



Education
Funding
Agency

Schools Forums: operational and good practice guide

**For local authorities and members of
Schools Forums**

October 2013

Section 2 – Effective Schools Forums

Introduction

- 2.1. As the previous section outlined, local authorities have responsibility for establishing Schools Forums. They also have an ongoing responsibility to provide them with appropriate support, information and guidance in carrying out their functions and responsibilities.
- 2.2. The following outlines some aspects of what local authorities and Schools Forums should consider in ensuring that their Schools Forums are as effective as possible. The pace of academy conversions in particular means that this significant sector must be properly represented and feel that it is able to play a meaningful part in the discussions of the Schools Forum.
- 2.3. Central to the effectiveness or otherwise of a Schools Forum will be the relationship between it and its local authority. The local authority will have a significant influence on this: the support it provides; the resources it devotes and the weight it gives to the views of Schools Forums all contribute to the nature of the relationship. There are therefore a number of characteristics of this relationship that are particularly important:
 - *Partnership: Having a shared understanding of the priorities, issues and concerns of schools, academies and the local authority.*
 - *Effective Support: The business of the Schools Forum is supported by the local authority in an efficient and professional manner.*
 - *Openness: It is important that a Schools Forum feels it is receiving open, honest and objective advice from its local authority.*
 - *Responsiveness: Local authorities should as far as possible be responsive to requests from their Schools Forums and their members. Schools Forums themselves should also be aware of the resource implications of their requests.*
 - *Strategic view: Members of Schools Forum should consider the needs of the whole of the educational community, rather than using their position on a Schools Forum to advance their own sectional or specific interests.*
 - *Challenge and Scrutiny: Schools Forums may be asked to agree to proposals from their local authority that will have an effect on all schools and academies in the local area. The extent to which Schools Forums can scrutinise and challenge such proposals is an important aspect of their effectiveness.*
- 2.4. The characteristics identified above are just some of the aspects that will contribute to an effective Schools Forum. The following provides more detail on some of the specific issues that local authorities and Schools Forums may wish to consider in thinking about their own arrangements.

Induction of new members

- 2.5. When new members join the Schools Forum appropriate induction materials should be provided. These might include material relating to the operation of the Schools Forum together with background information about the local and national school funding arrangements. Typically they might comprise:
 - a. the constitution of the Schools Forum
 - b. a list of members including contact details and their terms of office
 - c. any locally agreed terms of reference explaining the relationship between the Schools Forum and the local authority
 - d. copies of minutes of previous meetings
 - e. the programme of Schools Forum meetings for the year
 - f. the local Schools Forum web address
- 2.6. This Operational and Good Practice Guide, suitably supplemented by local material, should also be provided to new members on their appointment.
- 2.7. Where there is sufficient turnover of Schools Forum members in any particular year the local authority may wish to organise a one-off induction event to brief new members. Such an event would usefully include an outline of the role of the Schools Forum and the national funding arrangements for schools and local authorities. It might also include an explanation of the local funding formula and any proposals for review. The opportunity could also be taken to explain the main reporting requirements for school and local authority expenditure.

Training

- 2.8. Ideally Schools Forum members should be able to use some of the budget set aside for Schools Forum running costs for accessing relevant training activities. Some training will be provided by officers of the local authority but members may wish to attend national or regional events, the costs of which, where necessary, can be supported from the Schools Forum budget.
- 2.9. Training will need to be provided in response to any changes in the role of the Schools Forum and national developments in respect of school funding.

Agenda setting

- 2.10. The process by which the agenda for a meeting or cycle of meetings is set is in many respects one of the key determinants of the effectiveness or otherwise of a Schools Forum.
- 2.11. The frequency and timing of meetings of the Schools Forum should be agreed in advance of each financial or academic year. In drawing up this cycle of meetings, in consultation with the Schools Forum, the local authority should provide a clear overview of the key consultative and decision-making points in the school funding cycle. These will be drawn from a combination of national and local information and should inform the basic agenda items that each meeting needs to cover. For instance meetings will need to be scheduled at appropriate points to enable the

Schools Forum to consider the outcomes of local consultations and national announcements.

- 2.12. Although the business of Schools Forums must be open and transparent, it is recognised that from time to time items of a confidential nature will need to be discussed. It is recommended that authorities apply the same principles that they apply to Council/Cabinet meetings when judging an item to be confidential and adopt similar practices for dealing with those reports in the meeting, e.g. placing them together at the end of the agenda.

Preparation for a Schools Forum meeting

- 2.13. It is vital that Schools Forum is transparent, open and has clear communication lines to all of the members that are represented. This ensures the wider school family are aware of the business discussed, the impact on their setting and the reasons for the decisions.
- 2.14. The vast majority of a Schools Forum's business will be transacted on the basis of prepared papers. It is therefore important that these are concise, informative and produced in a timely and consistent manner. Recommendations should be clearly set out at the beginning of each report. It is also helpful if the front of the report confirms whether the report is for information or decision and who is eligible to vote where relevant.
- 2.15. It is good practice for the Schools Forum and local authority to agree a standard for these. It is usual for papers to be dispatched at least one week prior to the meeting at which they will be discussed to allow members to consider them and if necessary canvass views from the group they are representing. Papers should be published on the local authority's website at this time to enable representations to be made to Schools Forum members.
- 2.16. Consistency in the presentation of papers also contributes to the effectiveness of meetings: it helps set the tone of meetings, facilitate the engagement of all members and signal the importance the local authority attaches to the work of the Schools Forum. Ideally such a standard should be agreed between the Schools Forum and local authority. The publishing of papers as a single pdf file is helpful as it saves time and avoids accessing multiple documents both in advance of, and during, the meeting. An Executive Summary of the reports can provide Schools Forum members and members of the public with an overview of the agenda and the decisions required.
- 2.17. The publishing of papers on a publicly available website well in advance of the meeting ensures that all interested parties are able to access papers. Some Schools Forums ensure that each represented group meets in the days immediately prior to the Schools Forum meeting to ensure the agenda is discussed and Schools Forum members are properly briefed by the group they represent. Although on occasions it is inevitable that Schools Forums will receive late, or tabled reports it does create some difficulty for members as they will not have been able to seek the views of those they represent.

- 2.18. Schools Forums can consider adopting a flexible arrangement for time immediately prior to the meeting. For example it could be used for training of new members, or as a drop-in session for members to ask items of clarification, or for members to meet without officers to discuss the agenda.

Chairing the Schools Forum

- 2.19. The Chair of a Schools Forum plays a key role in setting the tone, pace and overall dynamic of the Schools Forum. They should provide an environment within which all members are able to contribute fully to discussions and guide the Schools Forum to making well informed decisions.
- 2.20. The relationship between the Chair and the local authority is therefore vital. The Chair should be very clear on the substance of the agenda items, understand the issues involved and the decisions and/or actions that need to be taken in respect of School Forum business. It is good practice for there to be a pre-meeting between the senior officer of the local authority supporting the Schools Forum and the Chair of the Schools Forum to ensure that all the issues are clearly understood.
- 2.21. Equally, the Chair has the responsibility of representing the views of the Schools Forum back to the local authority: for instance, they should, where appropriate, take the initiative to make suggestions for improvements to the way the business is conducted, and, in exceptional cases and with support of the members of the Schools Forum take the view that they do not have sufficient information on which to base a decision and ask that an item is deferred until further information is available. However, in doing so, the Chair and Schools Forum should be fully aware of the consequences of deferral.
- 2.22. The independence of Schools Forum is paramount. Enhancing the role of Chair to a paid position, rather than the reimbursement of reasonable expenses, could blur the lines of independence. Similarly, if the Chair undertakes significant work for the LA in another capacity, e.g. as an external consultant, they could be viewed as equivalent to an officer of the local authority.
- 2.23. Local authorities could consider if sharing contact details of the Schools Forum Chair with neighbouring authorities would be helpful for peer support and improving networking opportunities.

Clerking the Schools Forum

- 2.24. Clerking of a Schools Forum should be seen as more than just writing a note of the meeting. A good clerk provides an invaluable link between the members of the Schools Forum, the Chair and the local authority. It is a role often undertaken by an employee of the local authority though we would recommend consideration is given to the use of an independent clerk.
- 2.25. Clerks should manage the logistics of the meeting in terms of ensuring dispatch of papers and producing a note from the meeting. In considering the style of meeting notes consideration should be given to making them intelligible enough for non-attendees to get a sense of the discussion as well as clearly indicating the

conclusion and action agreed in relation to each agenda item. Verbatim reports of a Schools Forum's discussion, however, are unlikely to be very useful. Schools Forums may consider whether a simple action log should be maintained by the clerk to ensure all action points agreed are followed up.

2.26. Beyond this a good clerk can:

- a. provide the route by which Schools Forum members can access further information and co-ordinate communication to Schools Forum members outside of the formal meeting cycle;
- b. respond to any queries about the business of the Schools Forum from headteachers, governors and others who are not on the Schools Forum themselves;
- c. be responsible for ensuring contact details of all members are up to date;
- d. maintain the list of members on the Schools Forum and advise on membership issues in general;
- e. assist with the co-ordination of nomination/election processes run by the constituent groups;
- f. keep the Schools Forum website up to date: e.g. by posting latest minutes and papers etc;
- g. monitor, on a regular basis, the Schools Forum and general Schools Funding section of the Department for Education (DfE) website or the gov.uk website; and arrange for the distribution of any relevant DfE information to Schools Forum members;
- h. if appropriate, provide technical advice in relation to the Schools Forum regulations and in relation to the operation of a Schools Forum's local constitution; and
- i. organise, operate and record any voting activity of the Schools Forum in line with the provisions of its local constitution.

2.27. Not all of these tasks may be able to be undertaken by the Schools Forum clerk. However, each one is important and there should be arrangements in place to ensure they are discharged adequately.

Good practice for Schools Forum meetings

2.28. Schools Forums should ensure there is a clear debate of all agenda items. Whilst sub-group meetings are valuable in working through detailed issues, Schools Forum should consider that the level of debate held at the Schools Forum meeting and recorded in the minutes will be the official reflection of the level of challenge and discussion on each issue.

2.29. The use of nameplates for Schools Forum members also showing which group they are representing can be helpful to members of the public and presenters of papers.

2.30. The use of coloured cards or coloured nameplates can be helpful when specific members of Schools Forum are eligible to vote on specific items, e.g. de-delegation or changes to the funding formula.

2.31. Consultations with Schools Forum are a key responsibility of a local authority, ranging from the funding formula to the letting of contracts. Each consultation will be different and depend on the subject being consulted on, but local authorities should consider the following factors as good practice for effective consultation:-

- Plan and consult early
- Allow reasonable timescales for response (as Forum members may need to consult the groups they represent)
- An open and honest approach
- Fully inclusive
- Allow for ongoing dialogue
- Provide feedback
- Clear communications.

Meeting notes and recording of decisions

2.32. 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 Forum must be clearly set out.

2.33. Notes or minutes of each Schools Forum meeting should be produced and put on the website as soon after the meeting as possible to enable members and others to see the outcome of any discussions and decisions/votes. It is good practice to formally agree the accuracy of the note/minutes at a subsequent meeting but the publication of the draft minutes should not be delayed as a result.

2.34. In order to provide clarity about representation at each meeting, it is good practice for the minutes to record the group and/or subgroup that each member represents against their name.

Communication

2.35. Communication to the wider educational community of the discussions and debates of, and decisions made by, Schools Forum is fundamental to their effective operation. The more schools and other stakeholders know about the proceedings of the Schools Forum, the more their work will be an important and central part of the context of local educational funding. This is particularly important given the decision making role that the Schools Forum has. Local authorities should consider the operational differences between the types of stakeholders and plan their communications accordingly. For example ensuring effective communications across the PVI sector may be more difficult than with schools, who are more likely to have existing channels of communication e.g. headteacher meetings.

2.36. Each Schools Forum should therefore be clear what its channels of communication are. One channel is the requirement that all its agenda, minutes and papers are publicly available on the local authority's website. However, the Schools Forum should also consider additional communication processes. These could include:

- a. the reporting back by Schools Forum members to their 'parent' group of the business of the Schools Forum is a key responsibility of Schools Forum members. This can be a particularly useful method of ensuring that Schools Forum members have an ongoing dialogue with the constituents of their group or sub-group and are therefore well able to represent their views at Schools Forum meetings;
- b. an annual report on the proceedings of the Schools Forum;
- c. attendance by the Chair, or other Schools Forum member, at other relevant consultative or management groups such as any capital working group; or senior management meetings of the Children's Services Department; or
- d. a brief email to all schools, early years providers and other stakeholders after each Schools Forum meeting informing them of the discussions and decisions with a link to the full papers and minutes for further information
- e. a Schools Forum newsletter can be a less formal and more interesting way of communicating forum business and raising the profile of Schools Forum and its members.

News updates

- 2.37. Most, but not all, members of the Schools Forum will already be in receipt of regular information on school funding matters from the local authority and DfE. Other Schools Forum members should be copied into such information flows so that they can be kept abreast of developments between meetings.
- 2.38. Many local authorities have already established dedicated Schools Forum websites on which they post key information for Schools Forum members and other interested parties.