

**SCHOOLS FORUM
14 NOVEMBER 2024
4.35 - 5.40 PM**



Present:

Elizabeth Savage, Academy School Representative
Jenny Baker, Special School Representative
Trudi Sammons, Primary School Representative (Headteacher)
Keith Grainger, Secondary School Representative (Headteacher)
Grant Strudley, Academy School Representative
Catherine Forrester, Academy School Representative
Justin Southwood, Academy School Representative (Substitute)

Observer:

Councillor Roy Bailey, Cabinet Member for Children & Young People (Observer)

Apologies for absence were received from:

Sue Butler, Early Years PVI Provider
Caroline Johnson, Primary School Representative
Juanita Dunlop, Primary School Representative (Headteacher)
Tim Griffith, Academy School Representative
Katie Moore, Academy School Representative
Rachel Manton, National Education Union
Richard Ferris, Academy School Representative
Gareth Croxon, Academy School Representative

17. Minutes and Matters Arising

The minutes of the meeting of 19 September 2024 were approved as a correct record.

Arising from the minutes, Duane Chappell provided an update on the Safety Valve programme, the key points made included:

- Subject to approval by the Department for Education (DfE), a trust has been appointed to run the new Social, Emotional, and Mental Health (SEMH) school, which will be funded through capital investment from the Safety Valve initiative. It is anticipated that the school will open in September 2025.
- Work is progressing with Edgbarrow School to develop its specialist provision, with the aim of opening in September to accommodate five pupils.
- Headteachers have received a briefing on the new banding tool.
- There continues to be significant demand for Education, Health, and Care Plans (EHCPs) at the initial assessment stage, with a high reliance on placements in the independent sector.
- Efforts are underway with academies to assess the level of Specialist Resource Provision (SRP) within the borough. Once this work is complete, findings will be shared with headteachers.

- Details of the admission criteria for resource provisions across the borough are available on the Additional Needs Information Hub: [Bracknell Forest Directory | Additional Needs Info Hub \(SEND Local Offer\)](#)

Arising from questions and concerns raised regarding EHCPs and SEN support, the following points were noted:

- Decisions on whether to issue an EHCP were made in accordance with page 154 of the Code of Practice. These decisions were based on a needs assessment to determine how best to meet the child's needs and whether an EHCP was required.
- Training had been provided at the Headteachers' briefing to help schools enhance their early help support.
- Although the letter had 150 signatories, this did not necessarily equate to 150 children, as both parents in a family often signed the letter. There were 1,633 children with EHCPs, and support for them followed a graduated approach co-produced with the Parent Carer Forum.
- The SEND letter from families had been responded to via the Parent Carer Forum, and the response was available on the website.

18. **Declarations of Interest**

Trudi Sammons and Grant Strudley declared an interest in item 6 "Update on 2025-26 School Budgets including outcomes from the October 2024 Financial Consultation with Schools"

19. **Schools Forum Work Planning**

The Forum received a report which presented an outline of planned work for the Schools Forum together with the key priorities as identified by head teachers.

This included a timetable outlining when essential decisions would be made at the Schools Forum. A consultation had also been conducted with headteachers regarding their priorities, with the most pressing issues identified being scheduled for discussion at future Schools Forum meetings.

Arising from member comments, Duane Chappell agreed to provide information on the training provided to schools to support pupils with SEND.

The Forum **NOTED** the report.

20. **New SEND banding tool**

The Forum considered a report on proposed changes to the SEN banding tool.

Duane Chappell informed the Forum that the tool was designed to determine how funding was allocated to EHCPs. The banding tool was scheduled for implementation from 1 January 2025, initially applying only to new EHCPs and phase transfers. It would also be applied if a child's needs were reassessed. The tool aimed to ensure that funding was distributed as fairly and equitably across the system as possible. Duane assured the Forum that, as Assistant Director: Education and Learning, she personally signed off on all panel decisions. Additionally, a monitoring group involving headteachers would be established to oversee the implementation of the banding tool.

Arising from questioning, the following points were noted:

- The banding tool would be rolled out over five years. During this period, specialist resource provision would be developed, with the aim of reducing the burden on mainstream schools.
- Funding allocated through an EHCP covered what schools were required to do above and beyond their usual responsibilities for a child. The values underpinning the banding tool would be continuously monitored to ensure accurate application.
- A significant amount of resources was currently being spent on placing children in the independent sector. However, it was hoped this could be mitigated by the ongoing development of additional specialist provision.

Arising from discussion, the Forum raised the following points around the banding tool:

- While the banding tool was logical and straightforward to use, there were concerns that if the underlying values were set too low, schools with large numbers of EHCPs might receive less funding in future years.
- There was apprehension that the tool might not work as effectively for children with complex needs.
- It was essential to highlight the positive work being undertaken in mainstream schools. The Forum requested that the next meeting include a discussion on how best to inform parents about the EHCP process. **(Action: Duane Chappell)**

21. **Update on 2025-26 School Budgets including outcomes from the October 2024 Financial Consultation with Schools**

The Forum received a report which provided an update on the latest information from the Department of Education (DfE) in respect of the 2025-26 Financial Settlement for schools and the responses received from schools to the annual financial consultation.

The report also sought views from the Forum regarding whether schools should be consulted on widening the calculation of the Block Transfer from the Schools Block (SB) to the High Needs Block (HNB) to include those schools funded at the lowest per pupil amount normally permitted by the DfE through the Minimum Per Pupil Funding Level (MPPFL).

Paul Clark provided the Forum with a presentation on the 2025-26 financial settlement. The Forum was reminded that £2.3 billion of additional funding had been allocated for schools, of which £1 billion was designated for SEND. This funding would need to cover the 2024-25 pay settlement as well as the 2025-26 pay award.

Paul Clark explained that, in practical terms, this would represent a 0.5% increase in funding once the 2024-25 grants were integrated into the 2025-26 National Funding Formula (NFF) rates.

Paul Clark also confirmed the funding protection mechanisms for 2024-25. These included:

- The minimum funding guarantee level must be set at between a -0.5% and 0.0% increase per pupil from 2024-25, or 0.0% for special schools.
- The Mainstream Pupil Funding Levels would ensure that primary schools received at least £4,955 per pupil and secondary schools at least £6,465 per pupil.

Arising from discussion and questions the following points were raised:

- There was no indication that the financial challenges facing schools would ease following this announcement.
- Councillor Bailey would write to the Secretary of State to highlight concerns about the local funding formula and its impact on smaller schools, including single-form primary schools. He would request that the DfE consider how these schools could be better protected. **(Action: Cllr Bailey)**
- A request was made for a paper discussing the approach to single-form primary schools in Bracknell Forest to be presented at a future Schools Forum meeting. **(Action: Duane Chappell)**
- Additional information from central government was needed to clarify the impact of employer national insurance increases.

RESOLVED that the Schools Forum **AGREES** that after taking account of the school responses to the October 2024 financial consultation:

- That after taking account of the school responses to the October 2024 financial consultation that de-delegation of budgets for Maintained Secondary Schools continues for the services requested by the council.
- That a consultation should be undertaken with all schools to gather views on whether the calculation of the Block Transfer from the Schools Block to the High Needs Block budget should be updated to include schools funded at the Minimum Per Pupil Funding Level.

The Schools Forum agreed to defer decisions on the following decisions until the meeting of 5 December 2024:

- Whether de-delegation of budgets for Maintained Primary Schools continues for the services requested by the council.
- Whether a £20 per pupil contribution continues to be made by maintained schools towards the cost of delivering 'general' education related statutory and regulatory duties.

22. **The Schools Budget: 2024-25 Budget Monitoring**

The Forum received an annual report which provided an update on the 2024-25 forecast budget monitoring position for the Schools Budget, to be aware of key issues and progress to date on the Education Capital Programme.

RESOLVED that the Schools Forum **NOTES**:

- The budget variances being forecast on the Schools Budget that total to an aggregate net forecast over spending before Emerging Issues of £9.155m (paragraph 6.15);
- That including Emerging Issues, the forecast over-spending increases to £10.017m (paragraph 6.15);
- That the year-end balance held in the Dedicated Schools Grant Adjustment Account is forecast at a deficit of £26.278m deficit and that the cost to Bracknell Forest Council of servicing this level of "debt" in 2025/26 will be around £1.25m per year (paragraph 6.16);

- The expectation that the liability to fund balances held in the Dedicated Schools Grant Adjustment Account will transfer to LAs from April 2026 (paragraphs 6.21 to 6.22)
- Progress to date on the Education Capital Programme, as summarised at Annex 2.

23. **Dates of Future Meetings**

The next meeting of the Forum will be held at 4.30pm on Thursday 5 December 2024.

The other dates of Schools Forum meetings for the academic year are:

15 January 2025

13 March 2025.

Chair