

A Consultation on School Funding Reform: Rationale and Principles

1. Do you agree with the stated characteristics of an ideal school funding system? (Section 2)

Yes – Wirral has adopted these characteristics in the local formula.

2. Are there further characteristics the system should have? (Section 2)

- SEN – should be a specific factor to represent some of the most vulnerable children.
- Stability/continuity and some degree of predictability. Three-year funding periods would provide this
- A focus on raising standards

3. Do you agree with the analysis of how the current system falls short of these aims? (Section 3)

In terms of Wirral's local formula, the Schools Forum does not agree with this analysis. Schools funding has been made less opaque this year with the mainstreaming of grants, making it easier to see all funding streams available to schools.

However in terms of the National formula, the Schools Forum does agree. The current system is seen to be unfair, particularly when schools which are compared in league tables have very different levels of funding. This is not only due to different local formulae but also to the different amounts per pupil allocated to local authorities.

4. Do you agree with the case for reforming the system?

Nationally yes, locally the case is less clear.

5. Do you agree that the aim of ensuring all deprived pupils get the same level of funding no matter where they live is the right one? (Section 4)

The Schools Forum discussed this area and recorded 2 views:

1. Allocations for deprivation should take account of local circumstances. An allocation based solely on Free School Meals is too simplistic
2. Yes, all deprived children should get the same level of funding no matter where they live. This should be based on Free School Meal eligibility as this is the most up-to-date, accepted, straightforward and simple measure of deprivation.

6. Do you agree the underlying formula needs to change to meet this aim more quickly and effectively?

The Schools Forum again recorded 2 views which link to those expressed in question 5:

1. We need to understand what works by looking at the way deprivation funding has been allocated and the outcomes that this has produced. Changes in deprivation funding take time to show their effect.
2. Yes, the Pupil Premium and amounts paid for deprivation in the formula should be aligned.

7. Do you think the school funding system should be based on a purely national formula? Or should there be flexibility for local decisions about funding levels? (Section 5)

The Schools Forum discussed this area and recorded 2 views:

1. Local flexibility is important in targeting specific needs. We need to retain local flexibility to enable us to respond quickly to local circumstances. Local knowledge is essential in ensuring that all needs are met.

2. There should only be a national formula with no local flexibility. We need to look forward. Having local flexibility will reinforce the inequalities of the past. If the national formula is designed properly and is sufficiently resourced to meet wide ranging needs then local flexibility should not be necessary.

8. If so, should that flexibility be limited, and if so how?

Local flexibility should be clearly defined. The minimum funding guarantee and the central expenditure limit are existing controls that are effective.

9. If there is local flexibility, what should the roles of local authorities, schools and the Schools Forum be in decision making? (Sections 5 & 6)

The current system works well. The Schools Forum operates as an advisory body, informed by responses from schools to consultation documents. The Council takes final policy decisions.

Regardless of whether there is local flexibility or not, the Schools Forum should remain as an advisory body. School representatives still need to meet to discuss shared interests and funding issues.

10. If there is local flexibility for maintained schools, how should Academies and Free Schools be funded?

It seems likely that Academies will be funded according to a national formula. If maintained schools are funded differently, there is a risk of creating a 2 tier system and LA schools may suffer as a result.

11. How do you think SEN support services might be funded so that schools, Academies, Free Schools and other education providers have access to high quality SEN support services?

A central team within the LA to support SEN is essential. Specialist services cannot be delivered as effectively by schools.

Currently, some services are funded at school level and some by the LA. The balance that currently exists is the right way of working. Schools must continue to be adequately funded.

12. How do you think a national banded funding framework for children and young people with SEN or who are disabled could improve the transparency of funding decisions to parents while continuing to allow for local flexibility?

The process of banding SEN would be very complex. More information and explanation of how this would work is needed before a response can be made.

13. How can the different funding arrangements for specialist provision for young people pre-16 and post-16 be aligned more effectively to provide a more consistent approach to support for children and young people with SEN or who are disabled from birth to 25?

The DfE need to look closely at the existing divide in funding and why it exists. Funding should be continuous to support person-centred care.

14. How successfully has the EYSFF been implemented? How might it be improved?

In Wirral, the EYSFF has been successfully implemented across all sectors, although nursery schools have needed a long transition period. The move to 15 hours in the maintained sector has worked well. Flexible provision has been less successful – in the maintained sector it has been difficult to deliver a

service that meets parental demand and is affordable; in the PVI sector it is not considered cost-effective to deliver a flexible entitlement.

15. How important is an element of local flexibility in free early education funding? What might alternative approaches look like?

A flexibility supplement may not be cost effective , some schools have been unable to make this work.

16. How should we identify the total amount of funding for early years and free early education for three year olds and four year olds not in reception from within the overall amount of 3-16 funding?

Early Years funding should be a separate identified block.

17. Should the formula include only pupil led factors or also school led factors?

The formula should include mainly pupil led factors. There may be exceptional circumstances where school led factors are necessary, but we would need to see evidence of the need for these factors.

18. What factors should be included?

An amount per pupil plus deprivation, SEN, EAL and high mobility.

19. What is the right balance between simplicity and complexity?

Simple doesn't mean better. What we need is transparency and effectiveness. A formula should be transparent, fair and logical. It is also likely to be complex if it is to meet a wide range of needs.

20. What level of change in budgets per year can a school manage?

This depends on the individual circumstances of the school. Schools cannot cope with significant changes in budgets at a time when funding is "flat cash". The MFG has provided essential protection in previous years, and this is the measure of change that schools are used to managing.

21. How much time do schools need to plan for changes in their funding?

No school should significantly gain or lose during a funding period. The ideal funding period would be 3 years.

22. When is the right time to start moving towards a fair funding formula?

Not this year – September 2012 at the very earliest.

23. Have you any further comments?

If a national formula is introduced, it should be a fair system that covers the 3-19 age range. If post-16 funding remains separate and continues to change, this could result in unmanageable budget turbulence for schools with 6th forms.