

SCHOOLS FORUM

At a meeting of the Schools Forum on Wednesday, 21 January 2026 at the Board Room - Municipal Building, Widnes

Present:

J. Wilson, Secondary Governor Representative (Chair)
S. Ainsworth, Special Academy Schools Representative
B. Barton, 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
B. Jones, PVI Representative
C. Liku, Community Nursery Schools Representative
J. O'Connor, PVI Representative
J. Robertson, Small Primary School Representative
A. Sheppard, VA Schools Representative
N. Shafiq, Financial Management, HBC
J. Thompson, Community Special Schools Representative
I. Moorhouse, Democratic Services, HBC

ITEM DEALT WITH UNDER DUTIES EXERCISABLE BY THE BOARD

SCF9 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Karl Landrum - Primary School with a Nursery representative.

SCF10 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 11 June 2025 were agreed as a correct record.

It was confirmed that School Balances would be brought to the Forum after the end of the financial year.

In terms of speech services, it was noted that the contract with the previous service provider ended in October 2025. Two extensions were made with the contract to address issues between the Council and ICB (Integrated Care Board) regarding data transfers between providers. From a school finance perspective, the additional funding agreed in 2025 was utilised to build further capacity with speech and language services. The Council had a statutory duty to maintain these services for children with EHCPs.

Action

SCF11 DSG AND SCHOOLS' FUNDING FOR 2026/27

The Forum was presented with the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) and School's Funding for 2026/27. The gross Schools Grant allocation for 2026/27 was announced on the 17th December as £178.850m.

There was no Autumn update on the 2026 national funding formula, unlike in previous years, which led to the cancellation of October's meeting. For 2026/27, the DSG will increase by approximately £10.3 million from the DfE. The Schools Block, which funded maintained schools and academies, included all school grants; its increase incorporated the £3 million Schools Budget Support Grant.

Council policy aligned with the National Funding Formula, which will become mandatory for all local authorities. Funding allocations from the DfE were based on this formula. The Forum was required to set the Minimum Funding Guarantee (MFG) between -0.5% and 0%. An MFG of 0% would retain £92,000 of the £122 million Schools Block funding, which officers recommended transferring to the Central Services Block to support schools experiencing the largest reductions in pupil numbers, as outlined in Appendix A. The Forum could decide whether this should operate as a rolling fund or a growth fund. An MFG of -0.5% would release £40,000 into the formula for distribution to all schools.

Headroom funding had not previously been used for this, but pupil numbers declined annually. Historically, this funding was used as contingency for staffing redundancies. If redirected to support falling rolls, using the methodology suggested, 17 schools would benefit.

Forum Members stated that as different schools had different issues, the money should not be used to go to all schools in Halton, regardless of whether they needed the money, and it should go to contingency to help with staff redundancies and schools with an aging workforce. Some schools with falling pupil numbers may not be able to afford redundancy payments.

Officers noted that the money could be moved to the Central Services Block and allocated at a later date.

Place planning work was ongoing, but it highlighted the financial difficulties that schools were having. Pupil numbers reduced in Runcorn and were set to reduce further

in the future but were more stable in Widnes. Officers noted that the suggested allocation of the headroom funding could be a onetime allocation.

RESOLVED: That

1. The Forum support the continuation of the National Funding Formula (NFF) methods, principles and rules for mainstream primary and secondary school funding allocations and de-delegation for 2026/27.
2. The Forum agree the level of Minimum Funding Guarantee (MFG) to be 0% and this to be applied to the Schools Block funding formula for 2026/27.
3. The Forum agree that the headroom funding for 2026/27 be transferred to Central Services Block and allocated at future date.

Following on from the discussion, Members of the School Forum will contact Officers regarding suggestions for the allocation of the headroom funding.

Maintained School Forum representatives agreed to the contingency rate.

SCF12 DSG FORECAST OUTTURN FOR 2025/26

The Forum was presented with the DSG Forecast Outturn for 2025/26.

Cost pressures within the High Needs Block continued to rise, and the Council was forecast to overspend its allocation by £12.5 million. The main area of increased costs was around the use of independent specialist school placements for Halton children, with increases averaging just under £10,000 per placement. No significant pressures were anticipated in the Early Years Block, and a major overspend there was unlikely. The overall DSG deficit was projected to reach £18 million by the end of 2026, with the Council required to fund any shortfall not covered by the DSG.

Officers agreed to provide the statistics on how much money would be needed if money was not invested into expanding school SEND and EHCP provision.

In-borough specialist school placements remained the most cost-effective option. The national average for pupils placed within their home authority was 43% but Halton's rate was 55%. No increases in independent specialist school placements were anticipated. Strong

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relationships with school-based resource provisions were essential to meeting the needs of pupils with EHCPs. The Service Level Agreement confirmed that match funding was available through a child's EHCP, with further financial work planned.

Once the Government's white paper was published, a statutory override for the DSG will require the deficit to be absorbed into the Council's budget. In preparation, the DfE appointed a financial advisor for each local authority to strengthen oversight of DSG overspending and ensure it remained at an appropriate level. It was expected that part, or all, of the High Needs Block will be managed by Central Government.

The Forum agreed that they should format a response on the escalating costs for SEND and EHCP provision and that there would never be enough money to resolve the financial burden this caused. The response should also highlight that there should be a radical change in the funding formula for the High Needs Block.

Regarding the projection for the High Needs Block, officers said that this work will be investigated in 2026 with the DfE appointed financial adviser. Service improvements will be factored in as part of this work, and they would need to ensure that the current strategy was fit for purpose. No additional funding was available to meet SEND and EHCP provision other than the funding from the High Needs Block. Money was transferred from the School Block to the High Needs Block in the past, but this did not alleviate the issue.

It was noted that the allocation for the High Needs Block was done outside the funding formula. Central Government had effectively frozen allocations for 2026 from 2025 because of the uncertainty around changes planned in the white paper.

The Forum requested that they receive the recommendation paper from the DfE appointed financial adviser on the effective use of DSG.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

SCF13 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

The Forum stated that they would like to continue having in person meetings instead of remote ones.

Meeting ended at 16:58

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