

Minutes of the Schools Forum – 16th January 2025

Microsoft Teams Meeting.

Status: **Draft**

Name	Establishment	Representing
Claire Whiting (CW) Chair	Redhill Primary Academy	Academies
Sarah Roberts (SR)	High Ercall Primary School	Maintained Primaries – Wellington Cluster
Rachel Cook (RC)	Newdale Primary School	Maintained Primaries – Central Cluster
Robert Fox (RF)	Donnington Wood Junior School	Maintained Primaries – North Cluster
Christobel Cousins (CC)	Lilleshall Primary School	Maintained Primaries – Newport Cluster
Darren Lennon (DL)	Linden Centre PRU	Maintained PRUs
Joe Edgar (JE)	Haberdashers' Abraham Darby Academy	Academies
Nicola Davis (ND)	The Bridge Special School	Maintained Special Schools
Penny Hustwick (PH)	ABC Day Nurseries	PVI Settings
Simon Wellman (SW)	Director of Education & Skills	Representative of the Director of Children's Services
Tim Davis (TD)	Finance Manager	Representative of the Director of Finance
Natalie Bevan (NB)	SDM SEND	Representative of the Director of Children's Services
Andy Wood (AW)	Senior Accountant - Schools	Representative of the Director of Finance

1. Apologies - AW.

1.1 There were no apologies given for this meeting.

2. Minutes of the 12th December 2024 meeting and matters arising - CW.

2.1 The minutes of the 12th December 2024 were accepted as a true and accurate record. Copies of the minutes can be found here:

[Minutes of 12th December 2024.](#)

2.2 Item 9.1 was discussed, and it was stated that the membership would be reviewed to reflect maintained / academy pupil numbers in accordance with the Forum Regulations with the possibility of an additional member to represent the PVI sector.

3. School Block, High Needs Block and Central Schools Services Block Allocations for 2025/26 - TD

3.1 The Forum was provided with a paper which can be found here:

[Dedicated Schools Grant Allocations for the Financial Year 2025-2026](#)

3.2 The Schools Block allocations increased by £14.8m compared to the prior year, however £11.8m of this related to legacy grants now incorporated into the DSG. There has also been a net increase in pupil numbers (secondary increase of 191, primary reduction of 35; a net increase of 156 pupils).

3.3 The schools block allocations includes the Joint Use funding although we are not allowed to distribute this as such. We will therefore let this funding flow through the formulae. The ESFA said that they would not clawback the £648k as it is not a material sum from their perspective.

3.4 The final allocation for high needs is £28k higher than notified in November but the total increase of approximately £39.555m is still significantly less than projected 2024/25 expenditure, so the high needs budget will remain under significant pressure in 2025/26.

3.5 The Central Schools Services Block has been finalised at £6k higher than previously notified, but we are yet to be advised of the charge for centrally purchased licences which historically has been volatile and could well mean we overspend the allocation.

4. Proposal to transfer Schools Block funding to the High Needs - FY2025/26 - TD.

4.1 The paper presented to support this agenda item can be found at the link below.

[Proposal to transfer Schools Block funding to the High Needs Block for FY2025-2026.](#)

4.2 TD gave an overview of the high needs pressures giving rise to this proposal. The DSG deficit brought forward to this financial year was around £1.8m and the projected overspend in 2024/25 is likely to be at least £4m resulting in a £6m deficit to carry forwards to the following year. As noted above, current spending in FY2024/2025 is already greater than the allocations we have received for 2025/2026 which would imply that the deficit is likely to increase in 2025/2026.

4.3 Main pressures driving the overspend are increase in demand for EHCPs, Special School Places and independent placements; the biggest areas of expenditure.

4.4 The position in T&W is reflected nationally with the DfE reporting to the National Audit Office that they expect the high needs position nationally to be a deficit of over £4bn by the end of the FY2025/2026.

- 4.5 The proposal put to the Forum is that 0.5% of the schools block is transferred to high needs to mitigate the pressures and enable T&W to continue with the non-statutory support for mainstream schools that has been developed in recent years.
- 4.6 CW asked what the age range is that the high needs block is intended to cover? TD responded that the statutory age range for support extends up to a maximum age of 25. However there are relatively few young people over the age of 21 funded from the high needs block in T&W.
- 4.7 SW stated that we have a cost improvement plan which is reported to the Chief Executive and senior management at the LA. It should be noted however that a large proportion of high needs are outside of local authority control, such as national pay rises and supplier costs and of course the increase in employers national insurance contributions taking effect in April 2025.
- 4.8 CW thanked SW for the comprehensive SEND presentation with all 50+ slides. It was slightly reassuring to see that T&W are not alone in their struggles to make ends meet.
- 4.9 SW stated that nationally we need to be looking at a different way of delivering SEND to those pupils that need it rather than relying upon a statutory EHCP basis.
- 4.10 CW asked each member of the Forum to give their view on the proposal.
- 4.11 ND – Lots of requests for complex needs and not just from pupils living in T&W as pupils from any local authority can request a place. Currently The Bridge is over subscribed especially at reception. Over-placement means that classes are overcrowded, which in turn risks complex pupils having to go to independent placements at very high costs. We have attempted to expand the capacity of the setting as much as possible but being a PFI school extension to the premises are cost prohibitive. The LA needs the additional funding to continue to be flexible with provision.
- 4.12 NB thanks schools for working with the LA and being flexible.
- 4.13 DL echoes what ND said and that there are increasing numbers of complex pupils leading to extensions to provision, aiming to prevent the need for independent placements. The Linden Centre is working with schools to prevent exclusions.
- 4.14 PH – SEND a huge problem for early years PVI's. Currently have six pupils looking for an EHCP in her settings whereas historically this would normally be one or two. Smaller settings can find it particularly difficult to cope with needs of complex pupils. Pupils are staying on at early years settings due to the lack of availability of specialist pre-school placements. ND pointed out that there used to be a 40 place assessment nursery at The Bridge but those children are now out at settings because the space was needed at the Bridge for older pupils.
- 4.15 JE stated that she is seeing the strain in secondary schools and that schools are needing to be more flexible to cope.

- 4.16 RF stated that at the cluster meeting they agreed the proposal but wanted to see the pathways through the SEND system.
- 4.17 RC - now receiving non mainstream type pupils and staff are struggling to cope. Recruitment is a major problem and established staff are also struggling and not wanting to teach the more challenging pupils; not what they signed up for. Parents are having problems finding a place to match the needs of their children with some schools refusing to entertain admitting them. Central cluster voted to support the proposal but very reluctantly.
- 4.18 SR stated that it was the same picture in Wellington cluster. Schools don't know what to do with some pupils or where to go with them. Some pupils are looking for additional support to enable them to cope with the transition to mainstream secondary schools, but there appears to be a lack of provision.
- 4.19 CC stated that Newport cluster appreciate the ISF work and outreach.
- 4.20 Following all members comments, CW called for a vote on the proposal. The vote was unanimous in favour of transferring 0.5% of the Schools Block to High Needs in 2025/26.

5. Early Years Budget 2025 – 2026 - TD.

- 5.1 The Forum was provided with a paper which can be found here:
[Early Years Budget for Financial Year 2025 - 2026.](#)
- 5.2 TD gave the group a background to the paper which had a similar format to that put forward last year. The EY budget has increased from around £10m several years ago to an estimate of over £31m in 2025/26, due to the expansion of provision, such that in September 2025 the funded entitlement will be 30 hours for children of working parents from 9 months through to entry to school.
- 5.3 The paper was presented to the EY finance group in the first week of January 2025 and they supported the proposals.
- 5.4 PH spoke of the pressures on settings now as more of the hours at settings are funded by government which reduces their ability to charge for wrap around hours, which historically made up the shortfall in funded hourly rates. The increase in employers national insurance contributions will be a major concern to settings as there is no mention of additional grant funding for early years to cover this. Add to that the pressures of SEND there may be some settings that will not be able to remain in business.
- 5.5 Most of the 2025/26 plans are for consultation with the Forum, but the Forum needs to vote on the central retention, proposed at £361k in 2025/26 to cover the costs of the central early years support team and associated costs. The increase in this element is 7.7% compared to 2024/25 whereas the increase in income had gone up by 39%

5.6 TD stated that T&W have always retained less than most other local authorities and will distribute 98.8% of funding to settings compared to a minimum requirement of 96%, an increase from the previously set level of 95%.

5.7 CW called for a vote and all were in favour.

6. AOB - CW.

6.1 CW thanked the group for the quick turnaround in consulting with clusters to enable the agenda items to pass through. CW also stated that the papers presented were far better and timelier than when she started on the Forum 15 or so years ago.

7. Next Meetings

The dates of the forthcoming meetings for the academic year 2024/25, are as follows:

[Planned Forum Meetings](#)

- Thursday 20th March 2025
- Thursday 15th May 2025