

SCHOOLS FORUM MEETING
HELD ON 10 NOVEMBER 2025

PRESENT:

Primary Headteacher Representative: Mrs K Coe

Primary Academy Headteacher Representatives: Mrs S Richardson (Chair) and Mrs E Robertson

Secondary School Headteacher Representative: Mr R Henderson

Secondary School Headteacher Academy Rep: Mrs L Spellman and Mrs C Humble

Special School Representative: Mr M Little

14-19 Representative: Mr J Faulkner

Trade Union Representative: Mr L Russell

Local Authority Representative: Cllr. C Clark

Primary School Governor Representative: Mrs S Symington

Secondary School Governor Representative: Mr C Wilkinson

OFFICIALS: Mr A Bryson – Chief Accountant
Mr G Waller – Senior Accountant
Mr M Ellwood – Senior Finance Technician
Mrs C Besford – Local Authority
Mrs M McCarthy – Director of Children's Services
Mrs S Hewitson - Secretary to the Forum
Mrs C Tiffany – Service Lead Alternative Provision

OBSERVOR: Mr D Leane – Additional Posting
Mr G Lightfoot – Gazette Newspaper

The agenda was reorganised in the following order.

1. **APPOINTMENT OF VICE CHAIR**

One self-nomination was received from Mrs C Humble. An open vote was undertaken where it was;

RESOLVED that Mrs C Humble be appointed as Vice Chair of Schools Forum.

Mrs Hewitson

2. **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

RESOLVED that the apologies for absence were received from Mrs D Law, Mr R Parkinson, Mrs V Housley and Mr E Squire be accepted by the Forum.

3. **DECLARATION OF INTERESTS**

Members were invited to declare any personal or business interests they may have in any item included on the agenda.

No interests were declared.

4. MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETINGS – 6TH OCTOBER 2025

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meetings held on 6th October 2025 be approved by members.

5. MATTERS ARISING

5.1 Apologies and Substitute

The Chair reminded all members to respond to Mrs Hewitson with their agreed substitute if they were for any reason unable to attend Schools Forum to ensure quoracy.

Mrs Symington questioned if this needed to be another Chair of Governor or a member on her Governing Body. The Chair clarified that ideally the substitute be another Chair.

All Members

6. REMIT AND TOR OF THE HIGH NEEDS FUNDING SUB-GROUP

A copy of the TOR of High Needs Funding Sub-Group was circulated in advance of the meeting.

A group of colleagues had liaised under the LA plan for a High Needs Funding Sub Group which had brought some excellent questions ensuring top level of analysis. Mrs McCarthy had nothing additional to add. Mrs Kerry Coe, Mr Colin Wilkinson, Mr J Faulkner, Mr G Waller, Mr M Ellwood and Mr D Leane volunteered to be part of the group. The Chair advised that there was still a vacancy for an EY representative but nobody had come forward yet. The first formal meeting of the Sub Group to be held in January 2026.

7. SECTION 19 FUNDING

A copy of the Section 19 Funding document was circulated in advance of the meeting. Mrs C Tiffany had joined the meeting as a substitute for Miss E Dyball as she was unable to attend. She highlighted the following salient points from the document to the Forum:

Stockton-on-Tees had seen a significant increase in referrals for Section 19 support, particularly for pupils with anxiety and Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA). Last year, two additional agency teachers were secured by the council to support the rising demand for Home and Hospital Service and for Section 19 provision for children moving into the borough and following permanent exclusion. Funding was provided from the High Needs Block of the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG).

In the last academic year, 37% of persistently absent pupils had EHCPs, and 29.3% received SEND support. Over 62% of children out of school for more than 15 days with an EHCP transitioned into specialist provision, with 67% of these into independent placements. Without early intervention, this trajectory was expected to continue, increasing pressure on the High Needs Block.

National expenditure on the high needs block in respect of anxiety related support services and provision rose by £2.9 billion (+6.9%) in 2024–25, with a notable portion attributed to alternative provision and medical tuition. Stockton's net expenditure on Alternative Provision rose from £1.5m in financial year 2023/24 to £2.6m in financial year 2024/25. This resulted in an overspend of £1m in 2024/25, attributable to a significant increase in external tutoring costs plus further commissioned Pathway Development

Centres.

Nationally, 28.5% of pupils were severely absent in 2022, up from 15% pre-pandemic and this has continued to grow. Anxiety is a leading cause of this increase. The North East had one of the highest rates of persistent absence in England, with EBSA and anxiety cited as key drivers.

Severe absence in the SEND Support cohort had increased from 2.65% in 2021/22 to 4.01% in 2023/24. Stockton-on-Tees' figures were slightly below the North East and Statistical Neighbours for the most recent year, but the overall trend was rising. While levels were lower for EHCP pupils, this suggested a need for earlier intervention before instances escalate.

Severe absenteeism for pupils with an EHCP increased in Stockton-on-Tees from 6.0% in 2021/22 to 7.3% in 2023/24, and the rate was higher than the North East, Statistical Neighbours and England in the most recent recorded year.

In Stockton on Tees, support for anxious pupils was provided primarily via Home and Hospital Teaching Services and the Anxious Pupil Unit at Stockton Sixth Form College, Endeavour. This provision was subject to quality assurance checks. The proposed expansion of Endeavour was consulted on via procurement processes in October 2024 and the council had in place a multi-agency working group, with school reps, since 2024 working towards an expansion of anxious pupil provision to meet the rising demands related to Section 19.

The Local Authority's policy on Section 19 was in the process of being updated and provided detailed guidance for schools and parents, including the role of the Local Authority when alternative education was to be considered and what reasonable steps should be taken and were expected prior to requesting Section 19 support.

In response to a members question regarding the registration, Mrs Tiffany clarified due to SSFC being post 16 provision, KS3 and upper KS2 provision would remain on role with the school however, if this was a long term placement, this may be assigned to SSFC.

A member questioned if the £6k from SEND funding was required to be part of the Section 19 support. Mrs Tiffany explained that this was not just specifically for SEND pupils. The member noted that some budgets can't sustain the cost implications if they were using funds from the £6k or in addition to this. The team would be working alongside school and some of it would be outreach not just to schools. ***A discussion was held around the cost implications, affordability and level of detail provided.*** The funding from SEND funding would be used in school mainly and a lot of money Mrs Tiffany said would be used support and some towards alternative provision. A member commented that it was a nice idea but specifically for her trust, it wasn't sustainable or affordable.

A member commented that from a primary perspective, they think this was a affordable cost. ***In response to a governor's question***, the real work was invested through the horizons programme leading new people and working at who needs support pointed out to families under the services. Free training was available for all staff and in the Borough.

At this juncture Mr Little joined the meeting.

In response to a member's question, it was noted that historically there were 20 places

intended to support pupils with anxiety and certain difficulties. However, data showed that pupils now come from a wide range of backgrounds and through various referral routes. **Mr Faulkner raised concerns about the long-term sustainability of this model and whether a business plan was in place.** Mr Waller explained that the pilot scheme was running for two years. This approach helped reduce costs for high-needs placements and prevented additional expenses for schools, including long-term provision. It was also highlighted that Section 19 requests had increased significantly, which has had a financial impact on the Local Authority. **In response to further questions,** it was confirmed that when a child had not attended school for 15 days or more, the Local Authority had a statutory duty under Section 19 to arrange suitable education for them.

A member queried the current capacity at endeavour and how would they build capacity. Mrs Tiffany advised that there were under 20 pupils currently and once the agreement was in place there would be an increase of up to 80 pupils.

PROPOSAL:

It was proposed that the council's Section 19 expenditure would be redirected for the next two years to be delivered on a pilot programme, an enhanced expansion of Endeavour, which would introduce a bespoke service supporting pupils experiencing significant anxiety and emotional barriers to school attendance.

Over the next two years, the Council would invest a total of £950,000 in this pilot provision. This included an existing annual High Needs funded commitment of £200,000 for the original Endeavour provision, supplemented by targeted one-off grant funding from the SEND & AP Change Programme and the Delivering Better Value in SEND initiative. These grants were awarded to support inclusive practice and reduce pressures on the High Needs Block.

The pilot enhanced Endeavour provision would include support for the following:

- a. Personalised education from Day 15 of absence for those with SEND and Anxiety.
- b. Holistic support including mental health, family outreach, and reintegration planning
- c. A tiered model of intervention with costs ranging from £150 to £650 per place per week depending on complexity and duration of placement. Please see appendix 1 scope and model.

Members voiced concern around the recommendation/proposal and requested further information around the operational aspects and how the contribution would work before voting. Mr Bryson would clarify if this was a decision of Schools Forum to vote on in the terms of reference.

More detail was scheduled to be brought back to the next meeting, which Mrs Tiffany would arrange with Miss Dyball. **A member had questioned the Surgery Home Hospital Service,** and Mrs Tiffany explained that the Local Authority had a duty to arrange the service but not to provide it directly. Pupils who were too unwell to attend school were required to seek medical advice. However, cases involving anxiety were different; in some instances, where anxiety was severe, pupils were assessed by doctors and deemed not well enough to attend school.

Mrs McCarthy commented that they were invested in doing something different pilot programme and to build resources. A lot more detail would be brought back to the next meeting.

RESOLVED that this item be deferred to the next Schools Forum meeting.

8. CONSULTATION FEEDBACK RE DELEGATION /DE-DELEGATION 2026-27

The De-Delegation paper was circulated at the previous meeting and copies of the Delegation/De-Delegation 2026-27, Facility Time Paper and Single Letter to LA documents were circulated in advance of the meeting.

Funding for de-delegated services must be allocated through the formula but can be passed back, or de-delegated for maintained primary and secondary schools with school forum approval. The authority was proposing the option of de-delegation (i.e. central management) for all of the areas covered in the report circulated for 2026/27.

An equivalent paper was presented and discussed at the last Forum on 6th October, so members were aware of voting at today's meeting. Also, in the event of any of the proposals being rejected this would allow time to plan for the transfer of budgets and responsibilities.

RECOMMENDATION:

That the eligible Schools Forum members representing maintained schools vote separately according to their sector on the proposals to de-delegate services set out in the report.

Following a vote from maintained school Headteachers (Mrs K Coe and Mr R Henderson), it was;

RESOLVED that maintained schools agree with the recommendation outlined within the report to de-delegate services detailed.

Mr Bryson highlighted that he was awaiting feedback regarding the comparisons against other Local Authorities from Mrs Housley but highlighted the price per pupil due to increased time spent by unions on representing members the per pupil rate, which had not been uplifted for a number of years has been increased to £3 per pupil from £1.68 (secondary) and £1.51 (primary). Following the October census, the pupil numbers would be recalculated.

9&10. SCHOOLS FUNDING CONSULTATION & SCHOOLS FUNDING ARRANGEMENTS 2026-27

The National Funding Formula report hadn't been circulated for the meeting which usually was circulated for the October meeting but still pending further information.

RESOLVED that the NFF be deferred to an additional meeting of Schools Forum in December.

A copy of the Schools Funding Arrangements document was circulated in advance of the meeting for information.

Dedicated School Grant (DSG) to Local Authorities was allocated in blocks. There were blocks of funding for Early Years, Schools, High Needs and Central School Services. The Department for Education (DfE) uses the national funding formula to calculate the blocks within the DSG that are allocated to local authorities. Local authorities currently have some flexibility in how this funding is allocated to schools, within the framework and

constraints set out by the DfE.

This paper sets out the results of this recent local consultation with maintained schools and academies which covered a 0.5% transfer from the Schools to High Needs block for 2026/27. The Schools Forum should consider the views of the schools responding before making their decision.

RECOMMENDATION:

Schools Forum was asked to consider and vote on a proposal to transfer 0.5% (estimated to be between £900k to £950k) from the school's block to the high needs block in 2026/27 noting that:

- All Schools Forum Members may vote on this proposal.
- It was a School's Forum decision on whether to accept this proposal. If Schools Forum does not agree, DfE were able to decide if the Local Authority requests this via the disapplication route. Due to the increasing DSG deficit the Council might decide to request an amount above 0.5%.

The council recently held a consultation on school funding arrangements for 2026/27. This took place between 7th October and 5th November. A copy of the consultation document issued to schools is attached at Appendix A to this report.

Of the 78 schools consulted with, 37 responses were received by the deadline of 5pm on the 5th November (compared to 44 in the previous year). One response was received after the deadline and has not been included in the figures.

The breakdown of the 37 responses (which is a 47% response rate) was shown in the table below:

LA Primary	7
LA Secondary	1
Primary Academy	22
Secondary Academy	6
AP / Special Academy	1
TOTAL	37

Further detail on each of the proposals and consultation responses are provided below. A log of consultation response comments are set out in Appendix B. It was highlighted that one school had replied after the deadline date voted to support the transfer.

In response to a members question, Mr Bryson confirmed he could identify the schools who voted/didn't vote moving forward. ***In response to the members question***, Mr Bryson explained that he was not proposing anything over the 0.5% and if not this would be a disapplication.

A member commented that 70% of the responses were in favour of this proposal and David Leane commented that there were 11 emails from each Headteacher however, Mr Bryson said that he had only received 3. Mr Bryson reviewed his emails during the meeting and apologised as there had been 11 emails from each Headteacher and not 3.

Following an open vote, by the majority of votes, it was;

RESOLVED that Schools Forum approve the proposal to transfer 0.5% (estimated to be between £900k to £950k) from the school's block to the high needs block in 2026/27.

11. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

11.1 Independent Special School Placements

A copy of the Independent Special School Placement document was circulated in advance of the meeting for information and had been prepared in response to a request from Schools Forum to provide an overview of the current position regarding children and young people placed in independent school placements. The report outlined:

- a. The average cost per pupil is associated with these placements.
- b. A breakdown of the reasons why placements have been made outside the local area.
- c. Emerging themes around sufficiency, Tribunal influence, and mainstream provision limitations.

RECOMMENDATION:

- Note the current position regarding independent school placements, including the average cost per pupil and the breakdown of reasons for placement.
- Consider the implications of sufficiency gaps, Tribunal outcomes, and mainstream limitations on SEND strategy and resource planning.
- Forum members were invited to provide feedback, raise queries, or suggest areas for further analysis or action.

FINANCIAL CONSIDERATION:

- The average annual cost per pupil placed in independent school was £64,534.80. The average cost per pupil placed in an out of area independent school was calculated using the annual placement and the total cost of all placements was summed and then divided by the number of pupils with recorded costs, providing a representative average across the cohort. This figure reflected a range of placement types and durations.
- The highest annual cost for an independent school place was currently £117,251 per year. This cost was met solely by SEND for a child attending a 38 week residential placement owing to suitable provision not being available in the local area. This child was currently in Year 10 and would return to the area at the end of Year 11.
- Placement costs in the independent sector continue to rise year on year, with brokerage negotiations becoming increasingly complex. While the Local Authority aimed to agree a maximum annual uplift of 3%, recent requests from providers have ranged between 7–8%, placing additional pressure on the High Needs Block. These increases were often linked to inflationary costs, staffing pressures, or specialist service enhancements.

KEY THEMES:

- Around 10% of placements in independent school's result from decisions arising from SEND Tribunal appeals and decisions, reflecting legal pressures. This

included where orders have been made to the local authority directly from the tribunal judge to admit the child into the school placement and, where legal advice has been given to the SEND Service to concede the appeal for factors including but not limited to:

- i. No support or evidence from current school to defend the LA position, meaning that the case is flawed legally.
- ii. The Tribunal process limiting the opportunity for the LA to respond comprehensively to new information from parents or the parental representative, particularly where independent assessments are submitted late in proceedings.
- iii. Section F of the EHCP could not be met in mainstream settings.

A member commented that it was really interesting when she compared it to the cost that she gets of £18,000 to do the same thing in her SEND unit. For one child in the SEND unit with special needs, she gets £18,000, and yet the lowest cost was £35,500 for someone to go to an independent school. She queried why were they charging such a lot more as she had got inflationary costs, staffing pressures, all of those increased added pressures, yet she was running a SEND unit for 24 pupils at a cost of £18,000 a place.

The independent schools, there's one that had a £4m profit last year. That was where the SEND unit was born from, to bring those in house. Those SEND units generally were in primary schools currently, so there would be that cliff edge at some point, referring to a lack of SEND units in secondary schools which had been discussed at other meetings.

Year after year the expense gets bigger but ultimately there was a deficit that was growing. Part of the issue at the moment was the lack of capital funding to be able to do anything. It's almost trying to come up with as many creative ways as possible without having that capital ability to spend.

Mrs McCarthy advised it was really clear when you look at the costs and the difference between and that's something that absolutely needs to be tackled from the DfE.

Sometimes there was not a lot of choice around what was the child's need, where was that offer, who actually could educate this child and look after them. It often comes down to that limited choice, and therein lies the problem with the cost.

Mr Bryson commented one of the issues they had was, yes they could go and borrow money to build a specialist school, but the cost of that borrowing could fall on the authority. At the moment there's no way the authority can afford the cost of that borrowing. He doesn't think there was going to be anything in the reforms around this.

Mr Little spoke of frustration at the increase in fees and price tag from the independent sector and need to sell state-funded schools was an attractive provision of choice. He noted there was a lot more opportunities for collaboration and a lot more opportunities to keep young people in Stockton in state-funded provisions and not in the private sector.

Cllr. C Besford noted she was very much in favour of educating as many children within the Borough as possible. The reality was they had to put these children in a placement and there wasn't the luxury of an over-supply of places. As an authority it was really difficult for us, and the budgets and the overspend were scary.

The SEND units were a fantastic way of bringing those costs down, but there was an absolute need for more of these. The team were doing some great work about expanding placements in secondary school because as those children come to the end of their primary journey, there was no placements available for secondary stage.

The Forum, as discussed under agenda item 6, had set up a sub-group to oversee and scrutinise the use of high needs funding from the dedicated schools grant.

Mr Henderson suggested that collective training be arranged to ensure all members had a consistent understanding of tribunal processes and were aligned in their approach. This would help promote best practice, reduce the risk of inconsistencies, and improve confidence when handling cases.

Mrs Coe asked for a breakdown of Primary and Secondary provision available which Mrs Tiffany would send.

12. DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING

RESOLVED that:

- a) An additional meeting of Schools Forum be held at 9:30am on 18th December 2025 via Microsoft Teams.
- b) The following meeting of Schools Forum be held at 1:00pm on 20th January 2026.

Mrs Hewitson

Signature of Chair

Date