

# Schools Forum Briefing

From the meeting held on 20 September 2024

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.

## Local First Inclusion update

Schools Forum was updated on the Local First Inclusion Programme as it stands at the start of the academic year. Forum members were informed that Norfolk County Council's Cabinet had confirmed the £35m uplift in Element 3 'top-up' funding for mainstream schools, to cover the 2024/25 financial year.

Members heard that the Element 3 working group had proven useful during its term of operation. A new LFI Reference Group has been formed to continue this strengthened stakeholder engagement, with Mark Vickers OBE appointed as independent chair.

A deep dive into capital sufficiency and Specialist Resource Bases (SRBs) was due to be undertaken at the first meeting. Forum members remarked 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.

Members heard that membership would remain under review to ensure it was representative and proportionate to all sectors.

## Specialist Resource Bases

Current SRB capacity was reported 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. The Learning & Cognition SRB was currently over-subscribed at 108% occupancy, which was part of the reason why further SRBs were being constructed, while The Social, Emotional & Mental Health SRB was only at 79% occupancy, requiring monitoring to understand this under-occupancy. It was reported that one of the SRBs in the SEMH category currently had a pause on new admissions, which had a resulting effect on the dynamics.

It was noted that 80% occupancy was an optimum capacity figure, providing enough space to allow children and young people to be placed close to their home without excessive travel costs. Forum members asked how the 80% optimum figure for SRB occupancy had been derived, given the higher occupancy rates in some SRB categories at present. They heard that there was a delicate balance between strategic planning and ensuring the correct level of provision, and it was suggested that the LFI Reference Group could look at the data on a termly arrears basis to monitor this information going forward.



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

Schools Forum considered the proposals for the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) consultation which this year would be a combination of technical questions and questions regarding the system transformation needed. Members heard that as yet the DfE had not provided allocation details and there was currently no indication of a release timescale, which presented challenges for both officers and schools. It was agreed that conversations with schools would not be delayed despite the DfE still needing to confirm provisional allocations.

It was reported that 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.

Members heard the proposal 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 the intention that outreach move from a per pupil approach to referrals to a more strategic approach over a longer timescale. The consultation would therefore ask schools whether they wanted more provision built into the system.

Members heard also that the current **Element 3 funding model** was being consulted upon, with the aim of providing detail for a new model designed in collaboration with 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, with members highlighting the importance of the understanding of any implications of changes. It was reported that this was an important part of the consultation conversations taking place, and that there would be a breakdown and explanation of funding over the coming years provided.

**Shared Parental Leave and Maternity Leave** were a part of the consultation for maintained schools only; this is not currently reimbursed from the de-delegated maternity budget, with issues causing financial impacts on the budgets of some schools. 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 also highlighted, with the consultation seeking agreeing in principle of the local authority maintaining funding for minimum risk-based assurance. There is a requirement for the Section 151 Officer at Norfolk County Council to provide assurance regarding Council finances and funding to the government; the proposal outlines a move to a rolling cycle of audits conducted under the minimum risk-based assurance principle. As the new approach was risk-based it would enable best auditing practices to be applied to schools and use fewer resources than the current auditing approach.

## **Norfolk Audit Services – School Audits Update**

Schools Forum heard a report, updating them on the traded school and thematic audits recently conducted by Norfolk Audit Services.

Members commented on the importance of the inclusion of payroll information in updated auditing procedures; it was noted that this would be part of any ongoing discussions and it was indicated that schools' interactions with the payroll system would form part of the DSG consultation.

## **Falling Rolls Funding**

Schools Forum members heard that, in response to updated DfE guidance for Growth and Falling Roll funds, allocations would be based on both Growth and Falling Rolls for the first time, starting from the 2024-25 academic year.

They heard 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.

A number of Schools Forum members agreed to join the working group.

## **Early Years Funding 2025-26**

Schools Forum were informed that, given that the DfE had not indicated that any National changes to Early Years funding, 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.

Following the 2023 consultation they were proposing to keep the same formula principles, providing stability, with a review planned ahead of the 2026-27 academic year. This was supported by Schools Forum members.