

a best practice review of the role of schools forums

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Executive Summary

Background

Schools forums have a consultative and advisory role in school funding and financial matters. They have been a statutory requirement in every local authority (LA) in England since 2003. The key areas of work are a) the school funding formula; b) contracts and financial issues. Schools forums do not hold a budget and regulations do not allow a decision-making role.

Currently, all LAs in England receive the main element of education funding through the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) and have some discretion in determining the way that this grant is distributed across schools. The Government are currently proposing the development of a national formula to distribute the DSG more fairly across LAs while ensuring that LAs and schools forums still have a role in distributing those funds between the schools, the early years settings and high-needs pupils as deemed appropriate at the local level. However, the degree of discretion at the local level is yet to be determined.

The Local Government Association (LGA) commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to explore the current role, operation and impact of schools forums in England.

Key findings

- The research evidence indicates that schools forums influence and shape the amount of funding that goes to different educational providers. They were generally perceived to have a strong influence on funding decisions.
- Schools forums provide a platform for discussion at the strategic level about funding decisions at the local level.
- Effectiveness was characterised in terms of connected, proactive and child-centred behaviour. This includes effective communication within schools forums with LA staff as well as the wider educational community; full engagement of all members; training to facilitate members to challenge effectively; and an informed understanding of education policy and the broader demands on the LA. Distinct models of operation did not emerge as defining characteristics of schools forums.
- In the most proactive schools forums there was clear evidence that the funding formula is developed through consultation, characterised by transparency, continuous negotiation, the sharing of information and members work together to achieve the best outcome for all children and young people.
- Schools forums valued the contribution of councillors and cabinet members because they provide a council perspective, expert advice, feedback on education issues, information and advice. Their involvement gave schools forums the opportunity to have views, ideas and issues represented and considered at council level.
- Schools forums were broadly representative of their local education community in terms of phase and type of school. Local communities were represented on schools forums through the involvement of councillors, teacher unions, diocesan representatives and the press.
- Although schools forums' meetings were 'open', members of the public were not actively invited and rarely attended meetings.
- Interviewees identified a range of barriers to achieving the goals of schools forums which included a lack of funding, time, personalities (related to dominant characters and personality clashes) and uncertainty surrounding the future of schools forums.
- Looking to the future, interviewees expressed a lack of clarity about the role and status of schools forums in general. The outcome of the national funding consultation is expected to reduce the current ambiguity. There was uncertainty about whether the changes will result in a strengthened or reduced role

for schools forums. The impact on funding decisions of the increased number of academies was also a key current discussion point in schools forums.

- Key advice for other schools forums included: open and transparent communications; respectful relationships within the forum and between the forum and LA; a commitment to a shared vision and set of values; appropriate support for members; and adequate publicity of the schools forum role, remit and elections.

Conclusion and recommendations

Schools forums play a significant role in influencing and shaping local education funding. They provide a collaborative and consultative platform for strategic discussion and contribute to local decision making. Drawing on a wide spectrum of stakeholders' knowledge, views and experience ensures that funding decisions are shaped by open dialogue, informed debate and challenge.

The research indicates that schools forums are responsive to the changing educational policy context, particularly in terms of the growth of academies and the implications this has for the representativeness of their membership, as well as funding and service provision.

A more connected and proactive way of working characterised the most effective schools forums in terms of representing the interests of the local educational community and the children and young people it serves. The most effective schools forums operate in an open and transparent way, are accessible to the public, consult extensively with stakeholders, communicate effectively, are engaged in the detail of decision making and have a common strategic vision and commitment to meet the needs of all young people in the area.

Recommendations

The research indicates that schools forums will benefit from greater clarity about the proposed national funding formula in order to facilitate better planning and enhanced confidence in a time of economic uncertainty. Additionally, schools forums would value

better guidance about the academies funding regime, working alongside the existing system for maintained schools, in order to achieve the best outcomes for all children and young people.

Recommendations for schools forums

- Ongoing training for schools forums' members to ensure they have confidence and competence to effectively engage in and challenge local education funding decisions.
- Children and young people may benefit from schools forums working more creatively with reduced funding, for example, encouraging federations of schools.
- Schools forums need to continue to review their membership to ensure that they are representative of the local community.
- When evaluating their effectiveness, it is advisable for schools forums periodically to review the remit and role of subgroups to maximise their contribution and ensure its relevance.
- Schools forums need to examine how well they disseminate, and how clearly they explain, decisions to constituents, stakeholders and the wider community.
- Schools forums will benefit from considering the extent to which their practice reflects the characteristics of the more connected and proactive behaviour outlined above.

Recommendations for LAs

- Schools forums will benefit from LAs providing opportunities to inform and build links in order to increase understanding of local education funding in its fullest national and local context.
- LAs need to periodically review the level, type and frequency of involvement that senior managers and officers have in schools forums given the changing policy and priorities for the education, support and well-being of children and young people.

- When evaluating their working relationship with schools forums, it is advisable that LAs are aware that being responsive to requests for the provision of thorough briefings on statutory and policy developments is greatly valued by schools forums' members, as this helps them to provide more informed scrutiny and challenge.
- The further promotion of the schools forum and its role and remit within the LA, and more widely among constituents, is recommended in order to ensure that wider understanding and recognition of its responsibilities is achieved. Further research on how this aim could be realised is worthy of consideration.

Methodology

This executive summary presents key findings from nine case studies based on 40 telephone interviews with the LA officer responsible for the schools forum, forum Chairs, forum members (including school and non-school members) and constituent members. The research included a desk review of current models of schools forums in LAs by an analysis of 92 schools forums' websites, undertaken before the case study interviews in order to inform the sampling of the good practice case studies and the development of the telephone interview instruments.

1 Introduction

Schools forums have a consultative and advisory role in school funding and financial matters and have been a statutory requirement in every local authority in England since 2003. The key functions of schools forums are set in statute and include the requirement for consultation on the school funding formula, contracts and financial issues. They do not hold a budget and regulations do not allow a decision-making role.¹

The membership of each schools forum consists of:

- representatives from schools (most commonly headteachers and governors),
- representatives from the wider community (such as early years professionals or members of the 14–19 partnership; known as non-school members),
- non-voting observers such as councillors or members of the public.

The membership of schools forums has been progressively extended and the most recent revisions to the schools forums (England) Regulations in 2010 were put in place to encourage a membership which is more representative of the education and wider community. Therefore, it is now required that the number of school members by school phase and type must be proportional to pupil numbers. In addition, schools forums must also include at least one academy representative, one special school representative and one nursery school representative. It is also now no longer optional, but a statutory duty, for schools forums to appoint non-school members.

1.1 Policy background

Currently, all local authorities (LAs) in England receive a portion of education funding (the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG)) and have some discretion in determining the way that this grant is distributed across schools. However, because there is currently no national funding formula (instead a Guaranteed Unit of Funding (GUF) per pupil is allocated to each LA) this means that the full and ever-changing demographic profile of an LA is not considered in the national distribution of funds. The schools White Paper *The Importance of Teaching*², published by the Coalition Government, sets out the view that the current funding system is unfair, based upon outdated assumptions and, therefore, in need of reform. Since the White Paper was released a rapid increase in the number of schools converting to academy status has resulted in yet more anomalies and the Government is currently undertaking a third consultation on school funding.

The Government's most recent publication on the status of schools forums³ has guaranteed some level of discretion at the local level, while reducing the number of factors used to determine local formulae. They also propose to make changes to the composition (for example, the requirement to have a minimum number of 15 members will be removed) and operation of schools forums to ensure they are transparent and announce a role for the Education Funding Agency in upholding fairness in local decision making.

It is in this context that the Local Government Association (LGA) asked the NFER to further explore the current role, operation and impact of schools forums in England. The following section sets out the aims of the study along with the research methodology.

1 A useful summary of schools forums' role and responsibilities can be found at <http://media.education.gov.uk/assets/files/xls/s/schools%20forums%20responsibilities.xls> (Available February 2012)

2 *The Importance of Teaching*. School White Paper, 2010, DfE

3 *School Funding Reform: Next Steps Towards Fairer Systems*, DfE, March 2012

1.2 Aims of the study and methodology

The purpose of the study was to carry out a good practice review of the role of schools forums. Specifically, our research team aimed to address the following objectives to:

- 1 provide the LGA with an overview of the models of schools forums currently in existence across local authorities in England, including an assessment of the different approaches to forums with regard to their nature, structure and decision-making powers
- 2 suggest possible ways that schools forums might develop in the future including new practices which might improve schools forums
- 3 gain greater insight into good practice in relation to schools forums.

Methodology

The research design comprised:

- A desk review of current models of schools forums in local authorities. The desk research had two purposes. Firstly, to identify the current models of schools forums within local authorities and secondly, to contribute to informing the sampling of the good practice case studies and the development of the telephone interview instruments.
- Qualitative telephone interviews with up to five interviewees in nine good practice case-study local authorities.

Sample strategy

The sample of good practice case studies was identified through a call for information through NFER's network of link officers in each local authority (who liaise with researchers about projects involving authorities) and a subsequent verification process. The sample of nine good practice case studies, therefore, included:

- schools forums that displayed good or promising practice characteristics (as identified through analysis of the websites and in agreement with the LGA.

More detail on the criteria identified is available in Chapter 2)

- a representation of different types of local authorities (county, unitary and metropolitan) in different geographical locations
- a proportionate inclusion of local authorities where more than 50 per cent are academies (converter and sponsored academies)
- a representation of different types of schools forums' members, for example:
 - Chairs
 - secondary, primary and special school headteachers
 - secondary, primary and special school governors
 - representatives from other bodies, for example, the local diocese, early years, councillors and 14–19 partnerships.
 - representatives from academies and free schools
 - non-member constituents.

In total, 40 interviews were undertaken with nine at LA level, 26 forum members, one councillor, one cabinet member and three non-member constituents. More detail about the sample can be found in the technical appendix.

Interviews

The interviews with schools forums' members were carried out over the telephone between December 2011 and February 2012. The purpose of the interviews was to gain participants' views on the forums, impact and influence, and how they might develop in the future.

The structure of this report

This report begins by detailing our approach to, and the findings from, the review of schools forums' websites (**Chapter 2**). It outlines the criteria used to

identify schools forums that display characteristics of good or promising practice and outlines the most prominent model of operation evidenced by those schools forums displaying the most promising practice.

The **third chapter** of the report includes a brief description of the perceived purpose of the schools forums, how they operate across the case-study areas and more specifically, their role in terms of funding decisions. **Chapter 4** looks at the extent to which

schools forums are perceived to be representative of constituent parties and the involvement of other members of the wider community. The following chapter (**Chapter 5**) examines the influence of schools forums on different types of educational provision and provides case-study examples of good practice. The views of interviewees on the future, possible changes to schools forums and advice to other forums will be explored in **Chapter 6**. **Chapter 7** concludes the report by summarising key findings and recommendations for schools forums and LAs.

2 Models of schools forums

Key findings

- The review of 92 schools forums' websites revealed aspects of promising practice in terms of visibility to the constituent members of the schools forum. Key characteristics included accessible information, transparency, effective communication, wide consultation, proactive practice and engagement with specialist sectors.
- Different mechanistic models of operation did not emerge. Rather, there emerged a pattern of schools forum behaviour that could be described as more connected and proactive.
- Characteristics of connected and proactive schools forums are where representatives communicate well both amongst themselves, with the LA and with their constituent members, where all members are fully engaged in the schools forum, where training is offered and where the members and the Chair have a comprehensive understanding of education policy and the broader demands on the LA.
- In addition, this connected and proactive method of operation encompasses a fundamental appreciation that the purpose of the forum is to serve the best interests of every child and young person above any other motivations such as sector interests or those associated with different types of school.

This chapter provides a brief outline of the findings of the review of the schools forums' websites, the criteria used to identify schools forums that display characteristics of best practice and an outline of the model, or method of operation, that predominates amongst the schools forums considered to be most effective.

2.1 Review of schools forums' websites

As detailed in Chapter 1, a key element of the research methodology encompassed a review of schools forums' websites. In agreement with the LGA the call for information specifically asked for:

- the name and contact details of the local authority officer responsible (clerk to the forum)
- the membership including the local authority officers attending
- how the public/community are informed about meetings
- a link to information posted on the local authority website
- the most recent meeting minutes
- any review of operation and membership undertaken in response to the revised regulations and guidance in 2010/11
- evidence of best practice in terms of the role of the schools forum (for example, confirmatory data from partners or schools within the local authority for verification purposes)
- the role of cabinet members and other councillors.

In total we received a response from 72 local authorities, 15 of which sent a link to information available on their website, and 57 who responded directly to the proforma of questions we distributed. The websites of these local authorities were reviewed for information about their schools forum and a judgement made about the accessibility, visibility and currency of information. We also proactively reviewed a further 20 local authority websites, bringing the total local authority websites reviewed to 92.

2.2 Models of schools forums

Our analysis of the 92 schools forums' websites revealed aspects of promising practice in terms of visibility to the constituent members of the schools forum. Key characteristics included:

- schools forums' meetings being accessible to the public and information about the times and the venue of meetings being readily available
- the agenda, discussions and decisions made at the schools forums' meetings appearing to be transparent and communicated effectively to all parties
- evidence that members consult widely, for example, with their constituents
- evidence of proactive practice, for example, there are sub-committees and groups
- evidence of engaging with specialist sectors, for example, early years, in order to better inform practice and planning.

In agreement with the LGA the NFER selected case studies, on which to base the review of best practice in schools forums, from those websites that displayed the above characteristics.

On further examination of these characteristics when undertaking the case-study interviews, and bearing in mind that all schools forums have to adhere to membership being proportionate to pupil numbers across school type, the search for different and distinctive operational models did not identify any. In practice, schools forums operate in diverse ways depending on, for example, the type of LA in terms of whether it was a unitary, rural or urban authority. For example, a rural authority may have different priorities such as large numbers of small primary schools and considerations such as full attendance at every schools forums' meeting might be hard to achieve. In addition,

historical relationships between LAs and schools and between sectors, such as primary and secondary, might also influence the structure, operation and decision making of schools forums.

However, regardless of the size or type of the LA, and the extent of use of subgroups, there emerged a pattern of different approaches to schools forums' meetings that appeared to override considerations such as the nature and structure of the forums and could be described as more connected and proactive in terms of their decision-making powers. More connected and proactive in the sense that:

- Representatives communicate well both amongst themselves, for example, through either sector or subgroup meetings before the full forum meeting, and with their constituent members through consultation either via sector meetings such as the secondary headteachers' forum or through full consultation with all constituent members. Effective structure and preparation of meetings and papers was also an important factor in aiding communications.
- In the more proactive schools forums there was evidence of more focused activity with full engagement of all forum members, training offered to members and forums being chaired by a representative who has a comprehensive understanding of education policy and who actively fosters good relations with the LA.
- Representatives have acquired an understanding of the wider policy context and the broader demands on the LA.

In addition, this connected, proactive and child-centred method of operation encompasses a fundamental appreciation that the purpose of the forum is to serve the best interests of every child and young person above any other motivations such as sector (for example, secondary or primary) interests or those associated with different types of schools (such as maintained schools or academies).

3 Role of schools forums in funding decisions

Key findings

- Schools forums were felt to be an important contact point between the LA and education providers so that through debate, discussion, and challenge, secure financial strategic planning and an equitable distribution of finance is achieved for all pupils within the LA.
- Forum members reported valuing the contribution of councillors and cabinet members both for their areas of expertise, the council perspective they provide and as a conduit to pass forum views back to council.
- It was generally agreed that there is good representation from different sectors, as laid down in each constitution. The emergence of academies was reported to be a current consideration in terms of representation.
- The evidence indicated that subgroups are used to both provide a setting where details can be discussed and to expedite decision making at the full schools forum meeting.
- The LAs were widely perceived to be responsive to requests from the schools forums and to provide thorough briefings on statutory duties and policy developments.
- In the most proactive schools forums there was clear evidence that the funding formula is developed through a highly consultative procedure, characterised by transparency, continuous negotiation where joint decisions are taken, the use of a process of modelling and where there is a high degree of involvement of all forum members. Furthermore, there was an underpinning recognition that 'it's about what's best for all the children overall'.

- There was broad consensus that the scope and range of issues discussed encompass anything to do with finance and funding. Two key current discussion points are the impact of academy status on the distribution of funding and the uncertainty surrounding the possible national funding formula.

This chapter explores the role and purpose of the schools forum, the involvement of schools forums in funding decisions and provides examples of the scope and range of current issues being discussed.

3.1 Role and purpose of the schools forum

It was reported that schools forums felt that the role of the schools forum is to provide a contact point between the LA and education providers so that providers are consulted about funding decisions that will affect them. Similarly, the forum is perceived to be a place of debate, discussion, and challenge and one which influences rather than authorises and provides guidance and support with regard to financial strategic planning.

They also highlighted the importance of the schools forum ensuring that there is an equitable distribution of finance to all pupils within the LA. One member of a schools forum explained that the purpose of the schools forum is to 'make sure that all children in the city get a fair allocation of the funding'.

3.1.1 Role of schools forums' members

LA officers, forum Chairs and forum members were in agreement that there are two key elements to forum members' role. Firstly, decision making where forum members sit on the schools forum to represent their constituents, to facilitate agreement and vote when necessary. Secondly, their role is discussion and there

was consensus that forum members have a duty to represent their constituents and to discuss and debate items raised on the agenda.

Further, different forum members were perceived to have different roles as follows:

- Beyond complying with statutory requirements, key responsibilities of the forum Chair of the schools forum are, in consultation with the LA officer, to set the agenda, to ensure that no individual dominates and everyone has a voice and to make sure that proceedings progress so that all items on the agenda are discussed. One forum Chair explained: 'it's about holding it all together and making sure things proceed ... making sure it's not about one person's agenda being heard, it's about getting across everybody's views'.
- LA officers were seen to inform discussions with updates on relevant policy agendas, to answer forum members' questions, to provide papers on financial issues and to ensure that other LA officers understand the role of the schools forum.
- In addition to voting and debating roles (described above), main responsibilities of forum members include consulting, representing and feeding back to their constituents. It was noted that although schools forums' members are education professionals, non-schools forum members such as governors, early years and church representatives contribute a valued wider perspective to discussions.

3.1.2 Role of councillors

The case studies revealed that schools forums valued the contribution of councillors for two main reasons. First, councillors provided a council perspective and feedback on education issues as well as information and advice. Second, councillors' involvement gave schools forums the opportunity to have forums' views, ideas and issues represented and considered at council level.

Councillors were reported to attend schools forums' meetings on a regular, or sometimes an occasional basis, when there were specific issues that the schools forum considered they needed to discuss with them or when councillors thought that they needed to present

a case. Although they were reported to be observers who did not have voting rights, they played an active role as this cabinet member for education pointed out: 'I am there as an observer. I can't vote although I do express my opinion and answer questions'. The research indicated that of those cabinet members who attend schools forums the most common portfolio held was one associated with children's services and education.

Schools forums' members appreciated the advice and information councillors offered and their reports on specific issues from the council's perspective as this Chair noted: 'Getting councillors in the room is important – having "feedback from council" on the agenda helps with this'. If a schools forum wanted more information on a particular council decision or issue, the councillor would then take this back to cabinet for consultation and clarification.

Schools forums' members noted that councillors' involvement helped to inform councillors about local education issues, including funding, from a range of perspectives, as this interviewee indicated: 'They tend not to say a lot but listen a lot before they go back to their cabinet meetings and make their decisions'. A councillor said that he attended meetings to hear the debate so that he was aware of how the schools forum had made the decision to make a recommendation. Another councillor explained that when an item on the schools forum meeting agenda was debated 'they discuss how they would like it to impact on them and that recommendation is then put further up the decision-making chain, i.e. the cabinet as a recommendation to how they want to move forward'.

3.1.3 Attendance of members

It was generally agreed that there was good representation from different sectors, as laid down in the constitution, as one forum Chair explained: 'membership is proportional to pupil numbers per phase. Other members include representatives from the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sector, diocese, free churches, minority groups, training providers, 14–19 sector, County Council'. The emergence of academies was reported to be a current consideration in terms of representation. Although there was some discussion about the method of election of academy members (for example, whether a

forum member from a maintained school that converts to academy status automatically retains their membership) and the power of academy members (for example, whether they have equal voting rights as forum members from other institutions), interviewees were concerned to ensure that academies have representation.

Schools forums' meetings were well attended. Additionally, strategies were reported to ensure good attendance, for example, having appointed deputies to attend in the absence of a member and asking representatives, if they have missed three consecutive meetings, if they wish to continue on the schools forum. Interviewees explained that schools forums' meetings occurred on average five or six times per year, with possible additional meetings around the budget time. Although it was reported that alternative venues had been used, there was widespread agreement that holding the meetings at the same location is sensible especially one with ample parking facilities. Schools forum meetings were stated to be held at different times of the day from 8am to 6pm. In some cases they changed the time of day so members do not 'miss the same portion of the day every time'.

3.1.4 Working arrangements

All of the schools forums selected for this research had subcommittees (see Chapter 2 for details of inclusion). The evidence indicated that subgroups are used to both provide a setting where details, described as the 'nitty-gritty' by one LA officer, can be discussed and to expedite decision making at the schools forum meeting. One LA officer observed that 'it's what goes on in the subgroups ... that matters'.

Budget working groups or finance groups are common subgroups and are most likely to be permanent. It was also evident that subgroups are temporarily used to meet policy drives, such as an early years working group set up to prepare the early years funding formula. Further, task and finish groups are perceived to be an effective way to accelerate completion of undertakings. It was observed that the main driver for the subgroup model of schools forums is the size of the forum and there has to be transparency and adherence to decision making always being undertaken at the full schools forum meeting.

Illustration of effective use of sub-groups

In one largely rural LA in the south of England schools forum representatives meet within their sectors (for example, governors, primary headteachers and secondary headteachers) an hour before the full meeting. They go through the agenda and address questions such as 'do we have any concerns?' or 'do we support the recommendations?'. They try to agree on a way forward that represents the sector so they are speaking with one voice. The chairs of each of these sector meetings then briefly meet so if there are any disagreements they are aired before the full meeting. This system was recognised to accelerate decision making in the full forum.

There was wide-ranging agreement that there are links to other important representative groups such as the headteachers' and governors' forum meetings. In some cases there are also links with the Children's and Young People's Trusts, safeguarding boards and the council overview and scrutiny board. It was acknowledged that a lot of the schools forum work is driven by external timescales, for example, government consultations and decision making generally followed the annual financial cycle.

3.2 Involvement of schools forums in funding decisions

3.2.1 LA briefings

The LAs were widely perceived to be very responsive to requests from the schools forums and to provide thorough briefings on their statutory duties and policy developments. Furthermore, the LA officers were commended for their ability to listen and answer queries. When councillors or cabinet members attended their input was similarly valued.

The evidence indicates that where there is a good working relationship between the LA and the schools forum, then forum members feel able to ask for more detail if needed to make a decision. In addition to briefings, training in LA proceedings and language (for

example, acronyms) was also felt to be valuable. One cautionary note was made by one LA officer who observed that in view of reductions in staffing at the authority the briefings by LA officers are 'very time-consuming and there is no capacity for this now. This needs to be modernised and streamlined'.

3.2.2 Involvement of the schools forum in consulting on the funding formula

In the most proactive schools forums there was clear evidence that the funding formula is developed through a highly consultative procedure. The schools forum was perceived to be an integral part of the process as explained by one forum Chair:

I think we have pushed things from the school end ... to a point where the local authority does take forum seriously and I don't think would consciously or deliberately do something that would involve a decision to make change or introduce a system that had a direct financial consequence without involving forum.

One special school governor emphasised the influence that she felt the schools forum held: 'It would be almost unheard of for a decision to be made by the LA against the forum's wishes. I would say that the forum is substantially influential'.

The characteristics of this consultative relationship emerged as follows:

- Reaching agreement on the funding formula is a process of continuous negotiation and development in a partnership relationship where the sharing of information is open and transparent. An early years' representative explained that 'the discussion goes back and forth until agreement is reached'.
- Interviewees described a process of modelling that facilitates decision making. A secondary academy headteacher explained:

The schools forum provides opinions back to the LA on the funding formula. The LA then ... models the impact and circulates – there are always winners and losers. This system has evolved as the schools forum has become more confident.

- A diocese representative explained how effective this method is at highlighting 'unintended consequences of decisions'.
- A high degree of involvement of all forum members in the development of the funding formula was seen to be important, as described by one forum Chair: 'I'd like to think that the relationship [between the schools forum and the LA] is such that the final formula would only emerge after almost consensus had been reached or at least a very extensive debate'. Involvement of all forum members facilitated empowerment of schools forums' members.
- An effective system of conferring with schools when a wide consultation is needed.
- An efficient and transparent use of subgroups (see section 3.1.4 above) to interrogate details of the funding formula and report back to the full forum.

3.2.3 How decisions are reached

As detailed in 3.2.2 the evidence points to good practice being characterised by a highly consultative approach to decision making, although there was widespread recognition that the LA have the final power to recommend a decision. So typically the LA will ask the schools forum's opinion on a proposal, the forum will then seek information to understand and clarify, debate and consult and most commonly consensus will be reached, although formal voting is used occasionally.

Illustration of effective practice in terms of arriving at decisions

The LA officer and the forum Chair in a metropolitan LA described how they reached decisions by the LA presenting a proposal and asking the schools forum what they thought of it. There then followed a period of consultation. This might be within the main schools forum only or via the subgroups or via a wider consultation of all constituent members. The schools forum might request more information or invite an expert in to talk to them. The forum Chair explained that they 'had moved away from sector fights' and that there was lots of 'listening' and a very 'proactive' approach to decision making.

There were early signs that since schools have converted to academies their viewpoint on national funding has emerged as different from those held by maintained schools. One LA officer explained as follows:

There has been less unanimous voting so we are now trying to get a better understanding of their [academies'] way of thinking. Initially they were overruled in votes: it created some friction so for the future we are engaging with the academies' group and we will need to consider this when we are reviewing membership.

It is worth mentioning that one constituent (a headteacher who is not a member of a schools forum) pointed out that she does not understand exactly how decisions are made at schools forum and that she felt it entirely possible that a representative will be influenced by their own establishment's needs. She observed that more information on the whole system would be welcomed.

3.3 Examples of current funding issues

There was broad consensus amongst interviewees that the scope and range of issues discussed encompass anything to do with finance and funding. A LA officer viewed the forum to be 'an influential body'. It was observed in more proactive schools forums that the remit is extensive and includes more general educational themes such as attainment and school improvement. One forum Chair observed 'I don't think there's much we don't discuss'. In these cases it was observed that where schools forums acquire a broader understanding of the wider educational landscape and the LA's position, particularly with regard to finance (and current cutbacks), then consultations and decision making at schools forum are felt to be better informed.

The two key discussion points currently being debated at schools forums were reported to be:

- The impact of more schools converting to academy status on the distribution of funding. There was a feeling that many forums find this a challenging concept and would like more guidance from central government. Different viewpoints were expressed. For example, one representative felt: 'if more academies convert there will come a tipping point where it will disadvantage those schools that aren't academies in terms of getting a share of the money'. Many forum members expressed a need for clarification, for example: 'things are not transparent re the financing/funding of academies. Academies know how schools are funded but schools don't know how academies are funded'. Although most forums appear to be trying to ensure academies have full representation, one option mentioned is the possibility of reducing the voting rights of academy members at schools forums.
- There was discussion about the implications of a possible national funding formula. Interviewees described feeling 'uncertain' about how local funding formulae might be influenced by it and how local flexibility might be applied. One secondary headteacher of an academy observed: 'we are reluctant to countenance any change at the moment as the national funding formula is on the horizon'.

Examples of other current issues discussed at schools forums included the pupil premium and the link to the deprivation index, funding for the early years sector, and reduction in funding in the post-16 sector, the increasing pressure on primary school places and how to sustain small rural primary schools. Whatever the topic under discussion, these more proactive and connected schools forums (see Chapters 2 and 5) felt empowered to reach decisions with the LA and there was evidence that all discussions are underpinned by a desire to ensure that all schools, children and young people will receive an equitable amount of funds available.

4 Representativeness of schools forums and wider community involvement

Key findings

- Schools forums were broadly representative of their local education community in terms of phase and type of school. There was less evidence that schools forums were geographically representative.
- Schools forums kept membership under review and in some cases had revised their membership owing to changes in the education sector such as the growth in academies.
- The representativeness of schools forums depended on the make-up of the membership, the relationship representatives had with their constituents, and how active members were in contributing to the work of the forum.
- Schools forums expected headteacher forum members not only to represent their school but also their sector and the wider community they serve.
- Information on schools forums, including meeting agendas and minutes, were posted on websites, and in some cases, LA school portals.
- Although schools forum meetings were 'open', members of the public were not actively invited and rarely attended meetings.
- Local communities were represented on schools forums through the involvement of councillors, teacher unions, diocesan representatives and the press.
- Suggestions for widening community involvement included gaining the views of parents, local businesses, youth offending teams, social care and the police.

This chapter examines the membership of schools forums and assesses how representative they are of the education sector. The chapter also presents research findings on wider community involvement in schools forums.

4.1 Representativeness of schools forums

The research revealed that the case-study schools forums included forum members representing all parts of the education sector. Collectively, the forum members represented all phases: early years/foundation years including nurseries, primary, secondary and further education; and the different types of schools in their area: 11–16 secondary schools, 11–18 secondary schools, academies, special schools, faith schools and free schools. Schools forums' Chairs, LA officers and other members considered that forum members represented 'a good spread of provision' and 'a broad spectrum' in their areas. This assessment of schools forums as representative is exemplified by a councillor's comment that 'views should be sufficiently represented as there are representatives from all sectors'.

Case-study interviewees were less sure whether their schools forum was geographically representative of institutions in their area and appeared to regard this as less important than education phase and school type representativeness. The observation was also made that, although a schools forum can have a cross-section of education representatives, the balance of primary and secondary sector members may be questioned because a secondary headteacher represents a lot more pupils than does a primary headteacher. Forum Chairs and LA officers explained that expanding membership had to be thought through carefully to ensure that the size enabled them to manage forum business efficiently.

Case-study interviewees noted that their schools forums were democratic in that headteacher representatives were elected as forum members. The membership of schools forums' working groups comprised nominees

from elected headteachers and other nominated representatives usually chosen because of their interest or expertise in a particular topic.

Local authorities' involvement in schools forums often included senior officers responsible for services for children and young people in addition to the officer allocated to provide administration services to the schools forum. The senior officers were expected to provide as broad a vision as possible of education provision including children's centres and out-of-borough special educational needs (SEN) placements. Other members included representatives of children's trusts, safeguarding bodies and Connexions in some cases.

Forum Chairs pointed out that it was important to keep the membership of their schools forum and its working groups under review, especially given changes to the education sector such as the increasing number of schools converting to academy status (as discussed in section 3.3 above) and the growth in federated schools. Where schools forums had undertaken this type of review, forum Chairs reported that membership had been revised, and became more representative giving them a more informed view of different provision and priorities.

The case studies showed that schools forums' members often represented the interests of established groups such as a secondary headteachers' association, a primary headteachers' forum or a governors' association. Other areas of interest and specialism were sometimes represented through schools forums' sub-groups; for example, a finance working group including school bursars in its membership. Further findings on the role of subgroups are presented in Chapter 3 above.

Forum Chairs asserted that the representativeness of their schools forums depended to some extent on how representative forum members were of the interest in their sector, observing that the degree to which schools forums' members consulted and reported back to their constituencies varied. Furthermore, they suggested that representativeness depended to some extent on active membership and representatives attending meetings regularly. They reported that, (as discussed in section 3.1.3 above) occasionally when headteachers were too busy to attend, they sent replacements who could attend but not vote. The issue of representativeness was summarised by a LA officer who remarked that this

was contingent upon the 'contribution and activities of members, i.e. we need to ensure we reach out widely and that colleagues around the table have sounded out their colleagues'.

Schools forums expected headteacher members not only to represent their school but their sector and the wider community they served. Wider community involvement is investigated next.

4.2 Wider community involvement in schools forums

Agendas for forthcoming meetings and minutes of previous meetings were posted on schools forums' local authority websites and sometimes on local authority school portals. There was evidence of elected members' involvement in schools forums. In some cases, the elected members representing the three main political parties attended meetings. In other cases, councillors' involvement was related to their portfolios such as 'young people' or 'schools'. In addition, the local authority cabinet member or lead member for children and/or education sometimes attended meetings (as discussed in section 3.1.3 above).

Teacher union representatives were often involved in schools forums and attended meetings. Diocesan representatives were also said to participate in some areas. The press occasionally attended schools forum meetings.

The research found that, while schools forums' meetings were said to be 'open', members of the public were not actively invited and rarely attended the meetings. Parents were not invited though it was pointed out that, in some cases, their views were represented by school governors.

When asked about widening community involvement, schools forums observed that this would have to be managed carefully so as not to make forums unwieldy as this forum Chair remarked: '... the forum needs to be big enough to represent the diversity of an area but not too big that you can't properly discuss issues'. Schools forums identified the following representatives for possible inclusion: parents, local businesses, youth offending teams, social care and police.

5 Impact and influence of schools forums

Key findings

- Schools forums can influence and shape the amount of funding that goes to different educational providers.
- Without the existence of schools forums, decision making at a local level and the strategic conversation about finance would be lost. Schools forums provide a mechanism through which consultation with schools can take place.
- Schools forums are able to challenge and scrutinise funding decisions and are perceived to be effective in their approach. This is facilitated by training and the calibre of representatives.
- Barriers to achieving the goals of schools forums included lack of funding to allocate, time, personalities (related to dominant characters and personality clashes) and uncertainty surrounding the future of schools forums.

This chapter examines the relationship between the LA and schools forum. It also discusses the perceived consequences of not having a schools forum. The influence on different types of educational provision and case-study examples of widespread promising practice are summarised.

5.1 The relationship between the LA and schools forum

As discussed in section 3.2.2, the relationship between the LA and schools forum was generally described by interviewees as a partnership based on a common interest to achieve equity for all children and young people in the authority. One forum Chair, for example,

remarked: 'after all, the most important thing is that we're there to serve the children of [the LA] and that's what we're all about'. Words used to describe the relationship between the LA and schools forum were largely positive and included 'challenging', 'collaborative', 'transparent', 'trusting', 'respectful' and 'professional'. Nonetheless, words such as 'caution' and 'suspicion' were expressed by a minority of interviewees and revealed that, on the whole, feelings were more positive amongst those case-study areas that displayed a more holistic, connected schools forum.

5.2 The consequence of not having schools forums

The existence of the schools forum was generally perceived by interviewees as an important mechanism through which consultation with schools could take place. There was some indication to suggest that, if a schools forum was no longer in existence, another platform for discussion would be required. One school member reasoned: '... because there is recognition that the forum fulfils a vehicle for a dialogue that all the parties can participate [in] ...'

Typical views amongst interviewees regarding the potential impact of the loss of schools forums related to a loss of transparency; the loss of decision making at a local level or the ability to have a strategic conversation about finance. There was recognition of schools forums' ability to collate stakeholder views in a timely manner or for schools to convey to the LA, the pressures placed upon them, their needs and desires.

There was concern that LA staff would have less understanding about the needs of schools, which is provided by representatives who have the ability to see how decisions can impact on the children and young people they serve. Linked to this, there was also a suggestion that without a forum, there would be a loss of equity and fairness.

5.3 Impact and influence on educational provision

5.3.1 Achievements of the schools forum

Interviewees generally expressed a positive view about the impact and influence of the schools forum on educational provision, including, for example, forums' ability to challenge decisions, the breach of the central expenditure limit⁴ (CEL) and causes for the DSG under-spend.

Schools forums provide a platform for discussion amongst the LA and representatives and shape the distribution of money to schools. One forum school member observed: 'It's supported schools in putting money into where they think it's important. Schools are able to say that they have had an opportunity to influence and contribute to those decisions via the forum ...'

The following list highlights examples of other schools forums' achievements identified by interviewees:

- reaching agreement to exceed the central expenditure limit and funding for oversized schools
- reaching an agreement to roll out a programme of support for vulnerable young people
- changing the formula to secure specialist provision for maintained schools
- the development of a budget proposal for consultation
- managing, shaping and negotiation of contracts
- greater transparency to schools about their budgets
- discussing and agreeing local funding formula
- setting up the early years funding formula facilitated by an open dialogue between the schools forum and local authority

- improved knowledge and understanding of school budgets.

Further to the discussion of the characteristics of highly consultative procedures adopted in case-study schools forums (in section 3.2.2 above), there was some suggestion that positive relationships between representatives and the LA had helped facilitate the achievements of forum. One forum Chair commented: 'we have managed to discuss all the elements that everybody felt that they needed to discuss ... and have actually come to a real good consensus ... over the decision about how we are going to portion budgets'. Success was also perceived to be aided by, for example:

- providing training to forum members
- the reputation of forum and understanding its role and capacity to assist in making high quality decisions
- active attendance and wide engagement of all sectors in discussions
- effective chairing of the meetings and preparation meetings between the LA and forum Chair
- LA support for the academies programme.

5.3.2 Level of influence of schools forums

Schools forums were generally perceived to have a strong influence on funding decisions. One forum Chair said: 'I genuinely think our local authority ... operates from the view that with regard to decisions about school funding, wherever there is flexibility to make them, then the schools forum is a very important body to consult and get the views of'.

It was also observed that recommendations put forward by forums were generally accepted by the LA. For example, one councillor reasoned: '... schools

4 'This limit (known as the central expenditure limit or CEL) operates by restricting the increase in a local authority's centrally retained expenditure from one year to the next to be the same percentage as the increase in the ISB' [individual schools budget]. Schools forum technical guide (2005)
<http://media.education.gov.uk/assets/files/doc/s/schools%20forums%20technical%20guide.doc>

comes forward with a recommendation, we expect them to have discussed it, debated it and understood it'.

It was evident that the schools forum is able to challenge and scrutinise funding decisions and that there is a robust level of debate. In a few cases, however, interviewees were of the view that forum can only challenge within set parameters or that most decisions ultimately lie with the LA but that because of the level of trust, it is common to be able to come to an understanding.

On the whole, schools forums were considered effective in challenging and scrutinising funding decisions which was attributed to factors such as the calibre of forum members – 'there is an intelligent, cohesive, well, thought, through group of people who do challenge very effectively' (school member) and training to help facilitate depth of understanding. It was evident that, in some cases, forum's ability to challenge had developed over time in light of, for example, the time required to gain an understanding of the function of forum.

5.3.3 Barriers to achieving the goals of schools forums

Barriers to achieving the goals of schools forums included funding related to, for example, limited funds and the need to work more creatively. One forum Chair observed: 'sometimes it's not about what's going to go, it's about how we can spend it more wisely'. In one schools forum, it was observed that the decision had been made at LA level that schools were no longer

able to carry over deficits or roll everything together if there were over- or under-spends. As budgets become tighter, the minimum funding guarantee had started to be problematic for the work of the forum in terms of, budget pressures for special educational needs pupils, for example. Examples of other barriers include:

- **Lack of time** for representatives to be strategic, dedicate time to read and digest information. In addition, the time required to fully understand how forum works in order to have the confidence to challenge effectively was mentioned – 'forum members need to be on it for some time before they really understand how things work' (LA interviewee).
- **Personality issues**, related to dominant characters and personality clashes.
- The **uncertainty surrounding government plans** for school funding and the impact this has had upon planning.
- **Rapid changes as a result of the economic climate** resulting in the loss of experienced staff at the LA to support the forum.

5.4 Examples of best practice

This final section presents examples of best practice identified using the criteria outlined in Chapter 2. The following three case studies show evidence of widespread good practice which overall convey holistic, connected and proactive schools forums.

This metropolitan borough in the West Midlands has set up a number of subgroups to encourage active participation in the schools forum.

When the forum was first established, there were a number of other committees and groups set up to provide a platform for discussion between headteachers and LA officers on aspects such as SEN and school improvement. It was decided that the forum would take on a broader remit than the statutory role and for financial matters to be handled under the central focus of the schools forum. When matters reach full forum, reports are provided from

work groups (such as finance, SEN and school improvement plan) and any task and finish groups that are running. The forum tries to ensure that they have an overview of all key school activities.

The task and finish groups are set up with a specific objective. The groups allow for considerable discussion amongst a small group of people who are representative and can, if necessary, go back to colleagues and gather their views. This approach was perceived to work well because it provides a platform for open and constructive discussion.

... cont'd

CASE STUDY ONE

... cont'd

At workgroup level, forum was reported to have drawn in experts from across the LA, including non-forum members such as bursars. This has helped facilitate transparency and provides an opportunity for discussion amongst stakeholders with the relevant skills and knowledge who have the schools best interests at heart.

The forum also has an executive group comprising two headteachers, two governors, the forum Chair and the chair of the main workgroup. The group is responsible for filtering the agenda and placing detailed actions on officers such as drafting papers. The executive does not make any decisions. One school member commented: 'Therefore, there's a trust ... that executive does its job effectively by producing that [agenda]'.

In the future, it is anticipated that responsibilities of the schools forum may lessen and revert to a purely statutory model, following the development of collaborative ways of working (for example, schools across the primary and secondary phase working in partnership or federation).

Above 'the collaboratives', there will be a strategic accountability board. It is anticipated that the school improvement partner (SIP) and SEN workgroup will transfer to the strategic accountability board. This was viewed positively by one interviewee because the board will represent all schools in the borough and be able to make more cohesive decisions. The work of the group was still expected to feed into schools forum because it would have implications for finance and may influence financial decisions made by schools forum.

CASE STUDY TWO

This non-metropolitan county, based in the north west of England has developed various proactive mechanisms for communicating with representatives and stakeholders of schools forum in order to help facilitate transparency.

Most business of the schools forum is carried out via the two subgroups: funding formula and contracts and supplies. The main driver for this model was felt to be the size of the forum (which comprises over 50 full members). Any decisions made through the subgroups are always fed back to the full forum to ensure transparency. In addition, the forum Chair, vice chair and chairs of the subgroups are convened to discuss matters considered inappropriate to discuss in full forum (for example, sensitivities around contracts).

The committee that manages membership and access meet at least twice a year to review membership and ensure that procedures are working appropriately, including the timing and location of the meetings.

A newsletter is distributed to headteachers every half-term and includes information about the role of the

forum. This has increased awareness amongst schools of forum elections and generated additional interest from potential candidates and voting. A newsletter is also sent out to governors which a headteacher (who was not a member of the schools forum) felt was written in a 'user-friendly' format.

The forum is reported by interviewees to be well structured and organised. Papers are perceived to be clearly set out and explain, for example, what is expected of the forum and who the lead officer is for a particular piece of work. Materials are distributed via the school portal or email prior to the meetings to allow representatives time to digest the information. A summary of the previous meeting and executive summary of discussions and outcomes of subgroup meetings are also provided to members.

At present, the schools forum is made up of representatives from city-based schools. In the future, the creation of a geographical model was welcomed to take account of the different size and location of schools across the rural authority. It was felt that this would allow for greater breadth of vision.

This metropolitan borough situated in the north east of England was reported consistently by all interviewees to have an excellent approach to communication. The forum Chair, the vice-chair and the LA Director of Performance and Commissioning meet a week before the forum meeting to discuss the agenda and the previous meeting. Meetings are organised so that sector meetings (such as secondary headteachers) are held between schools forum meetings so sector colleagues can be consulted on schools forums' matters.

The LA host an annual event where all headteachers and governors are invited. The LA officer described the purpose of the occasion 'to provide the broad picture in terms of the city council budget and the schools' budget'. This was widely perceived to provide context for discussions at the schools forum.

Decision making was described as 'very proactive' by the forum Chair and she emphasised that forum members listened to one another and 'have moved away from sector fights'. It was recognised that forum members need to consult their constituents so they are encouraged to 'sound out' their colleagues' views.

The LA officer, who has worked on other schools forums, observed: 'the degree of challenge and respect and healthy debate is very good ... discussion on other forums can be a bit flat and things can go through on the nod'. An early years forum member concurred with this view and emphasised that the modelling carried out by the LA was an extremely helpful way of identifying 'winners and losers' and minimising unintended impact of decisions. She, and a forum member from an academy, also praised the training that was available and said it was always 'forthcoming' and felt the two-year working party that helped to formulate the early years' funding formula worked well. She praised the forum Chair for her wide experience and her understanding of the education context; she also felt the LA officer showed strong commitment and leadership. She pointed out that the leaders were not there solely to manage the meeting but to lead and provide a vision. She observed that she did not go to the meetings 'for figures on the paper but to make a difference to children's and young people's lives'.

Both forum members interviewed also recognised that there are only limited funds available and that their task was 'to do the best that we can with the resources available'.

6 The future of schools forums

Key findings

- A lack of clarity remains about the role and status of schools forums in national policy. The outcome of the national funding consultation is expected to reduce the current ambiguity.
- The introduction of academies and free schools is changing the make-up of local education communities and, therefore, the context in which schools forums work. Schools forums will need to respond to this change in order to clarify and shape their future role.
- In looking to the future, interviewees were uncertain about whether or not the changes will result in a reduced or strengthened role for schools forums.
- Despite the current uncertainty, most schools forums continue to adapt and make plans for the future because members and stakeholders believe that they should continue.
- When asked to share their key advice with other schools forums, interviewees made a range of theoretical and practical suggestions based on the need for: open and transparent communications; respectful relationships within the forum and between the forum and LA; a commitment to a shared vision and set of values; appropriate support for members; and adequate publicity of the schools forum role, remit and elections.

This chapter examines the possible changes to schools forums in the future, in the view of members and constituents. It then goes on to detail the advice that interviewees have chosen to share with other schools forums.

6.1 The future of schools forums

A lack of clarity remains about the role and status of schools forums at a national level (as detailed in section 3.3). Interviewees felt that the future of schools forums is heavily dependent on the outcomes of the funding consultation and the implications of academisation. In particular, interviewees were unsure about the extent to which schools forums will have decision-making powers and discretion in determining a local funding formula in the future. Concern was expressed that, should the remit be much reduced, they would struggle to maintain momentum. This was exemplified in this LA officer's comment:

Representatives will be less likely to give up their time unless they feel they can make a real difference. This is already the case with sixth form funding. The schools forum reinforces the fact that the local funding formula and decisions are agreed by the schools, not imposed upon them by the LA, and this aids acceptance and harmony which it would be a shame to lose.

It was clear that some believe a national formula would completely negate the possibility of any local discretion. There were also some preconceptions about the direction of government policy. For example, one schools forum member said:

I don't know if Gove thinks he should get rid of the schools forums or if they are the best thing ... I'm worried about cuts and the level of centralisation that is going on, despite the localisation agenda; they seem to be giving with the right hand and taking with the left.

There was a general consensus amongst interviewees that the schools forum played an important democratic role and that their existence had a range of benefits (detailed in Chapter 5). This enhanced the confidence that schools forums might, and should, be strengthened in order to maintain a scrutiny role at the

local level. One interviewee believed that schools forums could have a role in scrutinising the new national funding formula. Confident that they would have a future role in funding decisions, many forums were continuing to adapt and make changes, for example, (as discussed in Chapters 3 and 4) the majority were exploring ways to better accommodate academies. As we've seen in Chapter 4 on representativeness, the majority of interviewees could see the advantages of academy inclusion (for example, given the need to establish new approaches to accessing services) and there were some plans, therefore, to ensure better representation of, and links with, academies. One forum member suggested that the forum name should change to 'education funding forum' to reflect this change in membership and representation of issues. Only one schools forum had taken a 'defensive' stance by considering the reduction of the rights of academies to vote in school funding decisions.

A couple of schools forums had plans to make changes in other ways. For example, one schools forum planned to rationalise its role to ensure it was targeting its statutory function and that other areas of debate (on issues such as SEN and school improvement) were discussed in alternative school partnership groups. For one forum Chair in a large rural LA, the representation of schools by geographical location was a priority for the future.

6.2 Advice to other schools forums

One of the key pieces of advice that interviewees offered to other schools forums, and to which many of their recommendations relate, was the need to **foster trust and understanding through open and transparent communication** and processes. This was viewed as important at both the forum member level and between forum members and the LA. As a practical solution, and reflected in this report as good practice, interviewees suggested that **papers detailing issues for discussion should be clear, neutral, well structured and detailed**. Preparing and distributing them well in advance of schools forums' meetings gives forum members a chance to read them, consult their 'constituents' where necessary, and develop their own questioning. One forum Chair

emphasised the value of thanking LA officers when they had clearly spent a lot of time developing options and preparing papers for the schools forum. Furthermore, transparency was an important principle to which working groups should adhere; while providing a forum for more 'forensic' discussion, it was also necessary for them to operate in an open and transparent way – for example, sharing papers and allowing the schools forum to come to the final conclusion.

Interviewees stressed the need to **maintain a friendly, respectful and non-combative relationship with all forum members**. For many this could be fostered by ensuring that the focus was the same for all; achieving the best possible solution for all young people across the LA. One forum Chair said, 'you need to ensure the purpose is the same. The politics then drifts away.' To this end, some suggested that an explicit **commitment to a shared vision and set of values** is useful. Another practical suggestion was to build links with partners (for example, children's trusts and safeguarding boards) to encourage a more strategic view of improving outcomes for young people. An effective forum Chair could help to foster this strategic view, and, therefore, it was recommended that the forum Chair should be someone who is confident, commands the respect of all members and is able to guide discussion and focus the debate.

Adequate support for members was considered necessary to enable forum members to adequately represent the views of their 'constituents', understand the issues and implications, and feel empowered to ask the 'right' questions. Some felt that forum **members should take some personal responsibility for arming themselves with the right information**, raising their profile within their 'constituent' groups to gain sufficient feedback, and voicing and listening to the views of others at schools forums' meetings.

Finally, interviewees felt that the **schools forum should be adequately publicised** to ensure that all 'constituents' are aware of its existence, role, remit and how they could feed into the decision-making process, take up vacancies and vote in elections.

7 Conclusions and recommendations

7.1 Conclusions

Schools forums play a significant role in influencing and shaping local education funding. They provide a collaborative and consultative platform for strategic discussion and contribute to local decision making. Drawing on a wide spectrum of stakeholders' knowledge, views and experience ensures that funding decisions are shaped by open dialogue, informed debate and challenge.

The research indicates that schools forums are responsive to the changing educational policy context, particularly in terms of the growth of academies, where schools forums are reviewing the representativeness of their membership and the implications that the changes academisation will have on funding and service provision.

A more connected, proactive and child-centred way of working characterised the most effective schools forums in terms of representing the interests of the local educational community and the children and young people it serves. The organisational structure of schools forums was less influential.

Connected and proactive schools forums are defined by:

- being accessible to the public, for example, making information about meetings available on the website
- openness and transparency in the way they work and the way decisions are made
- extensive consultation with a wide range of stakeholders including, for example, the educational community, the LA and specialist experts
- effective and efficient processes for communication such as well-structured papers distributed before the meetings and gaining views and feeding back information to constituents
- having a good working relationship with the LA and where there is a mutual understanding of the wider

education and economic landscape and its local implications for children and young people

- high levels of engagement, for example, through subgroups exploring current issues and reporting back to the full forum to provide clarity and focus and to inform decision making
- having a common strategic vision and commitment to meeting the needs of all children and young people over interests specific to education phase, school type and institution
- a confident belief by forum members that they are making a useful contribution to, and can influence, local education funding decision making and that LAs would find it difficult to act without reference to them.

7.2 Recommendations

The research indicates that schools forums will benefit from greater clarity about the proposed national funding formula in order to facilitate better planning and enhanced confidence in a time of economic uncertainty. Additionally, schools forums would value better guidance about the academy funding regime working alongside the existing system for maintained schools in order to achieve the best outcomes for all children and young people.

7.2.1 Recommendations for schools forums

- Ongoing training for schools forums' members to ensure they have confidence and competence to effectively engage in and challenge a funding decision.
- Children and young people may benefit from schools forums working more creatively with current or reduced funding, for example, encouraging collaborative ways of working such as through federations of schools.

- Schools forums need to continue to review their membership to ensure that they are representative of the local educational community.
- When evaluating their effectiveness, it is advisable for schools forums periodically to review the remit and role of subgroups.
- Schools forums need to examine how well they disseminate, and how clearly they explain, decisions to constituents, stakeholders and the wider community.
- Schools forums will benefit from considering the extent to which their practice reflects the characteristics of the more connected and proactive behaviour outlined above.

7.2.2 Recommendations for LAs

- As forum members highly value the contributions of councillors and lead members, especially for their areas of expertise, schools forums will benefit from

LAs providing more opportunities to inform and build links in order to enhance understanding of local education funding in its fullest context.

- LAs need to periodically review the level, type and frequency of involvement that senior managers and officers have in schools forums given changing policy agendas and priorities for the education, support and well-being of children and young people.
- When evaluating their working relationship with schools forums, it is advisable that LAs are aware that being responsive to requests for the provision of thorough briefings on statutory and policy developments is greatly valued by schools forums' members as this helps them to provide more informed scrutiny and challenge.
- The further promotion of the schools forum and its role and remit within the LA, and more widely amongst constituents, is recommended in order to ensure that wider understanding and recognition of its responsibility is achieved. Indeed, further research to contribute to this aim should be considered.

Technical appendix

The sample comprised four unitary authorities (one of which was a London borough), three county and two metropolitan authorities. In total, 40 interviews were undertaken with nine LA level, 26 schools forums' members, one councillor, one cabinet member and three constituents.

More specifically, our sample included:

LA Officer interviewees

- One School Funding Manager
- One Assistant Director, People's Services and Commissioning
- One Schools Forum and Business Support Manager
- One Director, Access and Provision – Children's Services
- One Assistant Director Strategic Finance
- One Governor Services Manager
- One School Finance Support Manager
- One Director of Performance and Commissioning
- One Head of Education and Learning

Schools forums' interviewees

- Eight Chairs of schools forums
- Two Secondary Academy Headteachers
- Five Primary Governors
- One Secondary Governor
- Two Primary Headteachers
- Two Special School Governors
- One Work Based Learning representative
- One Primary Headteacher representative

- One Primary Academy Governor
- One Diocese representative
- Two Early Years Practitioners

Constituent interviewees

- Two Primary Headteachers
- One Primary Academy Governor

Other

- One Councillor for Corporate Services and Education
- One Cabinet member with portfolio for education.

Recently published reports

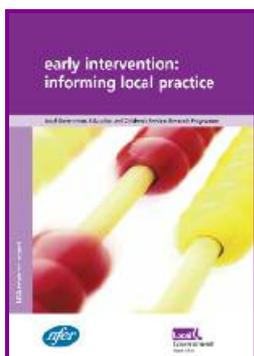
The Local Government Education and Children's Services Research Programme is carried out by NFER. The research projects cover topics and perspectives that are of special interest to local authorities. All the reports are published and disseminated by the NFER, with separate executive summaries. The summaries, and more information about this series, are available free of charge at: www.nfer.ac.uk/research/local-government-association/



hidden talents: a statistical overview of the participation patterns of young people aged 16–24

This report offers a start point for the Local Government Association (LGA) commissioned research to inform the Hidden Talents programme. It reviews available statistics, data and commentary to establish what can be reasonably deduced to inform policy in response to young people aged 16–24 years who are not in employment, education or training (NEET).

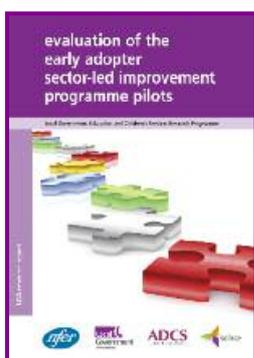
www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/LGHT01



Early intervention: informing local practice

The findings from this review of literature shows that the case for investing in early intervention approaches to improve outcomes for children and families and in bringing about cost savings in the longer term is widely accepted and supported. More needs to be done within the UK to identify and evidence the extent of potential cost savings, this will help enable policy makers and local commissioners to make informed commissioning decisions.

www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/LGLC02



Evaluation of the early adopter sector-led improvement programme pilots

The findings from this review show that the case for investment in early intervention for children and families, bringing about cost savings in the longer term is widely accepted and supported. More needs to be done within the UK to identify and evidence the extent of potential cost savings

www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/SLIP01

For more information, or to buy any of these publications, please contact: The Publications Unit, National Foundation for Educational Research, The Mere, Upton Park, Slough, Berkshire SL1 2DQ, tel: +44 (0)1753 637002, fax: +44 (0)1753 637280, email: book.sales@nfer.ac.uk, web: www.nfer.ac.uk/publications.

This report, commissioned by the Local Government Association (LGA), offers a best practice review of the role of schools forum. Best practice was characterised in terms of connected, proactive and child-centered behaviour.

Effective schools forums:

- provide a platform for discussion at the strategic level about funding decisions at the local level
- influence and shape the amount of funding that goes to different educational providers
- have developed consultation procedures characterised by transparency, continuous negotiation, the sharing of information and members working together to achieve the best outcome for all children and young people.