

Norfolk Schools Forum Minutes

Minutes of the Meeting held on Friday 9 May 2025 at 9am, Cranworth Room, County Hall

Present

Martin White (Chair)
Stuart Allen
Stephen Beeson
David Cousins
Steven Dewing
Bob Groome
Glyn Hambling
Carole Jacques
Owen Jenkins
Peter Pazitka
Joanne Philpott
Sarah Porter
Rachel Quick
Sarah Shirras
Matthew Smith
Daniel Thrower
Joanna Tuttle

Organisation

Nebula Federation
Mile Cross Primary School
Norwich Diocesan Board of Education
Eastern Multi-Academy Trust
Sapientia Education Trust
National Education Union
Unity Education Trust
Earlham Nursery School
Broad Horizons Education Trust
St. John the Baptist Catholic MAT
Ormiston Academy Trust
Unity Schools Partnership
The Wherry School
The Hive Federation
Sheringham Woodfields School
Wensum Academy Trust
Aylsham High School

Representing

Maintained Primary Schools
Maintained Primary Schools
Diocese Representative
Mainstream Academies
Mainstream Academies
Joint Consultative Committee
Alternative Provision Representative
Maintained Nursery Schools
Mainstream Academies
Mainstream Academies
Mainstream Academies
Mainstream Academies
Special School Academy
Maintained Primary Schools
Maintained Special Schools
Mainstream Academies
Maintained Secondary Schools

Substitutes Present

Karen McIntosh for Martin Colbourne

Organisation

City College Norwich

Representing

16-19 Representative

Also Present

Michael Bateman
Martin Brock
John Crowley
Dawn Fowler
Jane Hayman
Jonathan Nice
David Oldham
Nicki Rider
Adrian Thompson
Laine Tisdall
Alison Toombs
Joshua Warnes
James Wilson

Title

Assistant Director – SEND, Strategic Improvement and Early Effectiveness
Accountant – Schools, SEN, and Early Years
Assistant Director – Intelligence and Education Sufficiency
Dedicated Schools Grant Strategic Lead
Director – SEND and Inclusion
Senior Advisor – Teaching and Learning
Senior Advisor - Intervention
Assistant Director – SEN, Alternative Provision and Sufficiency
Assistant Director of Finance (Audit)
Committee Officer, Democratic Services
Senior Advisor – High Needs SEND Operations
Internal Audit Manager
Director of Sufficiency Planning and Education Strategy

1. Welcome from the Chair

- 1.1 The Chair welcomed Forum Members and officers to the meeting.
- 1.2 David Cousins was welcomed to the Schools Forum, as this was his first meeting as a Mainstream Academy Representative
- 1.3 Sarah Porter was welcomed back to the Schools Forum, as she was recently re-elected as a Mainstream Academy Representative

2. Apologies and substitutions

- 2.1 Apologies were received from Martin Colbourne (Karen McIntosh substituting), Lacey Douglass, Vicky Warnes, Samantha Fletcher, and Sara Tough OBE.

3. Minutes

- 3.1 The minutes of the extraordinary meeting held on Tuesday 4 March 2025 were approved as an accurate record of proceedings.
- 3.2 The minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday 26 March 2025 were approved as an accurate record of proceedings.

4. Matters Arising

- 4.1 The Norfolk Schools Forum **RESOLVED** to **NOTE** the Summary of Actions from the March 2025 meeting.

5. Strategic Planning (including Local First Inclusion)

- 5.1 Officers introduced the report, which focussed on the projects being delivered as part of the Local First Inclusion (LFI) programme, the impact and setting out a period of reflection to ensure that the programme governance was working for its intended purpose of supporting and challenging that delivery in the short, medium and long term.
- 5.2 The following key elements were highlighted to the Schools Forum:
 - Over the past couple of weeks, there had been a major focus on clarifying Element 3 funding for mainstream schools from September 2025. Around 30 to 40 schools remained in dialogue with Children's Services regarding this issue, with this number expected to decrease to a handful of outstanding establishments by mid-May.
 - A briefing for Members was planned for next week, providing a summary of the work undertaken to date.
 - There were a number of similarities between the report and the quarterly LFI update report submitted to the Scrutiny Committee at Norfolk County Council. Both papers were in the public domain but focussed on different areas of the programme.
 - The forward work programme for the LFI Reference Group was highlighted, with it being felt that this arrangement had proven successful over the past 12 months.. There was a likelihood that discussions at future Reference Group meetings would lead to co-produced work filtering down for consideration at the Schools Forum.

- An updated LFI plan was submitted to the Department for Education (DfE) earlier in the week, including a high-level summary of data which was previously considered at the March 2025 meeting of the Scrutiny Committee. Norfolk County Council remained part of the Safety Valve programme along with other local authorities in England. Other local authorities in the programme in a similar situation to Norfolk were also contacted by the DfE and invited to submit revised plans in April 2025. It was now known that no further Safety Valve deals were forthcoming from the Government, however, reforms to the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) system were expected to be announced in summer 2025.
- A high-level timeline regarding the opening of school-led Alternative Provision (AP) centres (secondary Social, Emotional and Mental Health Specialist Resource Bases) was set out in the report. It was stressed that work was already underway through the programme to deliver the capital development required to make changes to mainstream provision to enable this work.
- It was noted there was a perception that much of the work undertaken on AP was around the ten proposed AP centres, but in actuality a significant quantity of time was being spent on work around targeted early intervention, outreach, and the tier model.

5.3 The following points were raised and discussed:

- The Chair requested further details regarding the substantial changes to cohort funding. An officer stated that if there was a situation where a child was receiving funding to attend a certain school and then attended a different establishment, there was a need to make changes to a school's provision.
- Sarah Porter queried if the cohort funding changes accounted for current consultations with children holding an Education, Health, and Care Plan (EHCP). It was confirmed that officers were working closely with the High Needs Team to ensure information on EHCP placements were up to date.
- Stephen Beeson expressed concern that there was no comparison with previous iterations of the plan in the report, making it difficult to determine success, progress, and potential setbacks in the LFI programme. Officers stated that multiple LFI meetings were held at Norfolk County Council each term, considering different aspects of the programme. Given the sheer amount of information and metrics available to officers, there was a need to strike the right balance of content in the reports going to the Schools Forum.
- Owen Jenkins requested clarity regarding the funding of LFI initiatives, to scrutinise if they were providing value for money. An officer stated that data on the financial impact of LFI could be provided and summarised in a future report.
- Bob Groome commented that while the opening of Specialist Resource Bases (SRBs) was a success worth celebrating, there was concern that the closure of SEND units and teaching assistants being made redundant were not being reported. It was queried if a request for further funding was made to the DfE when the revised plan was submitted in April 2025. Officers confirmed that the local authority always advocated for further funding across the system, particularly across the High Needs Block and mainstream education. It was acknowledged that while the deficit in the High Needs Block was a major issue, which needed to be resolved for the LFI programme to work, increased funding in the overall system was paramount. The aim of the report was to illustrate and celebrate success stories within LFI, to build parental confidence in the SEND system and improve morale within. It was acknowledged while there were green shoots of positivity, the LFI programme, overall, was not currently on track.

- Stuart Allen suggested a report be brought to a future Schools Forum meeting considering the impact of SRBs, illustrating how much provision currently existed in the system and what was planned to be brought online in the future. This would provide a potential measure of success within the LFI programme.
- The Vice-Chair commented that the submission of a revised plan to the DfE provided an opportunity to reconsider the metrics, depending on whether the plan was accepted or rejected.
- The Chair requested clarity regarding recommendation two in the report, relating to the “leadership role that Schools Forum could play in helping the local authority to celebrate the success of the programme.” Officers stated the assumption was that the Forum Members would consider the impact of whole school funding, SEND funding and LFI funding and report back to constituents. The aim was to achieve a positive discussion and build upon best practices across the system. Forum Members had a position where success stories could be reported and the impact highlighted.
- The Chair commented there had been previous attempts to communicate summaries of Schools Forum meetings through briefing papers, however, receiving feedback from constituents remained an issue. It was noted it was particularly challenging for Mainstream Academy Representatives to communicate information to academies that were not currently represented on the Schools Forum.
- Bob Groome highlighted the Facebook group SEND Reform England as a potential option to overcome barriers to communication of the LFI programme. Officers stated that the Comms Team at Norfolk County Council were happy to speak with Forum Members, which could potentially drive engagement across the system.
- Stuart Allen suggested organising a SEND conference in Norfolk during 2026, providing Forum Members with an opportunity to showcase and highlight success stories across the sector. It was noted that a previous event was organised by the LFI Executive Board. If another was organised, it was paramount to build upon the momentum afterwards rather than treat it as a one-and-done event.
- Carole Jacques expressed concern that assisting the local authority in celebrating the success stories of the LFI programme was not part of the School Forum Member role. It was felt that there were other establishments such as the Zone Inclusion Partnerships (ZIPs) which were a more effective outlet for this, with the Schools Forum focussing on financial aspects of the system. Officers acknowledged this viewpoint.
- Joanne Philpott stated there appeared to be confusion regarding the remit of the Schools Forum. Forum Members held a civic role as school and education leaders to give balanced accounts and appropriate advocacy regarding positive trends in outcome data, providing cautious optimism to the wider education system.
- Sarah Shirras noted that there were several headteachers across Norfolk who were unsure of the content being discussed by the Schools Forum but had expressed gratitude to Forum Members for representing their interests. There were other forums across Norfolk where schools regularly interacted with each other.
- The Chair requested clarification of the reporting order between Schools Forum, the LFI Reference Group, and the Scrutiny Committee. An officer stated that there was more focus on ensuring clarity of information between each meeting rather than establishing a strict order of progress. It was suggested that the Schools Forum could play a role in identifying indicators which were off-track, or topics which were not covered by other groups, which would enable the local authority to take remedial action and report back progress at future meetings.

- The Vice-Chair stated that the LFI report at the end of the current academic year should be produced in such a way to enable detailed discussions towards the start of the next academic year. Officers commented that this timescale would fit the annual process of refresh. It was noted that the expected SEND reforms from the government would involve a stocktake across all LFI programmes.
- Joanna Tuttle requested assurance that the LFI Reference Group had the right membership consistency to help co-production of projects. There was a potential need to be more specific regarding attendance at individual meetings, to ensure rich and relevant feedback was received. Officers acknowledged the need to ensure a broad and collective membership mix at Reference Group meetings. If the Schools Forum had oversight of the Reference Group forward work programme, this would build confidence in the co-production element.
- Joanne Philpott commented that the report was appreciated but sought further assurances on the pace of delivery of the new Tier 2 provision, the financial impact, and what work was being undertaken around future projections. Officers confirmed there had been engagement with multi-academy trust leadership and other stakeholders in the system over the past month, with significant improvements noted towards addressing the pace issue. It was hoped that further improvement could be illustrated at the July 2025 meeting of the Schools Forum. It was acknowledged there were a range of issues around timescales, due to a variety of factors. Confidence was expressed that there was sound logic behind the AP centres and the overall strategy.
- Stuart Allen queried if AP model comparisons had been made between Norfolk and other local authorities. Officers stated they had examined other local authorities to see how they had interpreted DfE guidelines. It was noted that Norfolk still had more exclusions per head of population compared to most other areas in England. There was optimism that this trend would reverse over the next couple of years. The Vice-Chair commented that every single AP model was different. The only accurate way to judge outcomes was to use Norfolk's own key performance indicators (KPIs).
- The Vice-Chair stated he was happy to see that the Educational Psychology Service was benefiting from increased direct funding from Norfolk County Council, as this would help with framing the success stories of the LFI programme.
- The Vice-Chair commented that there were initial positive signs of systemwide change towards tackling exclusions.
- Bob Groome outlined an AP model used in Southend-on-Sea which targeted Key Stage 4 students who struggled with academic subjects. This model was based around hands-on intervention with work experience and college attendance. Students in the model received a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) assessment at the end of their tenure, with strong results seen from this model over the years. It was suggested that this model be examined in Norfolk, as it had assisted students towards practical qualifications and further employment prospects. An officer stated that the LFI Reference Group could examine post-16 education on their forward work programme.
- The Chair thanked Michael Bateman for all of his work and effort supporting the Norfolk Schools Forum over many years and for his commitment to supporting vulnerable young people in the county, as this was his final day at Norfolk County Council.

5.4 Having considered and commented accordingly, the Norfolk Schools Forum **RESOLVED** to **PROVIDE** feedback on the following:

1. Progress of the LFI programme
2. The leadership role that Schools Forum members could play in helping the local authority to celebrate the success of the programme and, in turn, increasing countywide consistency of inclusivity in mainstream schools in Norfolk

6. Update on Element 3 Funding Assurance

6.1 Officers introduced the report, which provided an update on the consideration of how assurance was currently provided in relation to the appropriate use of Element 3 funds within in Norfolk, to address concerns raised following previous discussions at Schools Forum meetings earlier in 2025.

6.2 The following key elements were highlighted to the Schools Forum:

- Guidance received from the DfE made it clear that the local authority could expect schools and academies to provide evidence of how Element 3 funding was being used, both in advance of allocation and through review processes, such as EHCP annual reviews. The guidance was applicable to both schools and academies. It was highlighted that the onus was on the local authority to determine the appropriate level of funding.
- The Section 151 officer at Norfolk County Council could seek assurance that High Needs Block funding was being used for correct purposes, rather than as general school funding.
- The DfE advised that while local authorities could not undertake academy audits by themselves, the local authority did have the right to request evidence.
- No additional Element 3 audits were proposed, as the changes implemented meant that officers had improved processes in place towards decision making and the allocation of funds and the review of provision in schools and academies on an ongoing basis. Norfolk County Council was of the view that these processes would provide greater assurance but emphasised the need for open and transparent engagement and dialogue from both maintained schools and academies alike.

6.3 The following points were raised and discussed:

- Owen Jenkins commented that while it appeared the processes around Element 3 assurance were moving in the right direction, there was a need for clarity around upfront and ongoing assurance, particularly around EHCP reviews.
- Stephen Beeson stated that the definition of “appropriate evidence” had to be clarified, as there was a need to make it clear to schools that this was not an audit process. Officers agreed to consider the definition if possible, however, the view of the DfE was that the local authority could set its own definition of appropriate evidence. The DfE did not provide a template for appropriate evidence. Officers agreed to further dialogue with representatives on this issue.

- The Chair queried if officers were satisfied that a robust system was in place to monitor how Element 3 funding was being spent in Norfolk, and questioned what actions would be taken if something unsatisfactory was discovered. Officers stated the robust system was a work in progress at present, with the data gathering recently undertaken and system changes underway. If concerns were raised, initial conversations around provision not meeting need or being inefficient would take place between schools and the dedicated team. Solutions would be sought through these discussions. It was hoped that the system in place meant that issues did not escalate in size.
- Stuart Allen asked if there was a mechanism for schools to disagree with and argue against a local authority funding decision. An officer confirmed there was an option of last resort for schools to argue their case with the DfE. However, the DfE's view was that a school was expected to have exhausted all other options before escalating their case to ministers and the Secretary of State for Education.
- Stuart Allen thanked officers for their work on the new processes, suggesting that an update report be brought back to the Schools Forum in 18 months' time. The Chair suggested an update for the Spring 2026 meeting of the Schools Forum.
- Joanna Tuttle commented that there needed to be confidence in the system that schools were being held to account, with the local authority having the ability to decide if Element 3 funding was necessary.
- Steven Dewing noted that academies received more audits than maintained schools, often being audited multiple times in an academic year.
- Owen Jenkins stated it was paramount to understand the assurance process. Concern was expressed regarding a lack of focus on Enhanced SEND Provision (ESP), with it appearing that the reporting mechanism was due to cease in the near future. An officer stated that the team now has a good evidence base on what good practice is with regards to small group provision in mainstream settings as part of LFI project 2. There was no intention to cease reporting. Communications on this issue were due to be sent out shortly.
- The Chair suggested that ESPs be considered at a future meeting of the LFI Reference Group, looking at equality issues. Officers agreed to consider further.

6.4 Having considered and commented accordingly, the Norfolk Schools Forum **RESOLVED** to **NOTE** the report.

7. DSG Final Outturn and Balances 2024-25

7.1 Officers introduced the report, which presented the final Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) outturn position for all four blocks within the DSG at the end of the 2024-25 financial year. The final position was due to be approved by Norfolk County Council's Cabinet at their June 2025 meeting.

7.2 The following key elements were highlighted to the Schools Forum:

- The overall DSG outturn position for all four blocks was a £55.87m overspend for 2024-25, occurring almost exclusively in the High Needs Block.
- An overspend of £0.031m was recorded with the Central Schools Services Block, while underspends of £0.109m and £1.030m occurred within the Centrally Maintained Schools Block and Early Years Block, respectively.
- The 2024-25 financial year commenced with a substantial DSG deficit of £81.5m. As planned, Norfolk County Council made a £5.5m contribution. However, no further Safety Valve funding was received from the DfE by the end of March 2025. Further funding announcements were awaited.
- The DSG deficit stood at just under £132m by the end of 2024-25.
- There was a reduction in Maintained Schools Balances from £14.8m to £13.9m during the course of 2024-25.

- Within the Centrally Maintained Schools Block, a Growth Fund of £1.25m was established and £0.918m was de-delegated to be held centrally. Both of these actions were previously agreed by the Schools Forum.
- Due to increased maternity demands, there had been a de-delegated overspend by the end of 2024-25.
- Marsham Primary School closed during 2024-25. Funds from this school were not required to be redistributed.
- The Central School Services Block overspend of £0.031m was largely caused by the cost of licences being higher than first estimated. When the budget was set, the DfE had not yet provided the costs, which came in higher than estimated.
- The High Needs Block outturn position had reduced by £2.2m since it was last reported to the Schools Forum in March 2025. This was largely due to a reduction in the independent placements cost following final information regarding placements, and Core School Budget Grant and Teachers Pension Grant being set aside for use on independent school fees which were credited back into costs paid by the DSG at the end of 2024-25.
- A £39m High Needs Block deficit was originally budgeted for 2024-25, versus the actual outturn position of a £55.87m deficit. The largest proportion of the variance was for independent special school placements with an overspend of £10.4m. There were 1,054 independent placements in 2024-25, as opposed to the 986 budgeted, a variance of 68.
- Another proportion of the High Needs Block variance was a £5.7m overspend on Section 19 places, due to an increase in demand by 187 places above what had been budgeted.
- The 1.03m underspend in the Early Needs Block was due to a final adjustment to the 2023-24 figures of £470,000, caused by an overestimate of the 2023-24 clawback. In addition, there was an underspend of £563,000 against the final expected position for 2024-25. A clawback of £2.35m was estimated to take place later in 2025, based on final data from the January 2025 census. The DfE were to produce a final DSG adjustment, which was expected to be known in July 2025.
- The in-year underspend in the Early Needs Block was largely attributable to an underspend on the SEN Inclusion Fund, caused by lower than anticipated demand following placement expansion and maximised use of the Disability Access Fund grant.

7.3 The following points were raised and discussed:

- Steven Dewing queried as to how there had been increased expenditure on Section 19 places when exclusion data pointed to a downward trend in Norfolk. Officers highlighted a combination of factors. The 2024-25 budget was set based on information known in December 2023. After this, there was an increase in exclusions at the same time that AP places were saturated. At the start of 2024-25, the number of children not on a school roll was significantly higher than budgeted, with numbers continuing to increase over the summer. This had a knock-on effect on the budget. It was noted that exclusion numbers and children not on a school roll fluctuated over the year, but the saturation of AP places had contributed to the increased expenditure.
- Matthew Smith asked if the adjustments around maternity and Shared Parental Leave contributions for 2025-26 would eliminate the overspend on de-delegated staffing costs seen in 2024-25. Officers expressed hope this would be the case, noting there had been issues forecasting these elements in past years. A change in methodology was expected to resolve these issues for 2025-26.

- Matthew Smith questioned if there were any other payments withheld in 2024-25. An officer stated the £10m in withheld Safety Valve payments consisted of £4m from 2023-4 and £6m from 2024-25. It was noted that the DfE's intention was to restart safety valve payments in 2025, but there was no clarity on the timescale or how this would be achieved at present. Once information was available, officers intended to build this into future financial projections.
- Matthew Smith requested a breakdown regarding High Needs Inclusion Infrastructure sum, which had amassed to over £6m. Officers agreed to revisit the figures and provide a breakdown at a future Schools Forum meeting. It was noted that a large proportion of this sum was through Schools and Community Teams.
- The Vice-Chair stated that while a strategy regarding the use of independent special schools existed, an overspend of 23% was still recorded. It was queried if there were specific aims built into the budget to achieve the targets within the strategy. Officers stated that assumptions regarding the cumulative effect of the LFI programme were built into the budget, but these had not yet occurred. Demand trends were not following the modelling presently. It was hoped that the Government's expected SEND reforms would provide support in this area. Officers confirmed that a different approach to assumptions was being taken for the 2025-26 budget.
- Stuart Allen expressed concern regarding the overspend in independent special school placements, as 68 extra children had effectively cost the local authority over £10m. Officers clarified that a reduction in places was built into the 2024-25 budget, meaning that the overspend related to the variance in places. It was noted that the cost of places fluctuated over the year, which was a challenge faced by the local authority.
- Rachel Quick queried if it was known which types of independent schools the High Needs Block was being spent on, and whether the provision for the additional 68 places was the root cause of lag within the LFI programme. Officers stated that a breakdown could be provided to a future Schools Forum meeting or via a briefing.
- The Chair commented that the cumulative High Needs Block deficit was reaching a point of no return, as the statutory override was due to cease before the effects of the LFI programme were felt. Officers acknowledged that the statutory override was due to end in March 2026. It was unlikely that any national SEND reforms would have any noticeable effect by this point. Conversations between the Government and local authorities were expected later in the year, but it was uncertain as to what actions could be expected. It was stressed that this was a pressing national issue for the Government, as several local authorities were in the same scenario as Norfolk. Change to the system was inevitable.
- Owen Jenkins commented that the statutory override would cease at the same time when the 2025-26 accounts were audited. Officers acknowledged this reality.
- Peter Pazitka queried if the underspend on SEN Inclusion Fund (SENIF) in the Early Years Block could be utilised in the sector to assist early intervention aims. An officer stated that the SENIF budget was difficult to predict due to the expansion in entitlements for working families. Funding was set at a 3% level, but this was a new and evolving marketplace needing to be kept under review. There were concerns that the under-3 cohort was becoming more skewed towards working families rather than disadvantaged families. There was a need to work with providers to encourage more take up from disadvantaged families in the under-3 cohort. Investigations had taken place to see if the underspend could be reallocated, however, the regulations were clear there was no flexibility in this area due to the DSG being in an overall deficit position.
- Steven Dewing commented that the Government's introduction of free childcare would continue to skew the under-3 cohort more towards working families. It was queried if there was any scope to use the SEN Inclusion Fund (SENIF) to target families and children in different settings as, at present, the reforms were effectively creating a two-tier early years system across the country. An officer stated this would not be in line with national funding guidance.

- Carole Jacques queried if there was scope for looking at a higher level for SENIF funding for children who could require an EHCP, as at present the level of funding per term was low and the process for a child to receive any information could take a significant amount of time. Officers stated there were numerous factors to consider and would explore options as part of consultation on a new formula.

7.4 Having considered and commented accordingly, the Norfolk Schools Forum **RESOLVED** to **NOTE** the report.

8. National Insurance Contributions Grants 2025-26

8.1 Officers introduced the report, which set out information regarding the National Insurance Contributions (NIC) Grants for the 2025-26 financial year

8.2 The following key elements were highlighted to the Schools Forum:

- The Government announced additional NIC grants for the 2025-26 financial year, to assist schools and high needs settings with increased NI costs.
- The DfE provided mainstream schools and academies with a calculator tool towards their rates.
- Early Year grants were to be provided to the local authority by the DfE in September 2025, then subsequently passed onto providers based on local Part Time Equivalent (PTE) data.
- The NIC grant for High Needs Settings was to be rolled into the Core Schools Budget Grant. With regard to distributing the funding, a consultation involving academies, special schools and AP centres was obligatory, scheduled to be held in the summer term. At present, a figure of £496 per place was set.

8.3 The following points were raised and discussed:

- Joanna Tuttle expressed disappointment that the formula did not take staffing costs into account. Concern was expressed that there was not a single school which had been adequately funded to cover the NI uplift.
- Steven Dewing stated that academies and federations were disadvantaged by the formula.
- Bob Groome queried if the figures and formula were similar for all other local authorities.
- Bob Groome suggested contacting other Schools Forums across England to put together a petition to the Education Select Committee regarding the formula. Officers confirmed that the government had been lobbied on several occasions to not make decisions which made schools poorer. It was suggested that Forum Members possibly write a collective letter which could be submitted to the government.
- The Vice-Chair asked if there was Schools Forum counterparts in Suffolk which could be contacted regarding a collective letter to the Government. Officers stated they had struggled to organise collective approaches with other Schools Forum on previous occasions.
- The Chair provided a comment from Lacey Douglass, who was unable to attend this meeting. It was noted that the majority of Early Years settings would bear the cost of any NI increases without grants being available.
- The Norfolk Schools Forum **agreed** to write a letter to the DfE outlining concerns regarding the NIC grant formula.
- The Chair suggested approaching other Schools Forums across the country to potentially organise a regional meeting, to improve connections. This was agreed by Forum Members and officers.

- Bob Groome offered to contact Amanda Martin MP and Jess Asato MP, both of whom currently sat on the Education Select Committee.
- Owen Jenkins stated that the local authority needed to take a flexible approach regarding the options, to reflect the impact on staff in schools.
- Matthew Smith commented that a technical paper on NICs should be shared to show the impact of the available options.

8.4 Having considered and commented accordingly on the report, the Norfolk Schools Forum **RESOLVED** the following:

1. To **NOTE** the report.
2. To **ASK** officers to support the writing of a letter from Schools Forum to the Department for Education (DfE) outlining concerns regarding the formula used for the National Insurance Contributions (NIC) Grant.

9. Early Years Expansion Grant 2025-26

9.1 Officers introduced the report, which set out information regarding the Early Years Expansion Grant for the 2025-26 financial year

9.2 The following key elements were highlighted to the Schools Forum:

- This was an unexpected additional grant for the 2025-26 financial year, allocating funding to all local authorities to support the expansion of early education entitlement from September 2025.
- There was no requirement for a consultation on how the funding was allocated.
- The methodology for allocating the funding would determine awards using Spring 2025 claim data.

9.3 The following points were raised and discussed:

- Joanna Tuttle stated that the methodology appeared sound and robust.
- Officers noted that this grant appeared to be a one-off for 2025-26. If it was recurring, there was a possibility of consulting in future years.

9.4 Having considered and commented accordingly, the Norfolk Schools Forum **RESOLVED** to **NOTE** the report.

10. Norfolk Schools Forum Constitution and Ways of Working

10.1 Officers introduced the report, which set out a proposed Norfolk Schools Forum forward work plan for the 2025-26 academic year.

10.2 The following key elements were highlighted to the Schools Forum:

- The review of the constitution remained a work in progress, as it was the aim to produce a bespoke document. There were plans in place for the Chair to meet with officers later in May 2025.
- Clarification was required regarding union members on the Schools Forum. A meeting was scheduled later in May 2025 to find a way forward.

- It was proposed to reduce the number of Schools Forum meetings from six per academic year to five meetings, by combining the two summer term meetings into a single date in June. The Norfolk Schools Forum was considered an outlier for having six meetings per academic year. The aim was to allow business items to be spread more evenly across Schools Forum meetings, while allowing extra time for actions to be picked up.
- It was possible to review the constitution annually if requested by Forum Members.

10.3 The following points were raised and discussed:

- The Chair asked if the Norfolk Schools Forum was unusual in not having sub-groups. Officers stated that many local authorities used sub-groups, which allowed items to be considered in great detail. It was not planned to consider sub-groups at this meeting.
- Bob Groome suggested possibly no longer holding meetings in March, due to a lack of business to consider. There had been occasions in previous years where the March meeting was cancelled outright. Officers stated there had been conversations around which meeting would be removed and would keep under review.
- Stuart Allen suggested a further reduction to four meetings per academic year, based on the draft forward plan.
- The Chair expressed concern regarding the reduction to five meetings per academic year, on the basis that meetings were already lengthy.
- Sarah Shirras noted that Schools Forum meetings had a healthy attendance at present and that Members were willing to commit the time for the existing meetings.
- The Schools Forum **agreed** to move to five meetings for the 2025-26 academic year.

10.4 The Norfolk Schools Forum **RESOLVED** to **APPROVE** a reduction to five planned meetings for the 2025-26 academic year and their approximate timings

11. Norfolk Audit Services – Annual Audit Report

11.1 Officers introduced the report, providing an update on Norfolk Audit Services' internal audit coverage for the 2024-25 financial year. The planned audit coverage for 2025-26 was also included within the report.

11.2 Officers thanked all schools who participated in the consultation and the Schools Forum for adopting the new risk-based audit approach.

11.3 The following points were raised and discussed:

- Matthew Smith stated that approximately 90% of maintained school budgets were currently spent on staffing and journaled. It was acknowledged there was a fair amount of complexity with the arrangements, but that this could be an area of high risk
- The Chair commented that poor leadership was another potential area of high risk.
- Peter Pazitka queried if the audit team were prepared to offer this service to academies, given that significant numbers of audit companies were not interested in the education sector. Officers stated there had been a move away from the traded audit approach during the 2024-25 academic year. The suggestion had been looked into previously and there did not appear to be much interest in the offer in Norfolk. It was acknowledged that a one-off audit would be difficult to organise given cost and staff implications. However, if a significant number of academies were interested, the suggestion could be revisited at a later date.
- Steven Dewing stated there would be a market for academy audits, noting that Sapientia had recently retendered a five-year contract for this.
- Steven Dewing queried the differences between the DfE guidance for academy audits and that for maintained schools.

- The Vice-Chair commented it could be useful for local authority colleagues to look at the Academies Financial Handbook to understand the expectation of the depth of both internal and external audits that Trusts were expected to undertake
- The Chair asked if the local authority had a mechanism in place to identify schools at risk and refer them for an audit. It was queried if this audit would also cover management structures and staffing. Officers confirmed that a process was in place.
- The Chair thanked officers for their report.

11.4 Having considered and commented accordingly on which areas were considered as higher risk for potential inclusion in the 2025-26 audit plan, the Norfolk Schools Forum **RESOLVED** to **NOTE** the report.

12. Norfolk Schools Forum Forward Work Plan

12.1 Officers introduced the current forward work plan to the Forum.

12.2 The Norfolk Schools Forum **RESOLVED** to **NOTE** the forward work plan.

13. Any Other Business

13.1 There was no other business to consider.

14. Date of Next Meeting

14.1 The next meeting of the Norfolk Schools Forum was confirmed for **9am** on **Wednesday 2 July 2025**, to take place in the **Cranworth Room** at **County Hall**

There being no other business, the meeting closed at 12:43

**Martin White, Chair
Norfolk Schools Forum**



If you need this document in large print, audio, Braille, alternative format or in a different language please contact Customer Services on 0344 800 8020 and we will do our best to help.