



CUMBERLAND SCHOOLS FORUM

MINUTES OF THE MEETING/TRAINING HELD ON 18 June 2025 Cabinet Meeting Room, Cumbria House, Carlisle (and Microsoft Teams)

PRESENT

Nicky Corfield (Maintained Primary Schools)
Danny Gee (PRUs)
David Grimshaw (Maintained Primary Schools)
Rhiannon Hughes (Maintained Nursery Schools)
Vicki Jackson (Secondary Academy)
Ruth Lawler (Secondary Academy)
Joanne Lloyd (Maintained Primary Schools)
Chris McAree (Secondary Academy)
Joanne Ormond (Maintained Primary Schools)
Michael Smillie (Secondary Academy)

Officers in Attendance:

Sue Lowndes	(Interim Service Manager – Learning Improvement Service)
Claire Marshall	(Group Accountant – Children’s Social Care & Education)
Sophie Scott	(Finance Manager)
Nicola Shiels	(Forum Support)

Observers:

None

Apologies for Absence

James Blackwell	(Maintained Primary Schools)
Sarah Flockton	(Senior Manager – Strategic Development & School Organisation)
Emma Hamer	(AD – Education & Skills)
Terentius Jackson	(Maintained Primary Schools)
Elaine Lynch	(Cumberland Portfolio Holder – Lifelong Learning & Development)

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

The meeting had originally been scheduled to take place on 10 June, but it had been rearranged and combined with the Schools Forum training event held on 18 June 2025.

1. Exclusion of Press and Public

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

2. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest at this stage.

3. Minutes of Previous Meeting and Matters Arising

Subject to an amendment to the surname of Joanne Llyod, the minutes of the meeting held on 18 March 2025 were agreed as an accurate record.

There were no other matters arising.

4. High Needs Working Group – Notes and Actions

The High Needs Working Group had met on 6 May 2025 and had considered modelling that set out the cost of special schools, PRUs and AP compared to residential ISPs and spend to save initiatives and the longer-term gain. There was a discussion about benchmarking and the ongoing conversation within the F40 group around the difficulties being faced by many local authorities in relation to high needs funding.

Dates for working group meetings were scheduled during the year but the group will only meet if there are issues that need further and more detailed consideration. Going forwards, it was important to have the right representation on groups that would be tasked with considering modelling and looking at issues with a view to helping the LA reduce the deficit.

It was suggested that an item be included on future School Forum agenda to seek suggestions of areas to model from School Forum members.

5. SEND Sufficiency – Verbal Update

Due to the meeting being rearranged, Sarah Flockton was unable to join the meeting so it was agreed that this item should be deferred and brought forward to the next meeting in September.

6. De-delegated Contingency Budget Monitoring 2024-25 Q3

A report presenting the forecast outturn position on the de-delegated contingency budget for the 2024-25 financial year as at 31 December was presented. The budget was forecast to underspend by £0.318m 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 Return and temporary accommodation costs at the Gillford Centre PRU.

At the March meeting of Schools Forum, an update in relation to the ongoing temporary accommodation at the Gillford Centre in Carlisle was requested. Education and finance colleagues had reviewed whether the temporary accommodation was still required at the Gillford Centre or whether this contract could be terminated. It was reported that notice had now been given on this contract with Portakabin and the temporary buildings would be removed over the summer holidays. Therefore, these costs would cease in the longer term.

In discussing the report, there was a question about if the contingency was underspent, was there a mechanism for the underspend to be redistributed to maintained schools or did it automatically go back to earmarked reserves? And similarly, if there was an overspend, would that be clawed back? This query would be reviewed with an update to a future meeting.

The Schools Forum noted the forecast outturn position as at Q3 for the contingencies budget 2024-25.

7. **High Needs Block Budget Monitoring 2024-25 Q2**

A report was presented that provided an update on the High Needs (HN) block deficit as at 31 December 2024 which was forecast to be £25.254m as at 31 March 2025.

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 projection against the budget as at Q3 showed that the budget was projected to overspend by £5.813m as at 31 March 2025.

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

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 was 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 would be incorporated into Cumberland's DSG management plan in due course.

Members discussed the report, the requirement to set a balanced budget and queried whether it was possible to consider the budget position 'in-year' in order to understand the annual expenditure and demands on the budget better, if it was possible to reduce the deficit and how much drift was there within the financial year? This could be an area that the High Needs Group could consider; other areas suggested for consideration were reviewing children and young people with EHCPs to determine that they remained in appropriate provision, to consider the number of EHCPs that were ceased following appropriate support having been in place and consider projected numbers of EHCPs including those coming through from SENIF/EY block.

There was also a short update on the home to school transport transformation programme. This included updating the home to school transport policy, reviewing exceptional transport and developing independent travel arrangements.

Cumberland Schools Forum noted the current projection on the HN Budget as at 31 December 2024.

8. Verbal Update on School Balances Pending Year End Report

The formal report on school balances would be presented to Schools Forum following the completion of the year end process but it was expected that the level of school balances would be reducing in the coming years.

The headline figures were set out for maintained primary and secondary schools. There were some concerned about the level of the deficit balances and there was a question as to whether any schools had had delegation removed. Forum members would support the LA if this were an approach that was adopted.

In future, schools should be willing to address the deficit by planning much further ahead in terms of managing change, reductions in workforce, etc. The management of change process could take two years, so it was important to be more proactive in this area and to maintain the excess surplus balance policy.

9. Excess Surplus Balances

Schools Forum considered a report that presented the outcome of the excess surplus balance policy that had been applied against maintained school balances as at 31 March 2024.

Due to a delay in the closedown process in 2023-24 the Excess Surplus Balances exercise for 2023-24 had been significantly delayed and schools had not received their

Excess Surplus Balance letters until November 2024. Normally these letters would be circulated with an appropriate remainder of time to allow schools to submit their data by the 31 May deadline.

It was reported that 29 schools had ended the 2023-24 financial year with an excess greater than 8% (primary, nursery, special schools) and 5% (secondary schools) of their total delegated budget shares. These schools were required to provide justifications and supporting evidence for the excess amount, which had a total excess value of £1.021m.

The returns had been reviewed by the finance team. The majority of justifications met the criteria in the policy with 56% of the total excess balance relating to schemes of building work, furnishing or equipping, 16% for schemes of repair, 11% relating to expenditure planned for in 23-24 but occurring early in 24-25, 12% relating to funds set aside for managing change, 4% relating to unspent grants and 1% for other reasons. The returns were reviewed by the Assistant Director for Education SEND, & Inclusion and 21 schools had received approval to retain their excess balance with 8 schools receiving conditional approval subject to providing further evidence by 14 February.

In previous years, any excess surplus balance clawback from schools had transferred to the de-delegated Schools Contingency Fund budget to support the costs of exceptional circumstances in schools. Any under or overspend against the Schools Contingency Fund would transfer to the DSG earmarked reserves at the financial year end.

DfE considered the holding of small surplus balances by schools to be part of sensible financial planning but also that school budget shares should be spent for the benefit of pupils in school at that time. The surplus school balances policy puts appropriate challenge on to schools with excess surplus balances. However, given the amount of resource time taken up by schools in preparing and collating their evidence for their justifications and the finance team in reviewing each justification and preparing the report for the Assistant Director against the low value of the excess claw back amount, the maintained schools representatives of the Schools Forum were asked to consider whether completing this exercise on an annual basis was still of benefit in terms of managing the levels of maintained schools surpluses balances.

Having considered the report the maintained schools' Schools Forum representatives noted the outcome of the excess surplus balances policy and recommended that the excess surplus balances policy should continue to be applied in future years.

10. 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.

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 created. The Cumberland Schools Finance Team have been working 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 two main deadlines in 2025-26 that maintained schools had been asked to comply with. These were 20 May 2025: bank reconciliation for cheque book schools and 31 May: 3-year budget packs for all maintained schools.

The report set out the compliance rates for these two 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 two deadlines to meet, being the publication of Period 1 tabs and circulation of the Excess Surplus Balances letters to schools.

The letters requesting justification for Excess Surplus Balances were 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.

It was also noted that the Local Authority were late in publishing the 2024-25 Period 13 tabs because of technical difficulties. Schools were therefore asked to base their 3 Year Budget Packs on Period 12 data, with reasonable assumptions for adjustments arising in Period 13.

This regular report would highlight the compliance to deadlines of both schools and the Local Authority School Finance Team and provide the Forum with the wider implications of such deadlines not being met effectively.

As well as reviewing the returns submitted from schools, the school finance team has also been increasing their challenge to deficit schools.

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 challenges faced and resources available to support schools. These meetings were held alongside the Improvement Service to consider the all-round support to schools.

Further work will be undertaken in the coming months with efforts to be directed at those schools in a deficit position. Upcoming meetings would reflect on the 3-year budget pack submissions as these were reviewed.

The Cumberland Schools Forum commented that this was a useful, transparent report and noted the position and the implications of the delays in submissions.

11. LA Scheme for Financing Schools

Forum considered a report that set out amendments to the Cumberland LA Scheme for Financing Schools and PRUs.

There was only one amendment which related to a new circumstance where local authorities could charge a school budget share without the consent of the governing body. This related to the cost of an undisputed invoice for energy where a school had entered into an agreement with the Secretary of State for the supply of energy and failed to pay such an invoice (Regulation 23 of The School & Early Years Finance (England) Regulations 2025).

This amendment came after the DfE introduced a pilot which gave the ability for schools in multi-academy trusts to buy into the DfE's own supply contract with the Crown

Commercial Service. The success of the pilot meant it was expected this would be rolled out to maintained schools in due course. When joining the scheme, the schools would continue to get their own energy usage data and pay their own bills direct to the supplier the DfE would become the 'contracting authority' and assist schools in the process.

Maintained school representatives on Schools Forum noted the amendments to the scheme which would come into effect in June 2025.

12. Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Schools Forum would be held on Wednesday, 17 September 2025. This would be an in-person meeting, beginning at 9.30am, venue to be advised.

13. Any Other Business

There were no other items of business.

NS/E,S&I
August 2025