

Schools forums: an introduction



What is a schools forum?

- A schools forum is a body that meets to discuss issues that relate to schools in a local authority area.
- The regulations require that every local authority have one and they must meet at least four times a year. We have permanently amended the regulations so schools forums can be held remotely by (but is not limited to) telephone conferencing, video conferencing, live webcast, and live interactive streaming.
- Schools Forums (England) Regulations 2012 (S.I. 2012/2261) govern the composition, constitution and procedures of schools forums.



Is there a minimum or maximum size for a schools forum, and who attends them?

- There is no minimum or maximum size but the local authority will take various issues into account, including the need to have full representation for schools (school members) and the local authorities policy on representation of non-school members.
- Schools representatives must make up at least two-thirds of the total schools forum membership.
- The balance between maintained primary, maintained secondary and academies must be broadly representative of the pupil numbers in each category and will include representation from all school phases unless there are no maintained primary or secondary schools .
- One third of the schools forum can be made of non-school members, and must include a representative of 16 to 19 providers and an early years provider from the private, voluntary and independent sector.



What issues do schools forums consider?

Local authorities will consult schools forums on things like:

- changes to the local funding formula
- proposed changes to the operation of the minimum funding guarantee
- changes to or new contracts affecting schools (for example school meals)
- arrangements for pupils with special educational needs, in pupil referral units, and in early years provision
- surplus claw back mechanism/DSG deficit recovery plans

While the local authority will put proposals to the schools forum and is expected to listen and act upon suggestions made by the schools forum, the local authority makes the final decision on the issues above. However, the schools forum can write to the Secretary of State to express their concerns in circumstances where the local authority have gone against the recommendation of the schools forum.



Do schools forums have decision making powers?

Yes, they have decision making powers on proposals that local authorities put to them on the following areas:

- to de-delegate to maintained schools, or pass back, monies allocated to the local authority through the funding formula for services the local authority would provide centrally to maintained schools. **Only maintained primary and secondary school representatives can decide for their own phase.**
- to create a fund for significant pupil growth to ensure there are sufficient school places in the local authority area. **All representatives vote.**
- their pupil numbers are falling if the schools' surplus capacity is likely to be needed within the next three years because of forecast rising pupil numbers. The forum should agree both the value of the fund and the criteria for allocation, and support is available only for schools judged good or outstanding at their last Ofsted inspection. **All representatives vote.**



Decisions...

- Agreeing other budgets centrally retained by the local authority including for local authority statutory responsibilities. **If they relate to maintained schools only then voting is by the primary, secondary, special and PRU members of schools forum.**
- Funding for central early years expenditure, which may include funding for checking eligibility of pupils for an early years place, the early years pupil premium and/or free school meals. **All representatives vote.**
- Local authorities require schools forum approval in order to move up to 0.5% from the schools block to other blocks. **All representatives vote**



What happens if the schools forum rejects the local authority's proposal?

- If the forum rejects the local authority's proposal, the local authority can appeal to the Secretary of State to disapply the Schools and Early Years Finance (England) Regulations through a process known as a disapplication.
- This involves the local authority submitting a disapplication proforma in which they should include the rationale for the proposal, the potential impact on other schools in the area and impact of other educational functions and services.



Elections to the schools forum

- The schools forums must elect a chair from among its membership. Elected members of the local authority or local authority officers cannot hold the office of chair
- The relevant group (for instance, maintained secondary) decides how their school members are elected
- Academies sponsors determine the process for electing academy members, and they choose which members will represent them



Good practice for the administration of schools forums

- Local authorities must publish all schools forums papers, including reports, consultations and so on well in advance of the meetings, and at least a week before the meeting
- The local authority should ensure that the websites are accessible and easy to find, and previous schools forum documents and minutes and details of future meetings should also be available on it
- A vital part of the effective operation of a schools forum is to ensure that an accurate record of the meeting is taken. This must include the clear recording of votes where there are contrary views. Recommendations to, and decisions of, schools forums must be clearly set out.
- We recommend that a log of decisions made are published on the website within 3 working days of the meeting.
- Minutes of the meeting should be published within 10 working days of the meeting – even if they are in draft form.



ESFA scrutiny

We've identified the importance of holding reviews of local authority schools forums to ensure they are adhering to regulations.

These reviews are desk based and we scrutinise the meeting minutes and documents considered by the forum. We run them continuously throughout the year and we review:

- forum composition
- voting on issues
- adherence to regulations

These also provide us with valuable information around any local issues and enable us to intervene earlier to offer assistance if it's needed.



Schools forums visits

We also attend schools forums as part of wider work we are doing to ensure meetings are being run effectively and to feed into our good practice guidance.

ESFA attendees:

- may answer questions that are put to them prior to the meeting
- will take questions away and answer them later

We do not provide feedback following attendance of a schools forum, but we will highlight if there are any concerns regarding regulation adherence and the operation of the schools forum meeting.

