

SCHOOLS FORUM

At a meeting of the Schools Forum on Wednesday, 26 February 2025 at the Civic Suite, Town Hall, Runcorn

Present:

A. Jones, Democratic Services, HBC
N. Shafiq, Financial Management, HBC
B. Holmes, Education, Inclusion and Provision, HBC
G. Bradbury, Financial Management, HBC
N. Hunt, (Chair) Pupil Referral Unit Representative
J. Wilson, Secondary Governor Representative
J. Jardine, All Through School Representative
K. Evans, Secondary Academy with a 6th Form Representative
M. Tudor, Secondary Academy Representative
K. Landrum, Primary School with a Nursery Representative
J. O'Connor, PVI Representative
A. Sheppard, VA Schools Representative
C. Liku, Community Nursery Schools Representative
J. Robertson, Small Primary School Representative
B. Barton, 16-19 Provision Representative
S. Ainsworth, Special Academy Schools Representative

Action

SCF17 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Cllr T. McInerney, Jackie Coughlan – Primary School Representative (Infants), John Thompson – Community Special Schools Representative, Russell Houghton – Primary Governor Representative.

SCF18 MINUTES

The minutes from the meeting held on 22 January 2025 were agreed as a correct record.

Clarity was provided over the provision of budget estimates usually given to schools in February, as these were not received to date. Officers advised that the indicative budgets for the Schools Block were sent out to schools. The final budgets, which include High Needs, Early Years and any grants, would be sent by the end of the week.

A suggestion was made to move the Schools Forum meetings in January and February to a slightly earlier date, to allow time for this task to be carried out in good time.

The Forum received a report advising them of the latest developments surrounding the mainstream school budget funding model for 2025-26, following submission to the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA).

Further to the meeting of the Forum on 22 January 2025, representatives agreed a 2025-26 funding model based on its essentials on National Funding Formula (NFF), but with small reductions on the basic per pupil formula values. The overall funding formula also consisted of funding elements for the PFI at The Grange, and the joint-use sports facility at OBA, however both of these were subject to change by the ESFA.

Officers outlined the reasons for the partial reversal of the per pupil funding rate reductions agreed at the last meeting and the DFE's decision that joint use agreements can no longer be included as a formula factor. The latter meant that OBA would see a funding shortfall of £80,947. The Officers proposal to cover the shortfall was to action a Block Transfer of the above amount, from Schools Block to Central Schools Services Block (CSSB), where the funding could then be transferred in a lump sum.

The Central Services allocation for 2025-26 was £765,250. If the transfer is agreed, the total would be revised to £846,197. The revised Schools Block allocations were presented on page 7 of the report.

Officers responded to various questions raised by Representatives. The Forum voted to support the transfer of the amount of £80,947 from the Schools Block to the CSSB, to cover the shortfall. Abstentions from the Secondary Academy with a 6th Form Representative and the All through School Representative due to conflicts of interest, were noted.

RESOLVED: That the Schools Forum

- 1) note the report; and
- 2) supports the transfer of £80,947 from Schools Block to Central Schools Services Block, to facilitate continuity of funding for the joint-use sports facility at Ormiston Bolingbroke Academy.

Director
Finance

of

SCF20 EARLY YEARS SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS INCLUSION FUNDING (SENIF)

The Forum considered a report from the Executive Director of Children's Services, which set out details of a proposed change to Early Years 'top up' funding.

Top up funding was the current funding model used to provide additional financial support to children with special education needs and disabilities (SEND), to access their Funded Early Years Entitlements (FEYE).

The report described the limitations of the top up funding process and proposed a revised model, which would meet the statutory requirement for local authorities to provide special educational needs inclusion funding (SENIF). It was reported that the new model would refocus SEND support on high quality provision, using the graduated approach, and strengthen support for lower level SEND needs to help reduce unnecessary applications for the EHCP assessment.

The Forum was presented with details of the rationale for change, the preparation carried out in respect to a revised budget for SENIF, and details of the proposed model. Representatives were also referred to appendices 1 to 4:

1. Early years entitlements: local authority funding operational guide 2025 to 2026;
2. The number of top up funding applications for the academic year September 2024 to July 2024;
3. Early years SENCO Workshop – Top up funding consultation; and
4. DSG Indicative 2025 to 2026 Early Years Block allocations.

Overall, Representatives welcomed the proposal and agreed it would help with identifying children presenting with SEND at a younger age, which in turn would help other services. One Representative expressed concern for children in PVI settings in schools (as opposed to stand alone settings), that were struggling to access the educational psychology service for EHCP assessments.

The Forum approved the Strategy.

RESOLVED: That the Schools Forum

- 1) note the report; and

2) approves the Strategy.

SCF21 DSG FUNDING - EARLY YEARS 2025-26

The Forum received a report on the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) for 2025-26 for Early Years and was asked to note and comment on the hourly rates and supplements for the Early Years Formula, applicable from 1 April 2025.

It was reported that the DSG settlement for 2025-26 was announced on 18 December 2024, allocating Halton a total of £168.551m, broken down as follows:

Schools Block	£117,833 m
Central Schools Services Block	£ 0,765 m
High Needs Block	£ 29,265 m
Early Years Block	£ 20,686 m

The report provided details and background information on the above allocations overall. The Early Years allocation was presented in detail in paragraph 3.2. This included the indicative rates and component DSG allocations and the proposed allocation by percentage across the funding elements and indicative funding totals, shown in the tables on pages 30 and 31 respectively.

The Forum was requested to comment on the hourly rates and supplements to be applied to the 2025-26 Early Years Single Funding Formula (EYSFF) determinations for all providers, as shown on page 31.

The following comments were made during discussion:

- Although the funding had increased by £5.5m, this was due to the expansion of the two's and under two's provision;
- The allocations were based on the January 2024 census so the allocations were indicative;
- The PVI Representative felt that the rates for 3-4 year olds were underpaid across the whole country and queried why the two year old rates were so high; and
- Halton's rates were mid-range in the funding tables.

RESOLVED: That the 2025-26 hourly rates and supplements for the Early Years Formula applicable from 1 April 2025 be noted.

SCF22 DSG FUNDING - HIGH NEEDS 2025-26

The Forum received a report on the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) for 2025-26 for High Needs. Views were sought on how the Local Authority could use this funding across the range of high needs activities for the financial year 2025-26, including for mainstream schools.

It was reported that the DSG settlement for 2025-26 was announced on 18 December 2024, allocating Halton a total of £168.551m, broken down as follows:

Schools Block	£117,833 m
Central Schools Services Block	£ 0,765 m
High Needs Block	£ 29,267 m
Early Years Block	£ 20,686 m

It was noted that the High Needs Block amount above was reduced to £25.461m after Academy and FE recoupment of £3.806m for the per place funding element deductions. The allocation represented an increase of 8% in annual funding.

The Forum was requested to note the funding rates to be applied to the High Needs Block allocation on the basis of 'place plus' (top-up) funding for specialist provision including Mainstream SEND Units. The recommendations for primary, secondary, special schools and PRU were presented in the tables on pages 35 and 36.

In relation to Further Education (FE), Halton proposed to apply a 2% uplift to FE element 3 funding, effective from April 2025 – the Forum was requested to support this uplift – this was agreed.

Representatives were referred to Appendix A of the report, which provided the funding allocations and consequent budgetary totals in detail for 2025-26.

The Forum discussed the report and officers answered questions on:

- The Resource Bases, how these were being used by schools, and how they should be best used;
- The Funding Formula used for the High Needs uplift;
- The continuing concerns over the high budget deficit;
- The banding of children within the Resource Bases and the need for rebanding as they progressed through the school; and

- Concerns over Key Stage 3 and support for Secondary colleagues to prevent children being sent Out of Borough.

In conclusion Officers advised that the 50 children in Resource Bases were included in the allocations, so there could be some movement on the costs once the numbers of EHCP's required where known.

RESOLVED: That the report is noted.

Director of Finance

SCF23 DSG FORECAST OUTTURN 2024-25

The Forum received a report from the Director of Finance, which gave the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) forecast outturn for 2024-25.

It was reported that the DSG allocation for 2024-25 was £154,132,652, following revisions to Central Schools Services and Early Years Blocks and was broken down as follows:

Schools Block	£111,188,230
Central Schools Services Block	£ 751,280
Early Years Block	£ 15,113,932
High Needs Block	£ 27,079,210

It was noted that of this, £58, 637,374 was recouped from the Schools Block for direct funding of mainstream academies, and an estimated £3,305,167 was recouped from the High Needs Block for academies and further education.

The report included commentary on the allocations for each of the above blocks. Taking into account the deficit brought forward from 2023-24 of £5,348,546, and anticipating the ongoing pressures specifically faced by the High Needs Block forecasting an in-year deficit of £5,352,067, the cumulative forecast deficit by the end of 2024-25 is £10,700.613.

The Forum noted that the Delivering Better Values (DBV) Programme was in place but it was too early to see any evidence of its success. Also, the DVB Programme would help to identify those children receiving SEND funding at a higher band than was necessary, as raised in the previous item.

RESOLVED: That the report is noted.

SCF24 MEETING DATES FOR 2025-26

The following meeting dates for 2025-26 were noted:

- 11 June 2025;
- 15 October 2025;
- 21 January 2026; and
- 25 February 2026.

Meeting ended at 5.20 p.m.