



CUMBERLAND SCHOOLS FORUM

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON

18 March 2025

**Cabinet Meeting Room, Cumbria House, Carlisle
(and Microsoft Teams)**

PRESENT

James Blackwell (Maintained Primary Schools)

Danny Gee (PRUs)

David Grimshaw (Maintained Primary Schools)

Rhiannon Hughes (Maintained Primary)

Vicki Jackson (Secondary Academy)

Simon Jackson (Secondary Academy)

Joanne Lloyd (Maintained Primary)

Elaine Lynch (Cumberland Portfolio Holder – Lifelong Learning & Development)

Chris McAree (Secondary Academy)

Jeff Parker (Maintained Secondary)

Michael Smillie (Secondary Academy)

Officers in Attendance:

Emma Hamer (AD – Education and Skills)

Sue Lowndes (Interim Service Manager – Learning Improvement Service)

Claire Marshall (Group Accountant – Children's Social Care & Education)

Sophie Scott (Finance)

Nicola Shiels (Forum Support)

Observers:

None

Apologies for Absence

Nerissa Nicholas (Maintained Primary)

Sally Senejko (Senior Manager – SEND, Education & Inclusion)

Kris Williams (Special Academy)

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

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

The minutes of the meeting held on 16 January 2025 were agreed as an accurate record.

There was one matter arising from the minutes; that referred to the Schools Forum constitution which was covered by an item on this agenda.

There were no other matters arising.

4. De-delegated Contingency Budget Monitoring 2024-25 Q2

A report presenting the forecast outturn position on the de-delegated contingency budget for the 2024-25 financial year as at 30 September was presented. The budget was forecast to underspend by £0.322m 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.

In discussing the report, a query was raised as to why the administration costs of the teachers' pension annual return were part of de-delegated contingency budgets? An update in relation to ongoing temporary accommodation at the Gillford Centre in Carlisle was also requested. It was agreed that both queries would be considered, and an update would be shared with Schools Forum.

It was noted that the Q3 report would be considered by the Executive on 8 April 2025 and presented to the next full meeting of Schools Forum in June. Members requested that the report be made available well in advance of the June meeting to allow for consideration and potential queries to be raised before or at the meeting.

The Schools Forum noted the forecast outturn position as at Q2 for the contingencies budget 2024-24.

5. **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 30 September 2024 which was forecast to be £24.856m 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 Q2 showed that the budget was projected to overspend by £5.114m as at 31 March 2024.

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 will be incorporated into Cumberland's DSG management plan in due course. The programme was due to end on 31 March 2025 and a final report on how the funding had been utilised would be presented to the next meeting of School Forum in June.

Members discussed the report, and the following points were raised:

- How did the cost of non-residential ISPs compare to the cost of AP provision or the cost of a PRU placement?
- Concern around the rising deficit on the HNB budget and the end of the current statutory override.
- The SEND Strategic Sufficiency Plan was now publicly available with 48 additional places already delivered and a further 100 due to come online. Looking ahead, there may need to be some short term invest to save initiatives, but the plan set out a clear strategy to deliver in relation to special schools, early years specialist

provision, RP and specialist RP. There would also be an EY Sufficiency Plan with more work to come in this area.

- At their recent meeting, Cumbria Education Strategic Partnership had agreed three key priority activity areas – belonging & inclusion, structures & provision and recruitment & training with system led working groups to be established to take this work forward. This was welcomed with a request that the work of these groups be referenced into future papers to ensure a joined-up approach, and that work was not being done in isolation.
- More transparency around the cost of residential placements was needed and it would be helpful to review the levels of funding for special school places to determine if this remained appropriate.
- The pace of delivery needed to increase to enable better support, earlier intervention and more inclusion but issues with the number and quality of support staff including TAs and SENCos impacted this. It was suggested that a plan for a more sustained workforce and investment in the future should be considered.
- Should also consider CYP and where they were in terms of provision – were they still in the right place, did they still need a specialist place, was the EHCP still needed with transition year reviews crucial. Success of an EHCP should be removal.
- The F40 group was a lobbying group with MPs on board. Working with this group, it was clear that funding was not equitable across all areas. HN funding was based on historical factors with some LAs receiving much more funding than Cumberland. The level of capital investment received in Cumberland was also low.
- DfE were also looking at equity of funding; workforce issues are a national problem and there were accommodation issues. A culture change was needed – the culture with parents and parental expectation, accommodation and the space to deliver, using mainstream and more inclusion.
- This week's weekly e-mail to schools to include a message from Elaine Lynch, Portfolio Holder for Schools & Learning together with a letter regarding issues related to funding that schools could adopt and share with parents.
- Providers may indicate that they were unable to meet need, so EHCP expectation was mooted with parents at an early stage because of the links to funding.
- Important to explore the CYP coming down the line, who were they and what was best for them?
- Suggested possible consideration of commissioning places at large state boarding schools (approx. 4) that were resourced with school nurses and specialist staff as cost likely to be lower than those in residential ISPs.
- Moral purpose and ethos about children being educated locally.

The HN Working Group was scheduled to meet on 6 May 2025 with areas identified to consider including the benchmarking of spend on non-residential ISPs and LA placements (PRU/AP) and more detail on invest to save initiatives and what there were achieving. Rhiannon Hughes would be added to the membership of group to represent early years.

As with the de-delegated contingency budget monitoring report for Q3, it was noted that the Q3 high needs block monitoring report would be presented to the next full meeting of Schools Forum in June.

Cumberland Schools Forum noted the current projection on the HN Budget as at 30 September 2024.

6. Cumberland Schools Forum - Constitution

Given that the current Cumberland School Forum constitution had been agreed prior to LGR and the formation of two new councils, each with its own Schools Forum, it was agreed at the previous meeting that the Chair and Vice-Chair meet with LA colleagues, including the AD Education, SEND & Inclusion to review the constitution.

The review had covered membership, terms of office, consultation with constituents, nomination of members and anything else considered relevant. A revised constitution document had been circulated with the agenda and papers for the meeting and was presented.

- A new front page had been added as a welcome to School Forum.
- Throughout the document it was now clear that forum members did not need to be headteachers but could be business or finance managers as well as governors, as long as they fully understood the financial management systems in schools.
- Forum membership remained unchanged in terms of number of members/constituencies but a 2-year term of office for all members had been introduced.
- As much of the current forum membership had been in place since LGR (April 2023) it was proposed that the full membership should be renewed. The exception to this would be the holders of chair and vice chair who would remain until the beginning of the academic year to ensure stability.
- There must be an agreed election process for each constituency or group.
- Attention was drawn to paragraph 3.2 which included, '*persons can only be nominated from an institution which has a record of sound financial management, and where any budget deficit is being addressed via an agreed deficit budget management plan. Nominations from institutions with increasing deficits are not permitted.*'
- Substitutes would not be permitted except for in very exceptional circumstances with any substitute having had to have undergone full training.
- Anyone who wished to sign up to Schools Forum would be required to attend forum training, with the first session to take place on 18 June 2025. This would be for a full day.
- There would be an expectation that members attend every meeting; more than two absences in an academic year would result in the constituency being asked to nominate a new representative.
- Members would also be expected to report back and consult with relevant schools from the constituency that they represented.

CASH and PHA would be asked to secure all school members and provide a list of nominations. All nominations would be reviewed by the finance team to advise on the financial position of the school. It was also agreed that geographical consideration would be given when securing venues for meetings; this would ensure that meetings rotated around the Cumberland area. When finalised, a copy of the Cumberland School Forum constitution, together with a full membership list would be made available on the relevant page of the council website. An updated membership list with contact details would also be circulated to all forum members.

7. Date of Next Meeting

- i) The next meeting of the Schools Forum would be held on Tuesday, 10 June 2025. This would be an in-person meeting, beginning at 9.30am and it would be held in the Cabinet Meeting Room, Cumbria House, Carlisle.

8. Any Other Business

FSM Auto-enrolment – There was a query about the roll-out of automated enrolment of FSM eligibility. It was confirmed that all the information relating to the roll-out had been provided recently in the AD weekly update letter to schools. It was further noted that auto-enrolment of FSM could result in the funding formula becoming unaffordable, potentially impacting on future AWPU levels. Forum members requested that it would be helpful in terms of planning if any information about possible impacts on AWPU could be shared with schools as soon as they were available.

Holiday Activity Fund (HAF) – Question about the continuation of HAF given the potential increasing numbers of CYP in receipt of FSM? Funding had been allocated to support activities over the Easter holidays, however, government were yet to announce details of funding for holiday periods beyond that. Any announcements would be communicated to schools as soon as the information became available.

There were no other items of business.

NS/E,S&I
March 2025