



## CUMBERLAND SCHOOLS FORUM

### MINUTES OF THE MEETING/TRAINING HELD ON 17 September 2025 CET Meeting Room, Yewdale Primary School, Carlisle (and Microsoft Teams)

#### PRESENT

James Blackwell	(Maintained Primary Schools)
Nicky Corfield	(Maintained Primary Schools)
Andy Curtis	(Teachers' Associations)
Danny Gee	(PRUs)
David Grimshaw	(Maintained Primary Schools)
Rhiannon Hughes	(Maintained Nursery Schools)
Terentius Jackson	(Maintained Primary Schools)
Vicki Jackson	(Secondary Academy)
Ruth Lawler	(Secondary Academy)
Joanne Lloyd	(Maintained Primary Schools)
Elaine Lynch	(Cumberland Portfolio – Lifelong Learning & Development)
Chris McAree	(Secondary Academy)
Joanne Ormond	(Maintained Primary Schools)
Michael Smillie	(Secondary Academy)
Kris Williams	(Special Academy)

#### Officers in Attendance:

Sarah Flockton	(Senior Manager – Strategic Development – item 8)
Sue Lowndes	(Interim Service Manager – Learning Improvement Service)
Natalie Bevan	(SEND & AP Lead and Transformation Manager – item 9)
Claire Marshall	(Group Accountant – Children's Social Care & Education)
Paula Gledhill	(Interim Group Accountant)
Gemma Benson	(Principal Auditor – item 7)
Nicola Shiels	(Forum Support)

#### Observers:

None

#### Apologies for Absence

Emma Hamer	(AD – Education, SEND & Inclusion)
Sophie Scott	(Finance Manager – Education, SEND & Inclusion)
Sally Senejko	(Senior Manager – SEND & Inclusion)
Dawn Watson	(Primary Academy)

## **PART 1: ITEMS LIKELY TO BE CONSIDERED IN THE PRESENCE OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC**

### **1. Appointment of Chair**

Chris McAree was appointed as Chair of the Cumberland Schools Forum for the coming year.

### **2. Appointment of Vice-Chair**

Michael Smillie was appointed as Vice-Chair of the Cumberland Schools Forum for the coming year.

### **3. Exclusion of Press and Public**

It was agreed that all items would be considered in the public domain.

### **4. Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest at this stage.

### **5. Minutes of Previous Meeting and Matters Arising**

The minutes of the meeting held on 18 June 2025 were agreed as an accurate record.

There were no matters arising.

### **6. Summary of Audit Findings – School Audits 2024-25**

Internal Audit undertook a small sample of school audits each year. Gemma Benson, Principal Auditor presented a report that summarised the findings from those audits completed in 2024-25. The findings would be disseminated more widely to all schools via the Schools Portal which would allow schools to consider their own arrangements with regard to the findings in the report and put in place any necessary improvements.

Four school reviews had been completed during 2024-25, one secondary, one primary and two infant schools. Internal Audit reports were agreed with the Headteacher at the individual schools and included an action plan for improving controls. The agreed report was also provided to the Chair of Governors/Chair of Finance Committee so that governors could support heads in implementing agreed actions. Individual school audit findings were provided to the Audit Committee as part of Internal Audit's regular progress reports.

As a limited number of audits were undertaken each year, Internal Audit collated the findings from each review into a summary report that could be shared with all schools to assist them in ensuring that they operated appropriate controls in the areas identified.

The school audit programme had been reviewed for 2025-26, resulting in expanded testing in additional risk areas for schools, including cyber security and information governance.

The most common findings from the audits undertaken were:

- Governing bodies not clearly evidencing budget approval and deficit recovery plans in minutes.

- Lack of, or inadequate financial procedures.
- Invoices raised without payment terms.
- Timesheets not completed or signed by claimants.
- School fund accounts lacking timely audited accounts.
- Less frequent financial reporting than required.
- Purchases not authorised in line with financial delegation policy.
- No evidence of regular asset inventory checks.

Members of Schools Forum discussed the report and asked if it was possible to target the schools that were selected for a visit, perhaps those with a deficit budget? It was explained that before schools were identified a risk assessment process was followed and discussions involving colleagues from the School Finance Team and Learning Improvement Service took place. It was also noted that the New Headteacher induction this year would include a session on finance and one on governance including governor responsibilities. More was needed but this was a good starting point, however support for the whole school estate was also important. Online half-termly training for governing bodies would be available for schools to sign-up to. This would include the offer of a session on finance but more training for governors regarding financial responsibilities was needed as there was a potential gap in governors' understanding around financial standards.

Whilst Schools Forum was supportive of sharing the report with all schools, some care was needed to frame the findings positively otherwise the message to schools may be one of overwhelming negativity. There was also some value in setting out any help and support that was available to headteachers and how that support could be accessed.

It was noted that there the LA had issues with capacity to undertake the audits and to support training for schools and governing bodies but the need for support and training was acknowledged. It was suggested that it might be possible to access some additional support from the Cumbria Association of Business Managers (Michael Smillie and Ruth Lawler were part of this group).

Schools Forum noted the content of the report and the findings as well as the intention to circulate to all schools for information via the Schools Portal.

## 7. **SEND Sufficiency – Verbal Update**

Sarah Flockton, Senior Manager – Strategic Development & Schools Organisation joined the meeting to provide a verbal update on SEND Sufficiency.

This was the first occasion that Schools Forum had received an update on SEND Sufficiency. The SEND Sufficiency Plan would be updated by the end of this year and would be available for schools to view and consider; in future, a written annual SEND Sufficiency update report would be presented to the Forum.

As at December 2024 there were 704 specialist places in Cumberland. A further 23 had been delivered from September, 4 at Hensingham RP (expansion) and 19 at Mayfield Special School with an additional 8 places commissioned at James Rennie Special School from October 2025. Looking ahead there was an ambition to deliver further additional places by 2027.

Occupancy levels in resourced provisions (RP) were being monitored to ensure that the right provision was in the right location and to identify any issues relating to the ability to

access RP places. There were currently 162 RP places with 152 children and young people accessing the places suggesting that there were 10 places available, however some RPs are operating over their commissioned number. As such, currently 16 places were unallocated, 9 of these were in two RPs but colleagues were working with these provisions in relation to the low occupancy as any commissioned RP places, including empty places, continued to be funded.

There were 533 places in the three special schools in Cumberland with all places fully occupied. The additional 19 places at Mayfield had been allocated prior to the work being carried out to create the places. This will also be the situation with the additional 8 places at James Rennie which would be available in October.

As of 16 September, there were 3055 children and young people in Cumberland with an EHCP and of these just under 60% were currently attending a mainstream school.

Looking ahead, monitoring occupancy levels in RPs would continue with actions to be taken as appropriate to ensure that the right provision was available at the right time. The SEND Sufficiency Plan had identified that there were gaps in RP provision however, the focus needed to remain on the special schools given that they were all fully occupied and capital budgets were limited. Feasibility studies were underway at the three special schools which would determine what could be achieved and the costs involved to undertake the works.

A white paper on the approach to SEND reform was awaited during the autumn which, when published, would be reviewed in terms of the impact on current ways of working and provision to be delivered.

Schools Forum thanked Sarah for the update and congratulated officers on the additional places created, with more on the way. Points made during the discussion that followed included:

- When compared with similar plans in other LAs, the Cumberland SEND Sufficiency Plan was much more detailed, accessible and up to date.
- Projected works were positive but realistically it would take time for the projects to be completed.
- Was the LA considering the development of SEND units in mainstream schools? These units were being considered and discussions with schools were ongoing, but it was difficult to get the provision in the right place. The impact of having a provision in one area rather than having it across an area would also be a consideration.
- If considering different models of provision such as specialist units in schools, capacity allowing, the special schools would want to support.
- RPs – there were increasing surplus spaces in primary schools; remodelling space to create RP was ideal but it was more difficult if capacity or building extensions needed to be added to create the provision. This required a careful balance with very limited capital budget available.
- The increasing number of tribunals was noted as well as the number of consultations that schools were receiving. There was some concern about where the young people would be placed while additional provision was being developed and also about the cost and time burden on headteachers in relation to each tribunal and responding to consultations.
- It was suggested that it might be helpful if the sufficiency plan could include the average cost per place for each type of provision.

Schools Forum welcomed the update and noted that a formal report would be presented to Forum next year.

## 8. SEND Strategy – Verbal Update

Natalie Bevan, SEND & AP Lead and Transformation Manager joined the meeting to provide a verbal update on SEND Strategy.

In July 2025 Ofsted and CQC had inspected SEND services in the Cumberland local area. The outcome of the inspection had been published in September. There were three possible inspection outcomes and Cumberland had received outcome 2 representing a positive trajectory when compared to the 2019 inspection of Cumbria County Council. That inspection identified significant weaknesses and nine priority areas; the recent inspection identified two areas of improvement. Inspectors acknowledged that work was already underway to address these and recognised that we knew our area well.

Strengths included the strategic vision and direction of travel, commissioning of alternative provision (AP), positive transitions for CYP, nursery settings and how they were supported, inclusive schools' culture and identification of multi-agency support for the early years sector. The areas for improvement related to social care and health advice in EHCPs, waiting times for CAMHS, embedding the new programme of development checks for CYP aged 5 – 19, using information about attendance, exclusions and suspensions better to identify trends that might suggest the vulnerability of some CYP and ensuring that all information was incorporated into any evaluation of impact.

The SEND & AP Action Plan would be updated within 50 days and the SEND & AP Strategic Partnership Board would consider proposals regarding changes in governance at their next meeting. The next full inspection would be within three years. Thanks were expressed to the settings that the inspectors had visited and to those schools that took part in other meetings with the inspection team.

As mentioned previously there were currently 3055 EHCPs with the primary need being ASD followed by speech and language. 341 requests for an EHCP assessment had been received between January and June, averaging at approximately 55 requests per month. A high number of these were parental requests with biggest number of requests being for KS3 pupils.

There was a 27% compliance rate to complete within the 20-week timescale. To address this, Spiky Profile had been commissioned to supply a team of EHCP writers; the importance of achieving the 20-week timescale was that CYP would get the support that they needed while schools would receive appropriate additional resources more quickly. In relation to the backlog of annual reviews, a support team had been commissioned from May to October and 937 reviews had been cleared. 105 annual reviews remained outstanding, and it was noted that with these ones, there were some issues in getting the required information from schools. Three additional EHCP Co-Ordinators would be recruited to support EHCP timeliness and the annual review backlog and a communication would be sent to schools about the outstanding reviews, information that was needed and support available.

It was also reported that there had a significant increase in the number of EOTAS packages – 41 at a general cost of between £30 - £60k per annum. EHE numbers continued to increase rising from 524 last year to a current number of 721 with an additional 24 since

the beginning of term, mainly Yr10/11 and primary age not transitioning to secondary school.

Other areas of work to explore that would help the partnership move forward included:

- Establishing a panel led by schools that would allow CYP to access HN funding without having an EHCP.
- Training – review what training looked like currently and consider how that might be developed to deliver the required skills while also highlighting training and CPD opportunities such the neurodiversity pilot as well as issuing more information about ADHD and autism during the autumn term.
- Begin a conversation about the development of a specialist outreach service (separate discussion with special schools that already provided some outreach support).
- Provide schools and settings with the opportunity to understand what the offer would be so that they could make an informed decision about becoming more inclusive and delivering specific provision.
- Consider a survey of schools – including CPD costs to give fuller picture of issues facing schools?
- Funding – internal audit of DSG and education financial return; importance of effectively planning ahead while considering primary areas of need.
- Development of a dashboard for schools that would provide current information about what SEND looked like in each individual school.
- SENDAC and links with parents & carers – strengthen and reinforce the message to parents/carers that we can deliver good provision that delivers for children.

Communication was vital and it was important that communications were pitched at the right level and audience. The government White Paper was expected in October but ahead of that Forum members were recommended to read the Children's Commissioner Report 2025 that had been published on Monday, 8 September 2025.

Schools Forum welcomed the update, and both Sarah and Natalie were thanked for moving the work in relation to SEND sufficiency and strategy forward at pace.

It was acknowledged that one of the biggest areas of work going forward related to the growing number of EHCPs. There was also some concern about the increasing number of CYP that would be leaving special schools and moving into further education with insufficient FE places available in Cumberland for these young people. As a result, more expensive places may have to be sought outside the council area.

A later agenda item would seek suggestions for potential modelling ahead of the next meeting of the High Needs Working Group so any thoughts relating to this update were raised at that point.

## **9. Provisional De-delegated Contingency Budget Outturn 2024-25**

A report presenting the provisional outturn position on the de-delegated contingency budget for the 2024-25 financial year as at 31 March 2025 was considered. The underspend in the provisional outturn was £0.320m and in accordance with the Dedicated Schools Grant conditions, the underspend would be carried forward into the Dedicated Schools Grant earmarked reserve.

As this was a de-delegated budget it therefore only related to maintained schools and not academies.

The de-delegated contingency budget for 2024-25 was £0.379m. DfE guidance stated that the contingency budget could be used for three purposes:

- Circumstances which were unforeseen when the school's budget share was initially determined.
- Schools in financial difficulty
- Additional costs relating to new, reorganised or closing schools

**Circumstances which were unforeseen when the school's budget share was initially determined.**

The main areas of expenditure related to ill health retirements, administration costs relating to the administration of the Teachers' Annual Pension Return and temporary accommodation costs at the Gillford Centre PRU.

Following a query raised at the March meeting of Schools Forum it had been noted that education and finance colleagues had reviewed whether the temporary accommodation was still required at the Gillford Centre or whether this contract could be terminated. Notice had been given on the contract and Portakabin had removed the temporary buildings over the summer holidays. These costs would therefore cease in the longer term.

In discussing the report, a number of points/queries were raised including:

- A query about the Teachers' annual pension return costs and whether this was a one-off cost? Colleagues would review this and provide an update after the meeting.
- During the meeting, discussions had identified some specific training needs in relation to school finance and it was suggested that some contingency fund could be allocated to provide a 'one-off' training programme. A paper exploring if it would be possible to use additional expenditure to improve the financial welfare of schools through the development of a training programme was requested for consideration at the next Schools Forum meeting.
- There was a further request for Schools Forum to receive a report setting out the financial welfare of those schools in the Ofsted window that may be subject to an academy order with associated costs of academisation potentially falling to this budget.

The Schools Forum noted the provisional outturn position in the contingencies budget for 2024-25.

## **10. High Needs Budget Monitoring Provisional Outturn 2024-25**

A report presenting the provisional cumulative High Needs (HN) block deficit position as at 31 March 2025 at a value of £25.481m was considered. This followed adjustments made to the provisional outturn that had been presented to Cumberland Council Executive on 11 September, where the position was stated as £25.922m.

Backstop arrangements for the finalising of local authority accounts for 2024-25 meant that the Statement of Accounts would be published by Cumberland Council no later than the end of December, ahead of the final backstop deadline of 27 February 2026.

A balanced High Needs budget had been set for 2024-25 with no planned transfer to or from reserves. The initial budget available for the HN Block was £36.491m based on the provisional HN block allocation from central government as confirmed in December 2023. There were transfers of £0.224m from the Schools Block. Since the initial budget was set the HN block allocation had been updated to reflect adjusted recoupment for HN places.

Performance against the High Needs Block budget was monitored monthly with reports presented to senior management, and to Executive on a quarterly basis, as well as to each Schools Forum meeting. The provisional in-year outturn showed an overspend of £6.097m as at 31 March 2025.

The key variances were detailed in the report and related to special schools, resourced provision, ISP and other placements, central SEN, residential ISPs, invest to save initiatives, post-16 ISPs, post-16 FE colleges and EHCP top-ups for pupils in mainstream school and early years providers.

The pressure against the High Needs Block continued to be due to specific budget pressures relating to the growth in demand for Education Health Care Plans (EHCPs) for children and young people with SEN which continued to rise. Benchmarking showed Cumberland's percentage of pupils with EHCPs was higher compared to the national rate and to Cumbria's statistical neighbours. The rate of increase for Cumbria overall was matched by the rate of increase nationally and compared to Cumbria statistical neighbours.

Cumbria took part of the Department for Education's Delivering Better Value for SEND programme and successfully applied and received approval for a £1m grant for each new authority to support their improvement plans, the impact of which had been incorporated into Cumberland's DSG management plan. The DBV Programme had ended on 31 March 2025.

Members noted and commented favourably about the reduction in the cost of residential places. Forum members discussed that the table in the paper needed to include a column for the number of places in each category so that both the number and average value of each could be understood along with the total spend figures. A previous discussion was about the requirement to set a balanced budget and whether it was possible to consider the budget position 'in-year' was also revisited. This would help to gain a better understanding and enable expected and actual expenditure to be tracked, if it would be possible to reduce the deficit and how much drift was there within the financial year?

Cumberland Schools Forum noted the provisional outturn for the High Needs Block budget as at 31 March 2025.

## **11. Maintained School Balances**

Schools Forum considered a report that summarised the projected mainstream school balances. Based on school budget plans submitted in May 2025, the net deficit balance was projected to be £8.124m as at 31 March 2026. This comprised of 94 schools proposing surplus balances totalling (£4.292m) and 31 schools proposing deficit balances totalling £12.417m.

Maintained schools were required to submit a three-year budget plan to the School Finance Team each year by 31 May. The plans were reviewed to check that the funding assumptions made were reasonable and that the expenditure plans were achievable. A summary report was provided to the Assistant Director, Education, SEND & Inclusion who approved the budgets. Schools that submitted a budget that could not be approved, because they were forecasting a deficit balance or for other reasons, were required to re-submit a revised budget by 31 October. Schools that proposed a deficit budget in May must apply for a licensed deficit and return a forecast year-end outturn as at 30 September and 31 December. In accordance with LA Scheme for Financing Schools a summary report was provided to Schools Forum.

As at 31 March 2025 the forecast net deficit balance for maintained schools was (£2.292m). Based on schools' own projections from their May budget submissions the net deficit balance was predicted to become a deficit balance of (£8.124m) as at 31 March 2026 which was an increase of £5.832m compared to the 2024-25 financial year. Of the 94 schools that were predicting surplus balances for 2025-26, a total of 14 schools were predicting balances in excess of the allowable 8% (nursery, primary, special and PRUs) and 5% (secondary) thresholds.

The number of schools with a deficit balance was predicted to be 31 as at 31 March 2026. Of the 31 forecasting deficit balances from 2025-26, two of them were predicting a surplus balance at the end of 2026-27. 21 schools that were forecasting deficit balances from 2025-26 were also predicting deficit balances at the end of 2027-28.

Secondary schools continued to display the most significant budget difficulties with 5 out of 6 maintained secondary schools predicting deficit budgets in 2025-26. The 5 secondaries predicting deficit budgets in 2025-26 had also been in deficit in 2024-25 and the net deficit balance for these secondaries was predicted to increase by £2.260m to £8.271m.

Applications for licensed deficits had been received from 19 out of the 31 schools that had proposed deficit budgets for 2025-26. Applications had been requested from those schools who had not yet applied for a licensed deficit to ensure they were compliant with the policy.

Schools Forum was concerned at the increasing level of deficit budgets in maintained schools and felt it was important that the LA were able to implement measures to address the issue of increasing deficits in schools. A process of challenge, including the introduction of a new framework of meetings with schools and an action plan to improve and change the tide was needed. The LA Finance team were keen to support this work but there were also concerns about staff capacity to fully address issues and work with schools to challenge and support.

Conversations with schools were ongoing to change the culture and understanding about the need for effective challenge. Stages in challenge included issuing a warning notice which could be followed with withdrawal of delegation. If delegation was withdrawn, the LA were then required to administer the entire school budget. There was some further discussion about the possible use of contingency to support the finance team in administering budgets if delegation was withdrawn from a school. It was also, however, noted that any remaining contingency could only be earmarked for use at a point in time when the absolute position in terms of expenditure against the budget was clear.

Schools Forum noted the projected school balances for maintained schools.

## **12. School Performance Statistics and Compliance**

A report that set out the schools' performance data for Cumberland maintained schools and PRUs in relation to financial data returns was presented. The report also included details about the LA Finance Team for transparency. This regular report highlighted the compliance to deadlines of both schools and the Local Authority Schools Finance Team and provided the Forum with the wider implications of such deadlines not being met effectively.

From 1 April 2023 until the end of the 2024-25 financial year, the Schools Finance Team had been hosted by colleagues in Westmorland and Furness. This arrangement ceased

on 31 March 2025 and a Cumberland Schools Finance Team has been established. The Cumberland Schools Finance Team had worked hard on the lead up to this transfer, and since, to increase the dialogue between schools and the local authority as well as to improve the communications coming from the team.

As part of the LA Scheme for Financing of Schools and PRUs there was an expectation on every school to submit specific financial returns by set deadlines with a similar expectation on the Schools Finance Team to provide schools with the data needed to make informed decisions.

To date there had been six main deadlines in 2025-26 that maintained schools had been asked to comply with. Two of these were reported to Schools Forum on 18 June 2025. The remaining four were 20 June: bank reconciliation period 2 for chequebook schools and maternity reimbursement claims for chequebook schools, 20 July: VAT return period 3 for chequebook schools, bank reconciliation period 3 for chequebook schools and ISBQ return for chequebook schools.

The report set out the compliance rates for all six deadlines as well as the methods that had been used to inform and remind schools of the requirement to submit the returns.

As well as the maintained school deadlines, the Local Authority Schools Finance Team had also had six deadlines to meet - the publication of monthly tabs and circulation of the Excess Surplus Balances letters to schools.

Some monthly tab reports had been issued late due to technical issues arising out of our control. The Schools Finance Team were actively working with IT colleagues to ensure that the issues were rectified.

The letters requesting justification for Excess Surplus Balances had been uploaded late to the portal, meaning schools could not return evidence by the required deadline of 31 May as prescribed in the LA Scheme. An extension had therefore been given to schools to return their justifications by Friday 13 June 2025. Despite this extension, there were still returns from schools that were outstanding on 18 July meaning that decisions could not be communicated to schools until the beginning of the 2025-26 academic year.

Whilst reviewing the returns submitted from schools, the School Finance Team had also been increasing their challenge to deficit schools.

It was reported previously that meetings had been held with 19 schools, providing the opportunity to provide additional challenge to those schools with deficit and allow for open and frank discussions about the challenges faced and resources available to support schools. Due to the summer break, the figures had not changed considerably since the last report however this work would resume now that the new academic year had commenced. Upcoming meetings would reflect on the 3-year budget pack submissions from May and October as these were reviewed.

The Cumberland Schools Forum welcomed the report and noted the position and the implications of the delays in submissions.

### **13. High Needs Working Group – Modelling Requests**

At the June meeting of Schools Forum, it had been suggested that a standing item be added to future School Forum agenda seeking suggestions from members about possible

areas to model and present to the High Needs Working Group for more detailed discussion. Based on discussions during the meeting, the following were put forward:

- Cost and impact of bringing resourced IEPs back into the county, earlier intervention and ways to fund CYP without the need for an EHCP. In particular, how much would this stem the rise in EHCP numbers?
- EOTAS – current trends, projected trends, pressure on high needs block and mitigations
- EHE – impact on income/school budgets, expenditure
- HN cost/projections for FE given known numbers in schools
- EHCP numbers – breakdown number of requests, numbers of plans completed, how many going to tribunal and mediation, directions to place
- Data – earlier support into schools/current pressures on PRUs

It was important to have appropriate representation on any groups that would be tasked with considering modelling and looking at issues with a view to helping the LA reduce the deficit. Natalie Bevan, Sarah Flockton and James Blackwell all expressed an interest in being involved with the High Needs Working Group. The next meeting of the group would be held on Thursday 9 October 2025 with Branthwaite Academy offered as a venue.

#### **14. Date of Next Meeting**

- i) The next meeting of the Schools Forum would be held on Wednesday, 5 November 2025. This would be an in-person meeting, beginning at 9.30am, venue to be advised.
- ii) A proposed schedule of dates for meetings of the Cumberland Schools Forum and associated working groups during 2026 had been circulated with the agenda. Any comments on the proposed dates to be forwarded to Nicola Shiels otherwise the proposed dates would be finalised and shared. Future meetings would generally be in person meetings.

#### **15. Any Other Business**

A concern had been raised about the fact that draft EHCPs and now EHCPS no longer show the resource funding attached to the plan and how this impacted schools and headteachers in responding rapidly to financial changes as well as their ability to set an accurate budget.

This issue had also been raised through the newly established RP Panel. It was noted that this was an area that was being considered. Natalie Bevan would investigate further with the outcome being updated via the weekly newsletter to schools as well as the SEND bulletin.

There were no other items of business.