the traded school audits and thematic audits that had recently been conducted by Norfolk Audit Services.

6.3 The following points were raised and discussed:

- The Chair requested clarity regarding not checking the employment status for tax purposes on individuals engaged by the school to carry out work. It was queried whether this was a case where such individuals had to declare that they were currently self-employed and covered their own taxes, or if they needed to complete an online proforma. Officers confirmed there was a HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC) toolkit available for assistance, with it being noted that declaring self-employment was not necessarily enough to satisfy requirements. It was important that a strong relationship was forged between schools and the HMRC, as this would help resolve issues highlighted from audits and inspections.
- Issues relating to payroll could be picked up with stakeholders as part of the work of the Audit Service. The payroll system and how schools currently interacted with it could form part of the DSG consultation, with officers happy to investigate further.

6.4 The Norfolk Schools Forum **RESOLVED** to **CONSIDER** and **COMMENT** on the key messages arising from the work of Norfolk Audit Services

## 7. Falling Rolls Funding

7.1 Forum Members received the annexed report (7).

7.2 Officers introduced the report, which was produced in response to DfE guidance for Growth and Falling Roll funds, which was updated in October 2023. The guidance stated that allocations would be based on both Growth and Falling Rolls for the first time, starting from the 2024-25 academic year. It was the intention of the local authority to form a time-limited Falling Rolls working group ahead of the November 2024 meeting of the Schools Forum, to discuss and make recommendations for the 2025-26 academic year.

7.3 The following point was highlighted to the Schools Forum:

- There was a need to determine criteria for the fund, based on the current environment for schools in Norfolk.
- A quantity of Forum Members were required to join the Falling Rolls working group.

7.4 The following points were raised and discussed:

- A Forum Member stated that four primary schools in the Caister area had applied for redundancies in the past week due to falling rolls and queried if they should be directed towards the fund. Officers noted that the criteria for the fund was not yet known, but that the schools could be directed there afterwards to see if they qualified for assistance. However, it was acknowledged that this may be too late for the affected schools. Demographic decline was an issue which schools across the UK had to adapt to.
- A Forum Member noted that the redundancy payment criteria was not clear to schools. Officers agreed to clarify and emphasise the criteria going forward.
- Stephen Beeson, Stephen Dewing, Sarah Shirras and Martin While all **AGREED** to join the Falling Rolls working group.



7.5 The Norfolk Schools Forum **RESOLVED** the following:

1. To **AGREE** to the establishment a time-limited working group of Forum Members and Officers, to consider whether a Falling Rolls fund should be established for Norfolk and, if so, to develop proposed criteria and methodology for allocation of the funds in line with government guidance.
2. To **AGREE** that the outcomes of the working group's work would be reported back at the November 2024 meeting of the Norfolk Schools Forum.
3. To **IDENTIFY** Members to represent the Schools Forum in the working group.

## 8. Early Years Funding 2025-26

8.1 Forum Members received the annexed report (8).

8.2 Officers introduced the report, which provided an update on Early Years Funding. At present, the DfE had not indicated that there would be any changes to Early Years funding nationally for the 2025-26 academic year. With this context, the local authority was proposing to make no changes to the early years DSG funding formula for 2025-26 and, therefore, was not required to consult with early years providers this year

8.3 Officers highlighted the following key elements from the report:

- Due to the significant consultation held in 2023, it was proposed that a consultation would not be held this year. Officers were anticipating that the same formula would be kept, enabling stability. A review was planned before the 2026/27 academic year.
- There was no indication at present from the new government that there would be any changes to early years funding.

8.4 The Norfolk Schools Forum **RESOLVED** to **SUPPORT** the local authority's preferred approach.

## 9. Norfolk Schools Forum Forward Work Plan

9.1 Officers introduced the current forward work plan to the Forum.

9.2 The following items were scheduled for the November 2024 meeting of the Schools Forum:

- Strategic Planning (inc. Local First Inclusion)
- Early Years Block 2025/26 Funding Formula Update (inc. consultation outcomes)
- Schools Block (inc. consultation outcomes and Schools Block transfer)
- De-delegation/Central Schools Services Block

9.3 The Norfolk Schools Forum **RESOLVED** to **NOTE** the forward work plan.

## **10. Any Other Business**

- 10.1 Forum Members raised concerns that the in-person DSG consultation event in King's Lynn on Thursday 17 October clashed with the Norfolk School Leaders' Conference 2024, which was being held in Norwich. It was agreed that a new date for the consultation event be found.
- 10.2 It was noted that the November 2024 meeting of the Schools Forum would have a particularly lengthy agenda due to the DSG consultation outcome being considered at this meeting. Officers suggested either holding an extended, all-day meeting on Tuesday 19 November to ensure all agenda items received a fair hearing, or potentially booking a reserve meeting in early December to cover the remainder of the agenda.

**There being no other business, the meeting closed at 12:11**

**Martin White, Chair  
Norfolk Schools Forum**



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