

Schools Forum Briefing

From the meeting held on 19 November 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 Forum website](#) along with contact details for Forum representatives.

Strategic Planning (including Local First Inclusion)

Schools Forum members heard an update regarding the Local Authority's revised safety valve plan submission to the DfE in October. There has been as yet no formal response from the DfE. A more detailed update on Local First Inclusion (LFI) is expected at the December 2024 Schools Forum meeting, by which point we hope to have more information.

Officers and members discussed a number of challenges, including:

- the delayed timeline for reduction in the use of independent special schools;
- the continued increase in the number of referrals for Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs)
- Alternative Provision capacity
- Tribunals overruling local decisions
- The need to maintain spare capacity in maintained special schools to reduce reliance on the independent schools
- The extended timescale for balancing the overall deficit in the high needs block

Schools Forum highlighted the need for Government to support a collaborative local and national solution to the SEND system challenges.

Provisional DSG Allocations for 2025/26 and Autumn DSG Consultation

Schools Forum received a report outlining information received from the DfE to date. National Funding Formula (NFF) allocations from the Department for Education (DfE) are still awaited, with expectations for their release in late November and the final Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) allocations to follow before Christmas. Indications suggested that the NFF would remain largely unchanged for 2025-26.

However, the Minimum Funding Guarantee (MFG) for mainstream schools was expected to shift down to between -0.5% and 0% in 2025-26, compared to 0% to 0.5% in 2024-25, indicating tighter allocations. The MFG for special schools was set at 0%. Members heard that the Local Authority needed to reapply for Exceptional Circumstances and that several grants, including the Teachers' Pay Additional Grant (TPAG), the Teachers' Pension Employer Contribution Grant (TPECG), and the Core Schools Budget Grant (CSBG), were to be incorporated into the NFF for 2025-26.

Members asked when schools could expect an understanding of their circumstances; they heard that while normal budget timescales would apply, an APT for final mainstream budgets was expected from the DfE in December but that would still not allow for



publishing of any budgets before Christmas. It was highlighted that communications needed to be sent out to schools as soon as possible.

Summary of Responses, Broader Engagement and Specialist Outreach

Schools Forum heard a report which summarised the Local Authority's learning from the recent consultation and engagement sessions. They heard that there had been an increase in the number of pupils and schools represented compared to previous years, though the overall response rate remained low, with a significant bias towards the academy sector. The Local Authority observed different engagement levels between online and face-to-face sessions, concluding that while briefings could be online, engagement sessions in-person yielded more effective dialogue.

Forum members reported that 33 Trusts were involved in the engagement sessions, representing 58% of Primary and 98% of secondary schools. Forum considered how They also suggested realignment of engagement activities with small primary schools to boost responses in future and resolved to consider the level of representation and provide feedback on future consultation arrangements.

Members heard that the LFI Executive Board planned to publish an official response to the consultation views at a future meeting, with further communications planned to highlight how feedback has shaped the strategy. Members also commented on the openness of responses, which was seen as a positive step, as well as suggesting that a follow-up paper with proposals for moving forward with common themes be created and presented. It was agreed that a paper would be submitted to the next LFI reference group.

Mainstream Schools' Funding Model Affordability

Schools Forum heard a report concerning responses made in relation to ensuring the affordability of the mainstream schools' funding model. Responses suggested a strong preference for Option 1, which involved adjusting NFF values, over Option 2, which proposed reintroducing a hard cap on future gains. Schools Forum resolved to recommend Option 1.

Schools Block to High Needs Block Transfer Members heard a report regarding the proposed transfer from the Schools Block to the High Needs Block. Element 3 would be discussed in detail at the December 2024 meeting. Currently, there is limited information on the government's plans to reform SEND funding.

In line with the DfE Safety Valve plan, Schools Forum were asked to vote on two recommendations - the transfer of 0.5% from the schools block to the high needs block, and to support the request to the secretary of state to transfer an additional 1%. To meet DfE deadlines, the Local Authority has already made the request to DfE to move the additional 1% and is required by DfE to seek Schools Forum's support for this request.

The report indicated that the Local Authority would seek DfE support to reduce or eliminate the 1.5% block transfer in future years, ending the redirection of funds from the Schools Block to the High Needs Block. Feedback suggested that retaining the funding within the Schools Block would ensure appropriate funding for Norfolk schools, allowing Element 3 funding to be allocated to the most vulnerable children.

This approach could reduce bureaucracy and provide certainty for schools. The Local Authority's proposal, including the rationale for the available options, was detailed in the report.

Officers and members discussed a number of challenges raised, including:

- the impact of the additional 1% block transfer on schools, particularly concerning consultations and redundancies,
- the assumption that Element 3 funding would reduce if the 1.5% block transfer was approved - officers stated that the local authority could not approve proposals increasing the High Needs Block deficit, as this would affect local finances. Future government reforms could change this.
- some schools faced difficulties due to decisions not to grant Element 3 funding for specific children, as their needs were expected to be met through the school's general offer,
- block transfer impacts school capacity including the loss of teaching assistant posts - officers noted that the increase in the LFI budget outweighed the amount taken out through block transfers, indicating that block transfers were not the sole cause of budget pressures.

Members commented that while schools saw the investment being made, the long timescales meant that results were not yet visible, and that schools lacked the capacity or facilities to meet current EHCP needs due to insufficient general school budgets; this issue was acknowledged and it was reported that work to produce EHCPs beneficial for schools was ongoing, with a need to build confidence in the mainstream system for both parents and schools to form a comprehensive, well-resourced plan. Any changes to EHCP production would be extensive and complex, reflecting the need to support children.

Members noted that uncertainty regarding allocations made decision-making difficult, as the evidence base was not robust enough to show that block transfers were improving school and child outcomes; they heard in response that planned changes to Element 3 distribution aimed to ensure fair and equitable funding.

Schools Forum **voted on the first recommendation**, continuing the 0.5% movement from the Schools Block to the High Needs Block for 2025-26. With 14 votes in favour, 1 against, and 0 abstentions, the recommendation was carried.

An amendment to the second recommendation was made, proposing that the continuation of the additional 1% transfer from the Schools Block to the High Needs Block for 2025-26 be supported, with a maximum overall block transfer of £9.7m. This amendment was agreed upon by Forum Members as being fairer and sending a better message to schools.

The Schools Forum then **voted on the amended second recommendation** regarding the additional 1% block transfer. This was carried with 3 votes in favor, 2 against, and 10 abstentions. Members were clear that their abstentions were based on a lack of detailed funding information from the DfE rather than opposition to the strategy.

Members asked if the 1% block transfer could be revisited at the December 2024 meeting. Officers agreed to contact the DfE for further information, potentially bringing the matter back to the January 2025 meeting if necessary.

Notional SEN

Members heard a report regarding Notional SEN funding distribution, covering two main aspects. The first was the average proportion of budget share allocated to Notional SEN in Norfolk for 2025-26, with options to increase the Notional SEN allocation by 1.5% to 9.11% of the budget share or propose an alternative approach.

The second aspect was the methodology for Notional SEND, either aligning with the DfE recommended approach or retaining the current Norfolk methodology. The Local Authority advocated for Norfolk to align with the national average for Notional SEND and adopt the DfE's methodology and It was emphasized that these recommendations were system-wide moves rather than the Local Authority imposing its will, with feedback supporting incremental movement towards the national average.

Schools Forum voted on the proposal to increase the average Notional SEN allocation in Norfolk by 1.5% for 2025-26, which was carried with 13 votes in favour, 0 against, and 2 abstentions. Members resolved to recommend increasing the average Notional SEN allocation in Norfolk by 1.5% to 9.11% of the budget share for 2025-26. They also recommended reconsidering the methodology for calculating Notional SEN allocations to align with the DfE recommended approach and requested the Local Authority to present a detailed proposal at the next Forum meeting.

Element 3

Members heard that there was a general acknowledgement that changes were required, as the current system could not continue in its current form. Thus, the LFI Reference Group was exploring the utilisation of information around the needs-led elements of the proposals, which would be based on ongoing conversations between the Local Authority and schools. A further report would be brought to the December 2024 meeting of the Schools Forum.

Forum members proposed a vote of thanks to officers for their production of the responses, and resolved to consider the future model during the additional December Forum meeting.

Early Years Budget Grant

Officers introduced a report in response to the Government's announcement of additional funding for local authorities during 2024-2025 to support early years providers with their costs, in response to the recent teachers pay award. This will be distributed through a new Early Years Budget Grant (EYBG), covering September 2024 to March 2025. Norfolk County Council planned to distribute the funding through additional payments to all providers in the Autumn and Spring terms.

Members heard that there was no requirement to consult about the grant distribution, although it had been discussed with the Early Years Consultative Group (EYCG). While no decision was required from the Schools Forum, advice was sought regarding the Local Authority's approach. The funding for nursery schools will be allocated to them based on the number of children attending. There is more flexibility in how the remaining funding is spent. In line with previous decisions to move away from quality supplements and support all providers to recruit and retain a

high quality workforce, the EYCG unanimously agreed that the additional grant should be allocated equally across the sector through an additional base rate allocation.

Members raised the concern that there are additional costs associated with employing teachers. Members noted that many schools did not employ teachers in their Early Years provision. Concerns were raised that the approach could lower quality and standards in schools; officers emphasised the need for flexibility given the sector's complexity, noting the wide range of staff qualifications and training. Members also highlighted the lack of school representatives on the Early Years consultative group.

Early Years Budget Grant

Schools Forum agreed to the disapplication for the re-baselining of Icen Primary Academy and Icen Secondary Academy, following a significant change process to separate the former Icen Academy all-through school.

Schools Forum agreed the disapplication request for a second and final year of amalgamation protection for Brisley CE Primary Academy.

Exceptional Premises Factor – Disapplication

The Norfolk Schools Forum agreed the proposed disapplication for use of the exceptional premises factor for hire or lease of buildings or land where the school premises was unable to provide the necessary facility. More information can be found in the [full minutes](#) of the meeting.

Growth Fund (Schools Block)

Members heard a report detailing the proposed Growth Fund for the 2025-26 financial year and its criteria for distribution, pending Schools Forum approval. They discussed a number of individual school settings, details of which can be found in the full meeting minutes. The Schools Forum then resolved to approve a £1.047m centrally retained fund for pre-16 growth in 2025-26 and the pre-16 growth fund criteria as detailed in the report.

Falling Rolls Funding

The outcome from the Falling Rolls Working Group meeting in October was shared with Schools Forum. The group discussed the principles of a falling rolls fund for 2025-26 and concluded that such a fund was not currently necessary, though it should remain under review. Data indicated that student numbers were not rebounding, and a declining birth rate was also noted.

The Schools Forum unanimously approved the recommendation not to introduce a Falling Rolls fund as part of the 2025-26 funding formula for Norfolk schools. Additionally, they agreed to consider and review the approach to Falling Rolls annually to determine when this funding mechanism might be needed, with engagement from the Schools Forum as necessary.

Central School Services Block

Officers introduced a report detailing the funding of central services from the Central School Services Block (CSS) for 2025-26, pending approval from the Schools Forum. They noted that the allocation for the CSS had not yet been received, so last year's figures and principles were being used. Members asked if the 20% VAT increase on independent school fees had been considered; they heard that the £100,000 figure was a contribution towards overall costs and that fees would be exempt if the child had an EHCP, with specific tax arrangements in place.

Schools Forum then voted on the four decisions:

- Decision 1, to approve the level of admissions funding at £487,000.
- Decision 2, to approve the level of funding for the Norfolk Schools Forum at £30,000
- Decision 3, to approve the level of funding for fees to independent schools for pupils without SEN at £100,000.
- Decision 4, to approve funding for responsibilities held for all schools from the CSS Block, including the Teachers' Pay Grant and Teachers' Pension Employer Contribution Grant for centrally employed staff at £2.714m plus inflation.

All decisions were carried unanimously.

Maintained Schools Consultation Responses

A number of items were considered by maintained schools representatives of Schools Forum only. Full details of these can be found in the Forum minutes, with a summary of decisions below:

Schools Forum resolved to consider feedback from the consultation survey regarding possible de-delegations for maternity leave holiday pay for support staff and shared parental leave, as well as options for internal audit, to inform decision-making on the De-Delegation item.

Additionally, they approved proposed amendments for Norfolk's Scheme for Financing Schools. Members voted on a number of proposals within the Maintained Schools De-Delegation – detailed voting information can be [found in the Forum minutes](#).