

**Meeting of the Schools Forum
Held on Thursday 7th December 2023 at 1.30pm
via MS Teams Digital Platform**

MINUTES

Quorum: 40% (8 of the 18 current School/Non-School Members)

NAME	Organisation - School Members	Attended
Rachel Lewis	Hindley Sure Start Nursery	No
Louise Curran	Rowan Tree Primary	Yes
Anne Isherwood	Three Towers Alternative Provision Academy	Yes
Tracy Mingaud-Cunningham	Primary Governor	No
Adrian Hardy	Secondary Governor	Yes
Gary Hayes	Orrell St James Primary	Yes
Fiona Quinlivan	Howe Bridge St Michael's Primary	Yes
Julie Hassan	St Oswald's Catholic Primary	Yes
Wendy Hughes	Golborne All Saints Catholic Primary	Yes
Lisa Hobden	St Patrick's Catholic Primary	Yes
Alan Birchall	Byrchall High (Chair)	Yes
Andy McGlown	St. Peters RC High School	Yes
Martin Wood	The Deanery High School	Apologies
Paul Davies	Fred Longworth High School	No
	Organisation - Non School Members	
Sue Morris	Care Love Learn Childcare Limited	
Peter McGhee	St John Rigby College	Yes
Max Atkins	Wigan NEU	Yes
Need nominated member	Diocesan Representative	
	Organisation- Nominated observers	
Cllr Jenny Bullen	Cabinet Member	Yes
Karen Parkin	NEU	Yes
Mike Wilkinson	Wigan NASUWT	Yes
Vacancy	Unison	
	Organisation - In Attendance	
Mark Rotheram	LA Finance – Strategic Finance Manager	Yes
Kirsten Reid	LA Finance – Group Finance Manager (Schools)	Yes
Cath Pealing	Assistant Service Director, Education	Yes
Jo Sullivan	Clerk to the Forum, Wigan Council Governor Services	Yes

The meeting was quorate.

1. **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies were received and accepted from Martin Wood (The Deanery).

2. **Agreement of Any Other Urgent Business to Be Added to the Agenda**

The School's Finance Team apologised to Forum Members for the lateness of papers for this meeting.

3. **Previous Minutes**

Members **confirmed** that the minutes from the Forum meeting held on **19th October 2023** were a correct record.

There were no matters arising from the minutes.

4. **Schools Block Funding Formula 2024/25**

Members had received a summary of the published information in respect of the funding formula for 2024/25 on the day of the meeting. The report was also shared on screen to the meeting.

- DfE provisional allocation of £260m.
- No indication of any additional grants other than teachers' pay and pension grant, already being received.
- Adjustment for NNDR, this left the Local Authority with £258m to distribute between schools.
- We were allowed to transfer 0.5% to other block funding with agreement from School's Forum.

Kirsten Reid talked through the basic per pupil entitlement formula. NFF was slightly higher in all phases this year.

Q. Some of our schools were supported by MFG, how many?

A. A very small proportion. 4 schools.

Q. Was the lump sum set by the Government?

A. Yes.

Members were reminded that these numbers were indicative and were subject to change.

Kirsten Reid talked through Appendix 4 which gave a breakdown of:

- National Funding Formula Values
- Indicative Funding 2024/25
- Indicative Funding 2023/24 and Mainstream Schools Additional Grant 2023/24.

The School Funding Formula 2024/25 – Schools Block had been circulated to school members in advance of the meeting to allow for consultation with schools within their consortiums. Feedback was welcomed.

The following feedback was presented:

- One contributor felt that it should be considered that some schools were sitting on considerable reserves.
- Secondary schools were not comfortable supporting a High Needs Block contribution above 0.5%.
- SEND budget really tight, schools were at capacity already, however some of the funding would be taken away under one proposal.
- Why had it been taken and top sliced again and what were the plans going forward?
- Some schools wanted a copy of how funding was distributed and spent.
- If we were being top sliced, would we be able to have more Educational Psychologist sessions?
- It was recognised that the issue was national and not local.
- It would be counterproductive if we requested too much money from schools, we were undermining plans trying to set a balanced budget.
- Special schools were seeing a lot more children coming through and if we took money from primary schools, who were already not being matched with funding by increased pressures, we would end up with children who were getting EHCPs later instead of being pro-active and getting support for these children early.
- Schools felt that they were struggling already with budgets and additional needs so did not want more money taken away. This was echoed across all consortiums.

Cath Peeling responded that the Local Authority absolutely understood and appreciated where schools were at currently. To reassure colleagues, the Local Authority had looked at balances and supported those schools who did need it.

The council was investing significantly in the SEND Team and were investing in additional Educational Psychologists.

We were struggling as a Local Authority with the rate of children falling out of the system. The number of reception school places in special schools had almost doubled this year. Independent schools were costing huge amounts of money for children whose needs we could not meet.

The Local Authority were really grateful that we were able to look at the funding together and make collaborative decisions.

Q. Was this likely to be challenged politically or accepted?

A. The demands on the system were rising year on year. We had had 12 years of austerity, and the demands were not mitigated by the Government. Cllr Bullen recognised the amazing work that schools carried out under immense pressure. The decision as a group would be respected and she did not expect any political comeback.

The Forum was trying to meet both the high needs of children outside and beyond schools and to also meet their needs whilst in schools. It was about balancing the needs of our young people inside and outside of schools.

Members **approved** the minimum transfer contribution of £500k from the DSG to the high needs block.

Cabinet was lobbying wherever possible about the difficulties across the system and the lack of funds.

5. **DSG Underspend 2022/23**

Mark Rotherham again apologised for the lateness of the reports for this meeting.

The DSG underspend report was shared on screen.

It was reported to summer term Schools Forum that there was an underspend of £0.351m on the DSG centrally retained funding for the financial year 2022/23. This report set out a proposal to earmark £0.160m of this underspend to facilitate the extension of the SEND Transformation Manager post until 31/03/2026. This post would co-ordinate and oversee the required transformation work necessary to move the High Needs Recovery plan forward at pace to ultimately deliver a sustainable high needs system for the borough of Wigan.

Q. Some of the impact of this post had not been realised due to illness etc. what was the current plan to ensure stability in this team?

A. We had appointed to a new post to start in January 2024. We had invested more and were recruiting agency staff where needed. There had been some instability, but we were investing in the team to ensure that this did not happen again. This was a high priority to ensure that the transformation programme kept pace and moved forward.

Members **agreed** to the earmarking of £0.160m from the 22/23 DSG centrally retained underspend to facilitate the extension of the SEND Transformation Manager post until the 31/03/2026.

Cath Peeling thanked the Forum.

6. **High Needs Block Finance Update**

The latest financial position for 2023/24 was shared on screen and had been circulated just before the meeting.

Kirsten Reid highlighted that:

- 2024/25 – looking at an increase in funding, no change in any other area.
- More pressure on deficit going forward. Factors remained the same, independent schools, EHCPs / mainstream top-up, special school places, post 16 provision, transport.

Q. Were transport costs a pressure on the high needs budget?

A. No but had a knock-on effect on the Local Authority. Small element funded from the high needs block.

Members **agreed** that the subgroup meetings would continue.

Budget projections for 2023/24 were shared on screen and talked through. The main area of funding was for maintained and special schools.

Education other than at school was a rising cost.

The current budget deficit was £6m.

Q. There were plans to improve mainstream schools' abilities to keep children in school. Was there a plan to use funding to enable schools to get better at this?

A. There was not a coherent plan as yet, but we would look at what areas we needed to spend money and attempt to drive the deficit down.

A Member commented that some high-quality training would be effective to support staff and give them the skills to work with these young people.

Cath Pealing agreed and this would be looked at in the subgroup meetings.

Q. Item 4.2 – Designing calculation of indicative SEND budget. What did this mean?

A. We needed to refine exactly what this meant so that expectations from parents were not exceeding what schools deliver. This was more around what the national standards were, and we were looking more at a Wigan model.

The Chair asked if there was particular training that Members felt would be beneficial for schools. This would be considered and discussed by Forum Members.

The landscape was significantly different post covid and schools were struggling to keep pace with needs.

Speech and language were a real issue in early years. We needed to identify as a partnership how to we address this and how we equipped staff with the skills and resources to support these children.

7. Any Other Urgent Business

No other business had been raised.

8. Future Meeting Dates

Members noted meeting dates (all via MS Teams):

- Spring 1 – Thursday 18th January 2024 at 1.30pm
- Spring 2 – Thursday 14th March 2024 at 1.30pm
- Summer 1 – Thursday 16th May 2024 at 1.30pm
- Summer 2 – Thursday 27th June 2024 at 1.30pm

The meeting closed at 2:52pm.

Background documents (available for public inspection):

Appendices to the circulated briefing reports disclose important facts on which the reports are based and were relied upon in preparing the reports. Copies of the background documents are available up to 4 years after the date of the meeting. If you would like a copy, please contact the Forum Clerk

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