

SCHOOLS FORUM

At a meeting of the Schools Forum on Wednesday, 25 February 2026 at Civic Suite, Town Hall, Runcorn

Present:

J. Wilson, Secondary Governor Representative (Chair)
S. Ainsworth, Special Academy Schools Representative
L. Bellfield, 16–19 Provision Representative
G. Bradbury, Financial Management, HBC
J. Coughlan, Primary School Representative (Infants)
B. Holmes, Education, Inclusion and Provision, HBC
J. Jardine, All Through School Representative
K. Landrum, Primary School with a Nursery representative
J. Robertson, Small Primary School Representative
A. Sheppard, VA Schools Representative
N. Shafiq, Financial Management, HBC
A. Stafford, Pupil Referral Unit Representative
J. Thompson, Community Special Schools Representative
I. Moorhouse, Democratic Services, HBC

**ITEM DEALT WITH
UNDER DUTIES
EXERCISABLE BY THE BOARD**

Action

SCF14 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Jane O'Connor - PVI Representative, Beth Jones - PVI Representative, Cathy Liku - Community Nursery Schools Representative, Matty Deeny - Secondary Academy Representative and Councillor Tom McInerney.

SCF15 MINUTES

Subject to Aaron Stafford being added to the list of attendees, the minutes of the meeting held on 21 January 2026 were agreed as a correct record.

It was noted that the Department for Education (DfE) did not accept the Council's budget as the £92,000 referenced at the previous meeting, had not been specifically allocated. Therefore, officers had to recirculate the money back into the school funding formula. This meant that all 57 mainstream schools would theoretically receive £1,600, but six schools had minimum funding guarantees and would be unaffected. Consequently, the remaining 51

schools will receive £1,800 each. The DfE approved Halton's school budget with this proposal.

One Forum Member noted that there were delays with receiving funding with mid-term transfers as funding was not allocated on a termly basis.

Officers concurred with this and noted that regulations stated that schools must have growth funding. Falling school numbers was a more common problem than increasing numbers.

Forum members noted that there was no funding for children without specialist needs so teachers not involved with the specialist pupils were made redundant.

It was noted that Halton had 21% more children in resource centres compared to the national average.

RESOLVED: That the Schools Forum supported the officer's actions regarding the surplus £92,000.

SCF16 DSG EARLY YEARS BLOCK 2026/27

The Forum was presented with the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) 2026/27 for Early Years. The 2026/27 DSG settlement was announced on 17 December 2025, allocating Halton a total of £178.850m. £122.425m was allocated to the Schools Block, £0.768m for the Central Schools Services Block (CSSB), £31.877m for the High Needs Block, and £23.781m for the Early Years Block. The Forum approved the Schools Block allocations and mainstream school funding formula in January 2026. There was a small increase of £0.003m for the CSSB, over the 2025/26 budget, despite the annual 20% reduction in historic commitment funding and pupil numbers being 246 fewer (a reduction of 1.4%). This was because the unit of funding has increased by 2.1%, from £43.05 to £43.97.

The 2026/27 hourly rates positioned Halton as 60th in Authority funding rankings nationally with two-year olds, and under two-year-olds, at 97% of national average, and three- and four-year-olds at 96% of the national average. Halton was above the Northwest average funding level at all age ranges (102.75% for three and four-year-olds, 104.0% for two-year-olds and under). Officers based proposals on passing all the year-on-year funding increases at two and under, and 96% (49p of 51p) of the three and four-year olds funding rate increase, with an overall passporting level of 0.5% above the increased requirement of 97%. This meant

that the funding rates agreed for 2026/27, following consultation with settings, and ratification by the Forum, and adding the in-year funding increases to each of the two-year-olds and under, and 49p/hour to the universal and extended three and four-year-old entitlement.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That the report be noted.
- 2) That the Schools Forum approve the proposed 2026/27 hourly rates and supplements for the Early Years funding formula.

An update on the new White Paper regarding SEND provision was given to the Forum.

SCF17 DSG HIGH NEEDS AND CENTRAL SCHOOLS SERVICES BLOCKS 2026/27

The Forum was presented with the DSG High Needs and Central Schools Services Blocks 2026/27. The High Needs Block allocation for 2026/27 was confirmed at £31.877m before Academy and Further Education (FE) recoupment and included the deduction for the net export of SEND pupils educated outside the borough. Academy and FE recoupment totalled £4.97m for per-place funding, as set out in the DfE's published allocations. In January, the Forum voted to transfer the headroom funding from the Schools Block into the CSSB. Halton had £26.907m available for distribution to specialist providers and to help manage ongoing cost pressures within the High Needs Block.

This represented a headline increase of 8.92%, or a net increase of 5.7% in annual funding, within which both inflationary pressures and rising demand must be managed. However, this comparison was misleading, as the 2026/27 figure included the annualised value (approximately £2.1m) of previous separate grant elements in 2025/26 for pay and pensions uplifts and national insurance contributions.

There were no proposals to increase the discretionary top up rates for resources places or special schools but there was a continuing expansion of resource-based programme which was consistent with the growth of travel referenced in the White Paper. Significant expansions in numbers at resource bases and increasing numbers and costs of out of borough provision, increases in numbers and value of EHCP (Education & Health Care Plan) assessments are all contributory factors in generating an

initial forecast shortfall of £8.71m. £42m was needed to manage all High Needs services.

A cumulative DSG deficit would be investigated at £27m and this would not incorporate the budget for 2027/28. It was predicted that there would be an overspend of £12m for 2027/28. The Forum agreed to an annually increased contribution for the established schools' safeguarding post to mitigate the reduction of the 'historic commitment' funding into the CSSB.

It was noted that the public did not understand how much services for high need pupils costed and how much the overspend costed the Council. If demand was not met, then services suffered. High Needs services had a statutory override, so it was not included in the base position of the DSG.

Smaller authorities struggled to have their own specialist SEND provision which was why Halton and neighbouring authorities had to rely on out of borough placements. Providers increased their prices annually for these placements. It was rare for a local special school to be unable to meet a pupil's needs; they may be placed out of borough if there was no place locally, if constant provision was needed, or if there was a place at a neighbouring authority that could accommodate them. Pupils would not be placed back in borough if they thrived at their out of borough placements. Work was done regionally to mitigate excess rises in costs for out of borough placements. The Forum suggested that authorities who did not send children to out of borough placements be looked at.

The needs of pupils had increased significantly over a short amount of time. It costed £10m for 144 pupils to be educated in non-maintained specialist schools with varying needs, including communication. Priorities for funding needed to be rationalised due to the increase of children in KS1 requiring specialist provision. Specialist provision became more 'competitive' following the introduction of EHCPs in 2014 and parents becoming more involved by paying private assessors to create EHCPs for their children. There was an increase in EHCP applications for Year 6s in 2026, so it needed to be questioned as to why these applications were so late in a child's education.

More work with the Early Years sector was planned to enhance early year provision in nurseries.

It was confirmed that all specialist schools, including

the Raise Academy, and school resource provisions in Halton were full. If there were vacancies, then this was affected by the need of the child or children who would be placed there. For example, eight vacancies could only accommodate six pupils if they had higher needs. Mainstream schools who had pupils with complex needs did not receive as much funding as special school placements. It was noted that different schools had pupils with different needs.

The Council will proactively work towards the number limit with placements as set out in the White Paper. Placements costed the Council on average £72,985 each in independent non-maintained schools. Resource provision centre placements were £180,000 per placement and there were between eight and ten pupils per centre. Schools with resource provision benefitted the Borough and schools had been contacted to see if they could enrol a child who was in an out of borough placement. This will be more proactive in the future and in conjunction with parents.

There was a disparity with EHCP Top Ups between primary and secondary schools due to the level of need. The amount of funding per Top Up was determined by a Panel. All resource provisions at schools received the same funding as per the service level agreement. Differentials with this were dependent on the pupils who were placed at the centre. Early Years could not use alternative provision but the support around the Early Years Intervention Fund worked well, and was praised as part of the Council's SEND inspection. It was noted that schools must pay for alternative provision.

It was suggested that members of the School Forum share case studies regarding the specialist provision that their schools provided to discuss in the future.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That the report be noted.
- 2) That the Forum approve the proposal as set out in the report.

Meeting ended at 17:18