

Department for Education and Skills

**SCHOOLS FORUMS:
OPERATIONAL AND GOOD
PRACTICE GUIDANCE**

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INTRODUCTION

1. This guide is designed to provide members of Schools Forums, local authority officers and elected members with advice, guidance and information on good practice in relation to the operation of Schools Forums.

2. It is organised in four sections:

- Section 1 provides information on the constitutional and procedural requirements as set out in the Schools Forum Regulations¹.
- Section 2 covers a number of key aspects of the operation of Schools Forums at local level, drawing on good practice from a number of Schools Forums.
- Section 3 provides information on the kinds of induction and training material and activities that local authorities should consider providing to members of their Schools Forum. It also contains information on further sources of information and guidance available and relevant website links and contact details.
- Section 4 contains information on sources of further information and Departmental contact details.

3. The guide draws on the experience and knowledge of Schools Forum members, local authority members and officers and the Department and its partners. Other than where it is describing requirements set out in regulations it is not designed to be prescriptive – what is good practice in one Schools Forum may not be appropriate in another, given the diverse circumstances of local areas. However, it is hoped the guide will stimulate some debate within Schools Forums and contribute to their ongoing development.

4. The Department hopes that Schools Forums and local authorities find this guide useful. It has been the subject of consultation with a wide variety of external partners. In particular, members of the Department's School Funding Implementation Group, made up of representatives of head teachers and governors, ConfEd and the Local Government Association, have provided valuable input and advice on the content of the guide. The Department is grateful for their assistance.

¹ Schools Forum (England) Regulations 2002, as amended by the Schools Forum (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2005/3299

SECTION 1

SCHOOLS FORUM REGULATIONS: CONSTITUTION AND PROCEDURAL ISSUES

Regulations

1.1. National regulations govern the composition, constitution and procedures of Schools Forums. Local authorities can provide Schools Forum members with a copy of these regulations or alternatively they can be accessed at:

<http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/management/schoolfunding/quickindex/>

Membership

1.2. The regulations provide a framework for the appointment of members, but allow a considerable degree of discretion in order to accommodate local priorities and practice.

1.3. A forum must have at least 15 members. No maximum size is stipulated, and authorities will wish to take various issues into account in deciding the actual size, including the need to have full representation for various types of school, and the authority's policy on including non-schools members within the total. However, care should be taken to keep the forum to a reasonable size. Experience suggests that if it is over-large, for instance more than 25-30, the effective management of meetings becomes difficult and individual members may feel unable to contribute meaningfully. Most Schools Forums have between 18 and 35 members.

1.4. Types of member. Forums must have 'schools members', and at the discretion of the authority can also have 'non-schools members'. If the latter are appointed, they can number no more than 20% of the total membership of the forum.

Schools members

1.5. Schools members represent specified phases or types of schools within the authority. At the least, Schools Forums must contain representatives of two groups of schools: primary and secondary schools. The numbers of members in each group should be proportionate to the ratio of pupils in each phase. Beyond this, Schools Forums must also include representatives of special schools and nursery schools if local authorities maintain such schools. These two groups of schools are treated slightly differently in terms of membership arrangements.

1.6. Where a local authority maintains one or more special schools the Schools Forum should have at least one schools member from that sector. In the case of nursery schools, however, local authorities were given the

opportunity to include a representative of nursery schools within the existing primary school members. If this discretion was not exercised before April 2004, Schools Forums had to then add a schools member specifically representing nursery schools.

1.7. Middle schools are treated according to their deemed status and while there is no specific provision in the regulations to require separate representation of middle schools it is good practice to ensure that all the various age phases of schools in an authority have adequate representation. Where middle Schools exist, therefore, many local authorities include them as a separate group in the membership structure of Schools Forums.

1.8. The authority then has discretion to divide these groups further so as to comprise sub-groups of head teachers and governors of the relevant schools. The sub-groups do not have to be of equal size – for example, there may be more representatives of head teachers of primary schools than governors of such schools, or vice versa. It is good practice for Schools Forums to aim for a membership structure based on an equal proportion of head teachers and governors, though this is not always possible for a variety of reasons. Nevertheless it is vital that even where equal numbers of head teachers and governors cannot be achieved there is sufficient representation of each type of schools member in each group to ensure debate within the forum is balanced and representative.

1.9. The authority can also divide groups in order to have separate representation of types of school – community, voluntary, foundation where these apply to the groups in question. This can be done instead of, or as well as, sub-division by head teacher and governor; but there will be a need to consider any resulting complexity and size. There must not be any duplication of membership between the sub-groups – i.e. a secondary school group can be divided into sub-groups of community secondary schools and Foundation/VA secondary schools. Such a group, however, cannot be divided in a way which would allow an individual head teacher to represent either the secondary school group in general or the Foundation/VA secondary school sub-group.

1.10. Whatever the membership structure of schools members on a forum, the important issue is that it should reflect most effectively the profile of schools across the authority to ensure that there is not an in-built bias towards any one phase or group.

1.11. The term of office for each schools member must be stipulated by the authority at the time of appointment. Such stipulation should follow published rules and be applied in a consistent manner as between members. They need not have identical terms – there may be a case for varied terms so that there is continuity of experience rather than there being a complete change in the membership at a single point.

1.12. As well as the term of office coming to an end, a schools member ceases to be a member of the Schools Forum if he or she resigns from the

form or no longer occupies the office which he or she was nominated to represent. For example, a schools member representing community primary school governors who is no longer a governor of a community primary school in the relevant authority must cease to hold office on the Schools Forum even if they remain a governor of school represented by another group or sub-group.

Election and nomination of schools members

1.13. Existing schools members will have been elected on the basis of procedures determined by the local authority. In practice, the local authority may have held its own elections or sought nominated representatives from appropriate groups, e.g. a local governors' association or the local primary head teachers' association. These memberships are valid until such members' terms of office come to an end or they resign or otherwise become ineligible for membership. When a vacancy does arise, the authority must appoint a replacement schools member to the group or sub-group in question.

1.14. The Schools Forum (Amendment) (England) Regulations 2005 require that such a replacement must be elected to serve as a member of the group or sub-group and that such an election must be run according to a process determined by the constituents represented by the members of that group or sub-group.

1.15. So, for example, a vacancy amongst a community primary school head teachers' group must be filled by a nominee elected according to a process that has been determined by all the community primary school head teachers in the local authority and in which all community primary school head teachers had the opportunity to stand for election and/or vote in such an election.

1.16. Similarly, if a local authority's Schools Forum has, say, a sub-group of Voluntary Aided and Foundation secondary school governors, all governors of such schools are eligible to stand for election and all can vote in any such election.

1.17. As outlined above, the composition of Schools Forum must be constructed in such a way that ensures that any potential schools member holding a single office/position (head teacher or governor) can represent only one group or sub-group. However it would be quite legitimate for a single person who holds multiple offices/positions to be eligible for membership of more than one group or sub-group. A person who is a governor of, say, a primary school and a secondary school is able to stand in elections as a representative of either group but can be appointed to represent only one of those groups.

1.18. The purpose of ensuring that each group or sub-group is responsible for their election process is to guarantee that there is a transparent process by which members of Schools Forums are nominated to represent their constituents. Some groups and sub-groups may face logistical and administrative difficulties firstly in determining the process for their elections

and secondly in running such elections.

1.19. Appropriate support to each group or sub-group to manage their election processes should be offered by the clerk of a Schools Forum, or the committee/democratic services of a local authority. This may just include the provision of advice but may also consist of providing administrative support in actually running the elections themselves.

1.20. As a minimum, the clerk of a Schools Forum must make a record of the process by which the constituents of each group and sub-group elect their nominees to the Schools Forum and be able to advise the Chair of the Schools Forum and local authority on action that needs to be taken, where necessary, to seek new nominees.

1.21. In determining the process by which elections should be operated it is perfectly legitimate for a local authority to devise, in consultation with their Schools Forum, a model scheme for the constituents of a group or sub-group to consider and be invited to adopt. However, such a model scheme cannot be imposed on any constituency: adaptations and /or alternative schemes may be adopted. A single scheme need not be adopted by each constituency.

1.22. In fact, schemes are very likely to differ in substance between different sized constituencies or between those constituencies that have an existing 'parent' group and those that do not. For instance, within most local authorities there are head teacher associations. These may serve as an appropriate vehicle for the organisation of elections. However, care must be taken to ensure that every possible eligible member of a constituency has an opportunity to be involved in the determination of their group's election process and is given the opportunity to stand for election if they choose to do so.

1.23. It would not be considered good practice nor to be compliant with the regulations for the steering committee or chair of a 'parent' group simply to make a nomination to represent their group or sub-group on a Schools Forum.

1.24. Any scheme must take into account a number of factors;

- a. the process for collecting names of those wishing to stand for election;
- b. the timescale for notifying all constituents of the election and those standing;
- c. the arrangements for dispatching and receiving ballots;
- d. the arrangements for counting and publicising the results;
- e. any arrangements for unusual circumstances such as only one candidate standing in an election or where there is a tie between

two or more candidates; and

f. whether existing members can stand for re-election.

1.25. Local authorities will be well placed to provide advice on all these and other relevant issues if required.

Non-schools members

1.26. Non-schools members may number no more than 20% of a forum's total membership (excluding observers – see paragraph x). It is for the authority to decide which bodies should be asked to nominate non-schools members, although the regulations require authorities, if they have non-schools members at all, to consider seeking nominations from the Church of England and Roman Catholic dioceses covering the authority's area. If diocesan authorities nominate members they should consider what type of representative is most appropriate – schools-based such as a head teacher or governor, or someone linked more generally with the diocese.

1.27. It is also good practice for local authorities to ensure that the needs and interests of all the pupils in the local authority are adequately represented by the members of a Schools Forum. Pupils in maintained schools clearly are represented by schools members. Some pupils in a local authority, however, are not in maintained schools but instead are educated in Pupil Referral Units, hospitals, independent special schools and non-maintained special schools. Certain types of non-schools members can play an important role in representing the interests of these groups of pupils. They can also play a role in representing the interests and views of the services that support those groups of vulnerable and at-risk pupils who nevertheless are on the roll of maintained schools, such as looked after children and children with certain learning and behavioural needs.

1.28. The purpose of non-schools members is also to bring greater breadth of discussion to forum meetings and ensure that stakeholders and partners other than schools are represented. Organisations which typically provide non-schools members are trades unions, professional associations and representatives of early years and youth groups. Parent groups could also be considered. However, as there are clearly limited numbers of non-schools members able to be on a Schools Forum, care should be taken to ensure that an appropriate representation from wider stakeholders is achieved.

1.29. The length of term of office for non-schools members is at the discretion of the authority. Schools must be informed within a month of the appointment of any non-schools member. The LSC cannot nominate non-schools members (but see section on observers at paragraph).

Restrictions on membership

1.30. There are two important restrictions placed on who can be a member of a Schools Forum. Firstly, elected members who hold an executive role in a local authority (a lead member/portfolio holder) are barred from being either a schools member (by virtue of them being a governor) or a non-schools member. Secondly, officers employed by the local education authority/Children's Services Department who have a role in the strategic resource management of the authority are also barred from the membership of a forum.

1.31. In practice this second restriction will apply to the Chief Education Officer/ Director of Children's Services, Assistant Directors and other senior officers with a specific role in strategic financial management and/or who are responsible for the funding formula for schools.

1.32. The restrictions on membership have been in force since the introduction of new school funding arrangements in April 2006². Since then, Schools Forums have had the power to approve a limited range of proposals from their local authority: the restrictions ensure that there is no conflict of interest between the proposing body (the local authority) and the approving body (the Schools Forum).

1.33. However, non-executive elected members and those officers who are employed in their capacity as head teachers or teachers or are otherwise engaged to provide direct support to pupils are eligible to be members of forums.

1.34. In the case of non-executive elected members, they may be either a schools member (by virtue of them being a school governor) or a non-schools member. As a non-schools member they would be well placed to fulfil the broader overview and scrutiny role they have within the local authority in general.

1.35. Officers who are employed as teachers or head teachers such as teachers-in-charge of PRUs or who work for, and those who directly manage, a service which provides education to individual children and/or advice to schools on learning and behavioural matters, for example, are eligible for membership.

1.36. So, for example, an officer working for or directly managing an education service for looked after children or pupils with sensory difficulties etc can be a non-schools member of a Schools Forum as they are well placed to represent the needs and interests of a particular group of pupils.

1.37. School Improvement Partners are also able to be a non-schools member of a Schools Forum as they will be able to bring an additional

² Transitional provisions for Schools Forums whose membership structures were not compliant with the amended regulations were made allowing them up until August 31 2006 to reconstitute as necessary.

professional voice to debates.

1.38. However, the inclusion of non-executive elected members, certain officer or Schools Improvement Partners is not a requirement. Many Schools Forums do not have such members on them and it is for each local authority and Schools Forum to consider that they have the right balance of school and non-school representation taking into account their local circumstances and preferences.

Observers

1.39. The authority must permit the local LSC to nominate an observer if it wishes. Observers can attend all forum meetings but may not vote. The LSC's right of observer status arises due to its interest in the planning and funding of post-16 provision. The authority should ensure that the local LSC receives copies of papers. The LSC observer is entitled to attend all forum meetings but can be asked to withdraw voluntarily for specific items.

1.40. The regulations also provide that any elected member or officer who is not a member of the Schools Forum is entitled to attend and speak at a forum. This is to ensure that, while not voting members of Schools Forums, executive elected members and senior officers with responsibility for strategic resource management have a clear right to participate in any discussions that Schools Forum may have, particularly where a local authority has asked its Schools Forum to approve a proposal. Where this is the case it is good practice that the executive member and/or senior officer is able to speak to such an item and respond to any queries the Schools Forum raises.

1.41. The authority may also ask other observers to attend Schools Forum meetings (these might include expert advisers on relevant issues). It can also invite any other body to do so. An academy operating in the local authority's area is entitled to attend the Schools Forum as an observer. If there is more than one academy they may nominate a joint observer; if they cannot agree on this, then the regulations specify a procedure for rotation of observer status.

1.42. There is nothing in the regulations to prevent the use of nominated substitutes for members and observers. If such a system is used then it is sensible for there to be formally nominated substitutes/alternates, rather than *ad hoc* arrangements, to ensure some degree of continuity and procedural propriety in respect of voting arrangement.

Recording the composition of Schools Forums

1.43. Each local authority must make a written record of the composition of its Schools Forum detailing the numbers of schools member representatives, the number of such members in each constituent group and sub-group and the organisations represented on the Schools Forum as non-schools members. This record should also indicate the term of office for schools members. When the term of office of an existing schools member comes to

an end, the group or sub-group they represented should nominate a replacement by holding an election among those eligible to be that group or sub-group's nominee (see paragraph 1.13 for more information on election of schools members).

Procedures

1.44. Most procedural matters are not prescribed in regulations and are at the discretion either of the authority or the forum itself. However, there are requirements in the regulations relating to:

- a. quorum: A meeting is only quorate if 40% of the total membership is present (this excludes any observers, and it is 40% of the current membership excluding vacancies). If a meeting is inquorate it can proceed but it cannot legally take decisions (e.g. election of a chair, or a decision relating to funding conferred by the funding regulations). An inquorate meeting can respond to authority consultation, and give views to the authority. It would normally be good practice for the authority to take account of such 'unofficial' views, but it is not legally obliged to do so. In practice, the arrangements for meetings should be made to reduce the chance of a problem with quora. The quorum stipulation is in the regulations to help ensure the legitimacy of decisions;
- b. election of a chair: Under the regulations, if the position of chair falls vacant the forum must decide how long the term of office of the next chair will be. This can be for any period, but the forum should consider carefully whether a period exceeding two years is sensible. A long period will also cause problems if the member elected as chair has a term of office as a member which comes to an end before their term of office as chair ends. The forum should then elect a chair from amongst its own members except that any non-executive elected member or eligible officer who is a member of a forum may not hold the office of chair. In the past a small number of Schools Forums have chosen to appoint a chair who is not a member of the Schools Forum, nor an officer or elected member of the local authority, Such independent chairs are not now permitted under the Schools Forum (Amendment) (England) Regulations 2005;
- c. voting procedures: The regulations provide that a forum must determine its own voting procedures. Previously, although many did so, it was open to the local authority to impose such procedures. A forum may decide, if it wishes, to adopt procedures already in place or replace them with its own. The new powers which Schools Forums have to take decisions on a range of funding matters increase the importance of clear procedures. These procedures should take account of any use of working groups by the forum – for example a decision might be taken by voting to accept a report by a working group (see also below). Schools members and non-school members will have experience of voting procedures from their responsibilities on

governing bodies and other groups so devising and adopting a voting procedure should not pose any major difficulties. Likewise local authorities will be well placed to offer advice if required. As part of any voting procedure there must be clarity in the procedures for recording the outcome of a vote, and any resolutions a Schools Forum makes in relation to any vote taken. The importance of accurate minute taking is discussed at paragraphs 2.26-2.27;

d. regulations: provide that proceedings of the forum are not invalidated by defects in the election or appointment of any member, or the appointment of the chair. Nor does the existence of any vacancy invalidate proceedings (see paragraph 1.44(a) on quorum).

1.45. Where the regulations make no provision on a procedural matter, local discretion should be exercised. It is for the authority to decide how far it wishes to establish rules for the Schools Forum to follow, in the form of standing orders. While it is entitled to do so, it is of course good practice to allow the forum to set its own rules so far as possible.

1.46. That notwithstanding, certain issues are most sensibly decided by the authority itself, because of the need to align meetings of the forum with the flow of school funding business throughout the year. The scheduling of meetings should therefore be decided by the authority, but taking account of views expressed by the forum and in particular the chair. Further consideration is given to this in the 'Managing the Business' section below.

Timing and logistics

1.47. Practice regarding the timing of meetings varies considerably across forums, reflecting different views as to the most convenient arrangement. Good practice in this regard will be the arrangement, under the particular local circumstances, that achieves the best attendance.

1.48. Generally speaking it is sensible to have all meetings of the forum in the same location. However, there may be a case, particularly in geographically scattered authorities, for rotating the location so that a minority of members is not continually disadvantaged in terms of travel and attendance.

1.49. Care should be taken to ensure that the logistical arrangements for meetings are conducive to good discussion and debate. The forum should meet in a room which is of sensible size for its membership, and arranged so that members can engage in effective discussion and debate. Over-large formal debating chambers, or small crowded rooms, may not produce a feeling of cohesion amongst forum members. The authority will also wish to bear in mind that some members will have difficulty in fitting attendance into their commitments, and provide modest refreshments in recognition of this.

Public access

1.50. With the introduction of the new school funding arrangements, Schools Forums are becoming more than just consultative bodies. Instead they also have an important role to play in approving certain proposals from their local authority and are therefore involved in the decision making process surrounding the use of public money at local level. Schools Forums should consider how best to ensure that their proceedings are subject to public scrutiny. Local authority council meetings and committee meetings are held in public except in certain specified cases and Schools Forums should start from the presumption that there is no reason not to allow public access.

1.51. Some Schools Forums already operate very much along the lines of a local authority committee. This is perfectly legitimate where there is such local preference. Certainly papers, agendas and minutes should be publicly available. This is most easily achieved by publishing them on a website.

Working Groups

1.52. It is open to a Schools Forum to set up working groups of members to discuss specific issues, and to produce draft advice and decisions for the forum itself to consider. It is not good practice (though it is legal, if properly decided upon and recorded) for the forum to delegate actual decisions or the finalisation of advice to a working group, as this may have the effect of excluding legitimate points of view.

Urgent business

1.53. It is good practice for the local authority to agree with its Schools Forum an urgency procedure to be followed when there is a genuine business need for a decision or formal view to be expressed by the forum, before the next scheduled meeting. The authority may of course call an unscheduled meeting; but it may also wish to put in place alternative arrangements such as clearance by email correspondence or some other means. Such instances should be avoided so far as possible but are legitimate provided all members of the forum have an opportunity to participate and the logistics provide a reasonable opportunity for consideration.

1.54. It is not legal for the chair to take a decision on behalf of the forum, no matter how urgent the matter in question; but a forum may wish to put in place a procedure for the Chair to give the authority a view on an urgent issue.

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. It should be stressed, however, that the working practices and operation of individual Schools Forums should reflect the circumstances of the schools and educational needs of the local area they represent. These notes, therefore, are not meant to be prescriptive but are intended to offer some helpful guidance based on what is considered to be best practice. Schools Forum members and local authorities may wish to consider these issues in relation to the operation of their own forums.

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:

2.4. *Partnership:* The work of the Schools Forum is likely to be most effective when there is a genuine partnership between it and its local authority. In practice this means having a shared understanding of the priorities, issues and concerns of schools and the local authority. However, it also means being honest and open where there are some tensions or disagreements over priorities. Overall there should be a shared commitment to working together on the agreed priorities and understanding of the contribution that can be made by each side to their achievement.

2.5. *Effective Support:* The local authority is the main source of support and guidance to a Schools Forum. It is vital therefore that the business of the Schools Forum is supported by the local authority in an efficient and professional manner. The management of meeting cycles, production of papers and the provision of good quality advice and guidance all contribute to the effectiveness of Schools Forums.

2.6. *Openness:* It is important that a Schools Forum feels it is receiving open and honest advice from its local authority. In the vast majority of cases this is the situation, but there will inevitably be some issues about which a local authority and its Schools Forum may disagree. This can cause tension but a Schools Forum should be able to feel that it is receiving all the

information it needs to reach necessary decisions or informed views.

2.7. *Responsiveness*: Local authorities should as far as possible be responsive to requests from their Schools Forums. These may include requests to discuss particular topics or issues as well as requests for information, data or other support. However, Schools Forums themselves should also be aware of the resource implications of their requests. The resources (both officer time and other resources) that a local authority devotes to the Schools Forum are a local matter that ideally should be discussed and agreed between the local authority and Schools Forum. Within the resources available, Schools Forums should have a degree of control over the issues they consider and information provided. Beyond this, local authorities will want to support their Schools Forum as far as they are able but Schools Forums should also take a realistic view of the resource implications of any requests they make.

2.8. *Strategic view*: Schools Forums are most effective when they take a strategic view of the issues they are considering. While members of a Schools Forum are representatives of their specific sector or phase, they should be able to consider the needs of the whole of the educational community, rather using their position on a Schools Forum to advance their own sectional or specific interests. Schools Forum chairs have a particularly important role in ensuring that this is the case: they can influence the kinds of issues and topics discussed and should set the tone for the discussions at meetings. Equally, local authorities have a role in ensuring that all members of a Schools Forum are well briefed and able to participate fully in discussions.

2.9. *Challenge and Scrutiny*: Schools Forums may be asked to agree to proposals from their local authority that will have an effect on all schools in the local area. The extent to which forums can scrutinise and challenge such proposals is an important aspect of their effectiveness. Many local authorities and Schools Forums pride themselves on the collegiate nature of their relationship and the consensus by which they operate: others may be less concerned about this. Whatever the nature of the relationship, however, there will be instances where it is incumbent on a Schools Forum to challenge and scrutinise a local authority's decisions, proposals or existing arrangements. Effective local authorities and Schools Forums manage this well and while agreement can often be reached under relatively informal circumstances, it is vital that there are formal procedures in place to ensure that any decisions the Schools Forum makes are reached in an appropriate and transparent manner.

2.10. 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.

The role of Executive Elected Members

2.11. A Schools Forum needs to ensure that there are systems in place for executive members of the Council to be aware of its views on specific issues and, in particular, any decisions it takes in relation to the Schools Budget and individual budget shares.

2.12. It is common for an executive member (usually the portfolio holder with responsibility for education) to attend Schools Forum meetings. By doing so such elected members are able to contribute to the discussion and receive first-hand the views of the forum: it is clearly good practice for this to be the case and the regulations provide the right for executive members to attend and speak at forum meetings. However, there is no requirement for this to happen so at the very least there should be clear channels of communication between the Schools Forum and executive members.

Attendance of local authority officers at meetings

2.13. There is no requirement for specific officers to attend meetings of the Schools Forum beyond any officers who, in consequence of local decisions, are non-schools members of the Forum. However, as with executive members it is clearly good practice for the senior manager with resource responsibilities, and perhaps the Director of Education/Children's Services, to attend meetings.

2.14. It is important to consider the capacity in which officers who are not members of a forum attend the meetings of their forum. In practice, it is usual for officers to have prepared the papers and information for the forum, present the papers at meetings and participate in any discussion. This will usually suffice, but on particularly contentious matters Schools Forums may want to consider what, if any, further information is needed, beyond that supplied, to reach an informed decision. For instance, in the case of a proposal to vary the Minimum Funding Guarantee for certain schools the Schools Forum may wish to ensure that it is aware of the views of the schools affected.

2.15. While processes should not be excessively bureaucratic or time-consuming, both the local authority and the Schools Forum should consider how such situations can best be managed to provide assurance to all schools that fair and effective decisions are being reached.

2.16. Also, in the majority of cases Schools Forums are supported by a specific officer - maybe the Assistant Director with responsibility for Resources. In the course of their work, however, Schools Forums will be required to consider a whole range of issues and they may consider it appropriate that other officers attend for specific items of business. Where this is the case, the local authority should meet the Schools Forum's requests as far as possible.

Administration of the business of Schools Forums

2.17. 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 of a high standard and produced in a timely and consistent manner

2.18. 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.

2.19. 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. Annex A provides a suggested model format for papers.

2.20. It is important to note that one of the issues that Schools Forum members have identified as contributing to unsatisfactory meetings is the poor presentation of papers and/or papers that arrive late. However, there may be situations in which a delay in the dispatch of papers and/or papers needing to be tabled at a meeting is an unavoidable situation for a variety of reasons.

2.21. This should occur in exceptional circumstances only but where it does the chair and/or the full meeting should have the discretion to take a view on whether such papers are sufficiently important to allow them to be taken at the meeting. If so, consideration should be given to how the agenda can be managed (by possibly by deferring some items to a future meeting) to ensure all members are able to consider the paper and contribute appropriately.

Clerking the Schools Forum

2.22. 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 Forum, the chair and the local authority. It is a role often undertaken by an employee of the local authority though in some cases independent clerks are used.

2.23. 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.

2.24. 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 head teachers, 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 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 DfES Schools Forum and general Schools Funding site on TeacherNet; and arrange for the distribution of any relevant DfES 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.

2.25. 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.

Meeting notes and recording of decisions

2.26. A vital part of the effective operation of Schools Forums is to ensure that an accurate record of the meeting is taken, including, where appropriate recording the outcome of any votes and decisions taken.

2.27. Notes or minutes of each Schools Forum meeting should be produced 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.

Resources of the Schools Forum

2.28. The costs of a Schools Forum fall in the retained budget portion of the Schools Budget of local authorities. Nationally there is variation in the level of funding local authorities identify against Schools Forum expenditure: the average in 2005-06 being £19,000 per year.

2.29. It is legitimate to charge the running costs of Schools Forums to this budget including any agreed expenses for members attending meetings, the costs of producing and distributing papers and costs room hire and refreshments and for clerking of meetings. Beyond these costs some Schools Forums have a budget of their own to use for activities such as commissioning research or other reports. The level of resource devoted to Schools Forums is a matter for local authorities, though it is clearly good practice for this to be discussed with their Schools Forum.

Agenda Setting

2.30. 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.

2.31. The frequency and timing of meetings of the forum should be agreed in advance of each financial and/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.

2.32. Beyond this, however, local authorities and Schools Forums may want to consider issues of an essentially local nature such as the specific operation of a factor in the funding formula or other matters relating to local school funding issues.

2.33. Ideally, the local authority and Schools Forum should come to a mutual agreement about what issues should be considered. However, it is likely that there will be a large number of issues that could be considered. In such cases the use of an issues log and forward plan can be a useful way of prioritising agenda items – all members of the Schools Forum and the local authority can contribute potential items to the log and an assessment of the relevant priority of each can be undertaken to determine the forward plan.

2.34. While this could be seen as unnecessarily bureaucratic, it does provide a way in which all members of a Schools Forum can bring their issues and concerns to the attention of the local authority and ensures that there is some transparent mechanism in place to determine the ongoing business of the Schools Forum.

Chairing the Schools Forum

2.35. The chair of a Schools Forum plays a key role in setting the tone, pace and overall dynamic of the forum. They should provide an environment within which all members are able to contribute fully discussions and guide the forum to making well informed decisions.

2.36. 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 the Forum business. It is good practice for there to be a pre-meeting between the senior officer of the authority supporting the Schools Forum and the chair and vice-chair of the Forum to ensure that all the issues are clearly understood.

2.37. 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.

Communication

2.38. Communication to the wider educational community of the discussions and debates of, and decisions made by, Schools Forums is fundamental to their effective operation. The more schools and other stakeholders know about the proceedings of Schools Forums, the more their work will be an important and central part of the context of local educational funding. This is particularly important given the enhanced decision making role that Schools Forums now have.

2.39. Each Schools Forum should therefore be clear what its channels of communication are. One channel is to ensure that all its agenda, minutes and papers are publicly available – ideally though web-pages devoted to the work of the Schools Forum. However, the Schools Forum should also consider additional communication processes. These could include:

- a. an annual report on the proceedings of the Schools Forum;
- b. the reporting back by Schools Forum members to their 'parent' group of the business of the forum. 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;
- 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 local education authority/Children's Services Department; or

- d. a brief email to all schools 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.

SECTION 3

INDUCTION AND TRAINING

Induction of new members

3.1. When new members join the Schools Forum appropriate induction materials should be provided. These might include material relating to the operation of the Forum together with background information about the local and national school funding arrangements. Typically they might comprise:

- a. the constitution of the 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 School Forum meetings for the year
- f. the local Schools Forum web address (where appropriate)
- g. a copy of the Schools Forums survey produced in Autumn 2004³

3.2. This Operational and Good Practice Guide, suitably supplemented by local material, should also be provided to new members on their appointment.

3.3. Where there is sufficient turnover of School Forum members in any particular year the 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

3.4. Ideally Schools Forum members should be able to use some of the budget set aside for Schools Forum running costs for accessing 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.

³ <http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/management/schoolfunding/schoolsforums/>

3.5. 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.

News updates

3.6. 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 DfES. Other Schools Forum members should be copied into such information flows so that they can be kept abreast of developments between meetings.

3.7. Many local authorities have already established dedicated Schools Forum websites on which they post key information for Schools Forum members and other interested parties. Consideration also needs to be given to the provision of hard copy news updates for all members of the forum and particularly for those who do not have ready access to the web.

SECTION 4

FURTHER INFORMATION AND CONTACT DETAILS

Web links

4.1. The Department's TeacherNet website contains details of all the announcements, documents and other information relating to school funding and Schools Forums. This website also has a range of useful links to other sites that may be of relevance to Schools Forum members.

4.2. The following address links to the main school funding page which has links to the latest news items on schools funding and all the latest information.

<http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/management/schoolfunding/>

4.3. The following addresses link to a) the school funding pages index listing all the documents published by the Department on school funding in alphabetical order and b) the dedicated Schools Forum pages on TeacherNet.

<http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/management/schoolfunding/quickindex/>

<http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/management/schoolfunding/schoolsforums/>

Contact details

4.4. On the Schools Forum web pages of TeacherNet (listed above) there is a dedicated email address that is monitored on a daily basis for members of Schools Forums or other stakeholders to send in queries questions or requests for information.

The email address itself is:

Schools.Forums@dfes.gsi.gov.uk

4.5 In addition this dedicated email box, members of the School and LEA funding Division in the Department are able to provide advice and guidance on the operation of Schools Forums:

Philip Moss

Tel: 020 7925 3756

email: Philip.Moss@dfes.gsi.gov.uk

John Hall

Tel: 020 7925 6422

email: John.Hall@dfes.gsi.gov.uk

Nick Dawson

Tel: 020 7925 6350

email: Nick.dawson@dfes.gsi.gov.uk

The postal address of the Department is:

School and LEA Funding Division
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
Westminster
London
SW1P 3BT

SUGGESTED MODEL FORMAT FOR SCHOOLS FORUM PAPERS

A useful format is one that contains, as a minimum:

- a. a short introduction outlining the issue under discussion;
- b. a summary of the key points;
- c. a clear signal of the recommendations and what action needs to be taken in response to the paper – e.g. is it for information, decision or comment etc;
- d. a background/discussion section expanding on the summary and action required;
- e. reference to previous related papers;
- f. consistent style and language (for instance in the use of acronyms);
- g. a clear numbering system which as a minimum allows members to identify the date at which the paper and any attached annexes were discussed and the agenda item number to which they relate.