

Warrington Schools Forum

Minutes – 19 March 2024 (via Teams)

Draft to be confirmed June 2024

Membership

Membership with differentiated voting rights ~ Total Membership of 28, of whom 22 are entitled to vote on funding formula issues										
Sector Representation (22)	Appointed by the Council following election by:	Member	Dates and Attendance							
			11 October 2022	17 January 2023	21 March 2023	20 June 2023	10 October 2023	16 January 2024	19 March 2024	18 June 2024
Maintained Nursery School Senior Staff (1)	Primary Headteachers Group	Marcia Atherton	A	P	P	P	P	P	P	
Special School Staff (1)	Special School Headteachers Group	Lucinda Duffy	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	
Special School Governor (1)	Governors Forum	Hazel Coen	P	P	P	A	P	P	P	
PRU (1)	PRU Management Board	Lindsay Regan	A	A	A	A	X	A	A	
Academy – all phases (9) Agreed this should be: (5 secondary including UTC) (4 primary)	Academy Schools (secondary)	Gwyn Williams	P	P	P	P	A	P	A	
		Vacant	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
		John Carlin	A	P	P	P	P	P	P	
		Christian Wilcocks	P	P	A	A	S	P	P	
	Academy Schools (primary)	Gary Cunningham CHAIR - Schools Forum	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	
		Jane Rooney (from March 2024)	A	A	A	P	A	-	P	
		Cath Cooke	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	
		Craig Burgess	P	P	P	A	P	P	P	
	UTC	Chris Hatherall	A	P	A	A	P	A	P	
	Maintained Primary School Sector (6)	WAPH and Governors Forum	Siobhan Bentley	P	A	P	A	P	P	A
Kathryn Berry			A	A	P	P	P	P	A	
Andy Hayes (from March 2024)			A	P	P	P	P	-	A	
Ian Moss			A	P	P	A	A	P	P	
Janet Lazarus Governor			P	P	P	A	X	P	P	
Donna Kendal Governor			A	P	A	A	P	P	A	
Maintained Secondary School Sector (2)	WASCL	Chris Hunt	P	P	A	A	S	P	P	
		Ed McGlinchey	P	P	A	A	A	A	A	
Private Voluntary and Independent Providers (1)	PVI Providers Forum	Kelda Willians	P	A	A	A	X	A	A	

Representing	Member	Dates and Attendance							
		11 October 2022	17 January 2023	21 March 2023	20 June 2023	10 October 2023	16 January 2024	19 March 2024	18 June 2024
Non-Schools Members (6)									
Anglican Diocese (1)	Jane Griffiths	A	A	A	X	X	P	A	
Roman Catholic Diocese (1)	Vacant	A	A	A	X	-	-	-	
16-19 Institutions (1)	Damian McGuire	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	
Parent Governor (1)	Vacant	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
NEU (Trades Union)	Lucie Humphreys	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	
NASUWT (Trades Union)	Laura Watson	P	A	P	P	P	P	P	

Representing		11 October 2022	17 January 2023	21 March 2023	20 June 2023	10 October 2023	16 January 2024	19 March 2024	18 June 2024
		Warrington Borough Council							
Director of Education and Community Services (Deputy DCS)	Paula Worthington	P	A	P	P	A	P	P	
Head of Service – Quality Education and Learning	Louise Atkin	A	P	P	P	P	P	P	
Finance Manager	Janet Davies (from Jan 2024)	S	P	P	P	-	P	P	
Senior Accountant (Schools)	Emma Norman (from March 2024)	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	
Executive Member for Children and Young People's Services	Cllr Sarah Hall	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	

Key:

P ~ Present

A ~ Apologies

X ~ Absent with no apologies

C ~ Meeting cancelled

S ~ Substitute

- ~ Vacancy

O ~ Observer

Presenting item:

Simon Bleckly

for item 3

Alison Purcell

for item 4

Minutes:

Gill Sykes

1. Apologies and Welcome

The chairperson, Gary Cunningham, welcomed everyone to the meeting and apologies were noted.

2. Minutes and Matters Arising (from 16 January 2024)

The minutes were accepted as a true record and the following was noted:

- Page 4: Noted that the clerk for admissions appeals has returned from maternity leave. Adam Kellock was going to ask the clerk to speak to headteachers to give feedback following appeals.
Action: Paula to follow up with Adam Kellock.
- Page 6: Query raised about the three schools going through the academy conversion process and how this went with the costs. Louise noted she was not aware of academy charges. Paula shared that she had a meeting with the DfE and raised the issue that the grant has not increased. There was acknowledgement from the DfE, they said they were aware of this.
- Page 9: Hazel clarified that although she mentioned Green Lane school she was commenting about all schools in all school settings.

3. Internal Audit Plan

Simon Bleckly presented his report to the forum which shows the main findings from the school audits carried out by Internal Audit since the previous report in March 2023 and provides an overall opinion on the governance and control frameworks in place in schools, supporting the completion of the Council's Annual Governance Statement.

The following key points were shared:

- Last year there was discussion about resource level impacting on the ability to conduct school audits. Formal comment was received from Schools Forum expressing concern and was included in a report presented to the Audit and Governance Committee in November 2023 highlighting the impact of reduced internal audit resource. Approval was given for extra resource at the level of auditor to do school visits.
- The intention is to catch up on school reviews and are conscious some schools have not been audited for up to 10 years. There is value in having a review of finance, governance and control frameworks on a more regular basis.
- A relatively low number of audits have been completed so far (seven) and a couple more are planned. There is good news with the findings, opinions are still mainly high or substantial (with the exception of one school) and is testament to the way schools are handling money in difficult circumstances.
- Opinions are generally good with recommendations around financial management and control. It is acknowledged that schools find it difficult to have separation of duties and oversight. There are no high or critical recommendations which is good.
- There is one school where a full review is planned due to serious concerns being raised and the audit team have already started supporting the Interim Executive Board (IEB).
- One key element of the revised Global Standards is a requirement for internal audit to ensure that all recommendations arising from reviews are followed up to assess whether they have been implemented.
- If recruitment for the new posts is successful we hope that the testing programme for 2024/25 will mean more schools can be audited and then be able to return to the 5 yearly cycle of audits.

Simon noted that the audit report concluded that, subject to the limitation in scope imposed by the number of schools that we have been able to audit, and the one school causing concern, there is Satisfactory Assurance that Warrington schools have effective systems of governance and internal control in place.

Questions/comments:

- Gary referred to the work being done with the IEB and asked if the statement is in the conclusion or will it be impacted on next year's conclusion. Simon noted that it will be picked up in next year's report. Work being done so far will be treated as an assessment within that school and for the IEB to see key risks. When the normal audit is conducted this will lead to a formal opinion and reported back.

- Query raised about if there is a way of escalating to audit when budget officers have concerns following monitoring visits. Emma noted that the finance team do report to the senior accountant, they liaise with audit and at the KASUR (keeping all schools under review) meetings it is all raised as part of a wider picture. If we have concerns they will be raised and advice sought from audit.
- Janet asked how schools are chosen to audit. Simon noted that his deputy is making sure we have the links with finance and other areas in education, picking up risks and identifying which schools need to be audited. It has been difficult over the last few years due to capacity but we will now try to clear the backlog of audits.
- Louise noted that the particular situation where audit was working with the IEB was initiated by education and Louise had a conversation with the audit team about flexibility in the system and to include Emma. Simon noted there is scope for better working together.
- Hazel thanked Simon for his comprehensive report and the council for putting additional funding in this area, it is worth it for financial probity.

Recommendations:

- (i) The forum is asked to note and comment on the contents of the report. **NOTED**

4. Proposed Early Years funding rates

Alison Purcell presented her report to the forum which provides Schools Forum with information of the proposed early year funding for 2024-25, following agreement from the Early Years Single Funding Formula Group (EYSFFG) meeting, on 11/01/24. The following key points were shared:

- The proposed rates were well received based on the 2023 census. There are lots of changes this year and next year with early education and there will be a few more census updates. They may not follow the typical census format and we may need to request extra information from schools to align with their original estimates.
- Early education funding for 2, 3 and 4 year olds will change and in September 2024 will expand to include working parents of children aged from 9 months. Alison noted that providers don't currently have the staff to accommodate the new expansion.
- We are not comparing the 2 year old working parent offer and the disadvantaged offer differently as we don't want providers to find one more desirable than the other. Providers were happy with the £7.53 proposed rate and this was accepted at the single funding formula meeting. They agreed with the logic to treat the offer fairly and noted there are ways to support a disadvantaged child and Early Years can give advice about the process.
- The proposed rate of £5.50 for 3 and 4 year olds is an increase of 24p from the current rate and is from April 2024. Members of staff can access deprivation funding and other funding streams to top up where appropriate.

The indicative funding for 2024/25 totals £25.5m and there is a contingency of £56K. The roll out is an unknown as we don't know what the take up will be for under 2 year olds with working parents. We have tried to be sensible with the contingency amount which can be used at our discretion for some 2 year olds, particularly if the family has no recourse to public funds, also we might have a family in receipt of funding and due to a situation out of their control they are no longer eligible. We might feel a need to maintain the standard and routine for the child and keep them in the provision. For children put into emergency foster care and to avoid splitting up siblings then this is the funding pot that could be used to keep them in a provision. Although £56K sounds a lot of money it could be used up very quickly. Requests are considered on a case by case basis through discussion as a team.

From 1 April 2024 working parents of 2 year old children will be able to access 15 hours childcare. They have to meet criteria and it works in the same way. Need to apply the term before to get an eligibility code to give to the provider, every 13 weeks they have to reconfirm their eligibility. From September 2025 those working families will have an increase to 30 hours. Most parents need childcare all year round and the free hours are for a 38 week period over a year. Hours can be banked so could potentially have a free day every so often. Parents can pick and choose where want to go depending on services.

April 2024	Working parents of 2 year olds will have access to 15 hours of free childcare.
September 2024	15 hours of free childcare will be extended to all eligible children above the age of 9 months (the term following turning 9 months)
September 2025	Working parents of children up to the age of 5 years will be able to access 30 hours of free childcare per week.

Alison explained that they are trying to recruit a dedicated team member to help providers. There are two funding pots from the DfE, a capital pot if providers need to physically expand (to create additional places structurally, not for refurbishment costs), whether early years or wraparound and a small pot providers can apply for. There is a criteria and they have to make a business case. One provider is not being favoured over another, the provision should have a sustainable offer, but we don't want to fund it if demand is already met in the area. We are trying to make it as fair and transparent as possible. The DfE has made it clear the service has to be sustainable and realistic.

By September 2026 it is expected that the wraparound expansion will be in place and any parent of primary aged children who wants to access formal childcare between 8.00 am and 6.00 pm should be able to do so. Schools/providers could join together and make a hub, could create EY foundation units with nursery pupils and reception to create more space for older children. A governance group will consider different ideas to get a true representation of what the sector thinks.

Alison noted that if you have anyone you think needs to know more about whether to critique the service you already have, if you would like a presentation to all school staff or for someone to speak to parents about the funding Alison's team can do that. It will give parents the right information at the right time to make informed decisions.

Questions/comments:

- How do schools find out about the pots of money and support Alison's team can offer. Alison noted she has been emailing to offer briefing sessions. Also, if a school has a nursery on site they will automatically be emailed once applications are live.
- If you have any queries please email the team inbox and mark the subject as: funding available CHI-EEFTeam@warrington.gov.uk
- Marcia echoed what Alison has said already and met Kelda Willians as part of the EY Single Funding Formula Group and they were happy with the amounts. It was felt to be a fair spread across the sector.

Recommendations:

- (i) Schools Forum ratify the proposed funding allocation for 2024/25. **AGREED**
- (ii) Following the validated 2024 census, a further report on this funding will be presented to Schools Forum. **NOTED**

5. Membership updates

The chairperson gave an update on forum membership:

- Cath Cooke is leaving and we will need a replacement primary academy rep.
- There is a vacancy for a secondary academy rep and Chris Hunt agreed to take to WASCL for nominations.
- There is a vacancy for a parent governor. Louise agreed to raise this at governors forum on 16 May 2024.
- Subsequent to the meeting Janet Lazarus resigned from Schools Forum, so we will need a primary maintained governor rep.
- Paula noted she has raised attendance at Schools Forum with Councillor Hall and as she is no longer able to attend it was suggested to make the decision to remove Councillor Hall from membership. Laura Watson noted that she has also spoken to Councillor Hall regarding attending Schools Forum and she is updated on schools via other mechanisms. Laura shared that if there is a need for councillor input, she can swap representation during the meeting as she is a councillor too.

The following was suggested:

- For members who have not attended for 12 months, to contact them to find out if they no longer want to be a member. Schools Forum really does need people to attend to see reasoning behind decision making.
- We previously mentioned if a member had not attended the past three meetings to no longer be a member.
- Suggested having membership to be a one year tenure and then refresh the membership.

Paula informed that WAPH Executive had contacted her regarding the timescale for when information from Schools Forum is distributed to members. They are asking for papers to be available earlier in order to have sufficient time before the Schools Forum meeting to consult with the headteacher colleagues they represent. Suggested that this is a conversation to have outside this meeting.

6. School Budget confirmation

Emma Norman presented her report to the forum which illustrates how the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) settlement for Warrington for 2024/25 has been allocated to individual budgets and follows previous funding discussion around the Schools Block of DSG (and the resulting mainstream budgets) at the 16 January 2024 Schools Forum Meeting. The following key points were shared:

- The DSG block allocations have been confirmed by the amounts detailed in the report.
- The ESFA will deduct at source for mainstream academy and High Needs place funding at non-maintained settings.
- There will also be the teachers' pay additional grant (re: pension contributions), applied and in the funding pack. We await further guidance on the additional 5% pension contributions and should get confirmation from the DfE in the early financial year about how it is allocated to schools.
- Application of the EY block was discussed at Item 4 of this Schools Forum meeting.
- HN block pressures were discussed at Item 7 of this Schools Forum meeting. A significant proportion is supporting the increasing EHCPs and trying to resource from the budget we have.
- Detailed information on allocations was sent out on 29 February 2024 along with supporting appendices.

Questions/comments:

- Craig referred to the £1.7m for Committed to Inclusion/graduated response (statutory) support for inclusion and asked for a meeting with Emma to discuss.
- Damian noted that the teachers pensions pay grant calculator on the DfE website came out last week and can be used to calculate for each individual school. It is not looking as good as people might think and is not fully funded from the ones identified so far. It is not vastly different depending on the size of budget. There is no mechanism for putting a claim in. An issue is they are using the per pupil rate.
- John noted there is a portal log in and for his school they are £7K down on what it will cost them.
- Emma noted the calculation is pupil premium and deprivation and because the DfE is using that factor it is not going to be fully funded. For those schools with the finance advisory service SLA they are working with schools. Noted that the funding is lagged.
- Hazel referred to the element 3 funding and noted there is a difference on the table for special schools and asked for a separate meeting with Emma to discuss. Emma noted that we need to make sure it is fair and equitable for all special schools. Lucinda noted there have been conversations previously and it is worth noting there is a difference in the level of need reflected in the level of funding, it is important to review it.
- Emma confirmed she could have a meeting with Craig, Hazel and others after the financial year end, so from May 2024 at the earliest.

Recommendations:

- (i) It is recommended that School Forum Members note the contents of this report. **NOTED**

7. SEN financial pressures – impact on significant projects

Paula Worthington gave a verbal update and explained that finances are incredibly stretched. We have tried to be ambitious around SEND and place planning but as Warrington is one of the lowest funded boroughs this creates difficulties. Paula wanted to let forum members know about some of the work taking place.

- There was a recent SEND State of the Nation workshop to look at complexity of need in SEND and from information in DPs we know of the children coming through the system from EY. Services are under strain due to the complexity of children across all schools and also around places and place sufficiency.
- There are no places left in Warrington and the local authority made a plea for sectors to help and lots of schools offered. There is great practice shared with an incredible amount of goodwill.
- Work around the SEND and AP Provision Board will be brought back to forum. There have been conversations around some of our ambitions to expand in some areas and at the moment we can't do that. We have to recalibrate what we can do this year and look at subsequent years. It has caused incredible frustration and in a meeting with the DfE Paula expressed our frustration that Warrington is promoted as a good practice sector with good working when we are one of the lowest funded boroughs. Paula noted she has raised the issue about Warrington's finances with the Shadow Education Secretary.
- One workshop was around SEND transport and looked at sole occupancy and Post 16 receiving SEND transition. We may have to make hard decisions about using the DfE policy, do we stop children accessing transport which means they may stop accessing school. An exercise showed some children probably shouldn't be on transport but others do need transport to keep them safe, warm, receive education and get access to food. There are conversations happening around this.
- Work is ongoing around the Peace Centre and developing Post 16 and Post 19. With Post 19 to lift children and young people out of dependence on education up to 25 years, which might not be right decision for them. Credibility offer takes them to adulthood and to take control of their lives.
- With place sufficiency part of the challenge is about making sure we have enough places in the borough, which means pushing the boundaries of our current facilities. We were successful in 2019 for an ASD free school but the DfE are still yet to build it. With places at the free school and the Peace Centre also taking a cohort, it would free up places at Woolston for Lucinda and Jo to have some capacity to expand.

Paula shared that we are trying to keep children in the borough until the Peace Centre is ready in September 2025 and the DfE are saying the free school will be ready next year at the latest. We are therefore in a holding period and are reluctant to send children out of borough, travelling some distance on transport and losing connectivity with community and peer groups.

It is a challenging climate and we appreciate this is a sobering message, but we always want to have forum members sighted on the challenges also happening within the council. In the SEND State of the Nation workshop it was mentioned that all our schools are SEND schools and we may need to restart conversations we started in the past and re-route through all schools.

There is a conversation about DPs and DP funding and different categories of need. It's not saying no, it's saying let's have the conversation in the context of we can do some things now and may have to delay other things. We want to bring information to Schools Forum so we will make the decisions jointly together.

Questions/comments:

- Craig noted that the concern is around giving dates but then if children go to the private sector, families could end up going to tribunal and an independent school will cost us vast amounts of money. These timelines have to be met or we won't have SEND provision in Warrington.
- Craig shared that he met the Shadow Schools Minister today and shared his concerns regarding funding challenges.

8. AOB

Query around SLAs:

- Lucinda shared that one of the headteachers had raised concern around a mid-year increase and they were questioning the validity of making an increase at that point in the SLA. They met with Stephen McNulty and he explained that it is in the small print when signing up for the SLA, it makes clear that there may be changes. The headteacher asked why it happened and what they could do to try and avoid that risk moving forward.

- Emma noted it was following this that an email was sent out on behalf of David Smith. In January 2023 when the SLA was put on My School Services the annual pay award was still to be agreed. Once it was agreed in December there was a massive increase in cost of cleaning staff. It was a corporate decision to pass on to the client. It was an average 5.8% increase from when the SLA was originally purchased.
- Craig queried the increase and noted that he had read something that said if an increase was over 5% there would need to be a consultation with the people the service has a contract with. Noted that this would have to be taken up with Stephen McNulty. **Action: Paula to contact Stephen McNulty.**
- Gary asked if the schools were notified before the money was taken. Emma shared that for maintained schools the adjustment would go through in March and academies would follow suit.
- Gary asked if there are any current pending increases for SLAs for this financial year. Emma informed that the SLAs are set by individual services, but we would like to think they have learnt from this lesson. It would be a question for David, to ask him if he has contingency to cover costs for next year.
- Gary noted that Stephen presented a paper on SLAs to Schools Forum and if mid-year increases are a pattern it is worrying for the sector and Stephen needs to understand the concern. Communication and forewarning and as much notice as possible is needed. Lucinda shared that that was why they asked for meeting, the SLA report was positive when presented to Schools Forum but then headteachers are reflecting a different story. They asked Stephen what guarantees would there be and what happen so services learn from this. They asked Stephen to share the questions with the services.

Action: Stephen McNulty to be invited to the next Schools Forum meeting to discuss SLAs and mid-year increases.

9. Meeting schedule for 2024

All dates are Tuesdays at 4:30pm–6:30pm via Teams:

- 18 June 2024
- 8 October 2024

The chairperson thanked everyone for attending and the meeting was closed.