

# **BEST PRACTICE GUIDE FOR SCHOOL FORUMS IN WALES**

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## **Summary**

This guide is aimed at assisting school forums to carry out their roles and responsibilities more effectively by providing examples of good practice. It focuses on the:

- Constitution of school forums;
- Meetings and proceedings;
- Conduct of business; and
- Non statutory functions of the school forum.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The School Forums (Wales) Regulations 2003 (hereafter referred to as the Regulations) required all local authorities in Wales to establish a Schools Forum by 15 December 2003. They were introduced to help develop informed and confident dialogue between local authorities and their schools on budgetary issues including schools' funding levels for the coming year, pressures on future years' budgets, changes to local funding formulae and reviewing contracts/service level agreements for services to schools.

In August 2008 the Welsh Assembly Government commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to carry out an independent review of the effectiveness of school forums in Wales.

The objectives of the review were to:

- assess the effectiveness of the current schools forums arrangements across local authorities from the standpoint of stakeholders in relation both to the statutory aspects of forums as set out in the regulations and those elements over which local authorities have discretion to get a clear picture/comparison of the effectiveness of school forums across Wales and to identify any pockets where there were weaknesses;
- assess the usefulness of the dialogue schools forums offer local authorities and schools in terms of its contribution to understanding and transparency of school funding arrangements in Wales by stakeholders; and
- make recommendations for the future development and/or improvement of schools forums in terms of the above, or any other areas.

The review was completed and the final report and executive summary were published in April 2009 and posted to the Welsh Assembly Government's website. The report can be found at:

<http://wales.gov.uk/topics/educationandskills/learningproviders/schools/schoolfunding/schoolbudgetforum/?lang=en>

The review found that school forums were largely felt to be a very positive development. There was strong support for the current school forum model and evidence that schools forums were effective. The review found that forums have improved the dialogue and communication between local authority officers, schools, governors and elected members. They have helped schools to have a better understanding of financial issues and the decisions made regarding school budgets. Forums have made funding arrangements more transparent and have built on good relationships between schools and local authorities. Evidence suggests that schools are now more informed about how budgetary decisions are taken because of the work of school forums. The review found many examples of existing effective practice amongst school forums and provided 16 recommendations to the Welsh Assembly Government for the future development and improvement of school forums in Wales.

This guide promotes the evidence gathered from the review to enhance existing practice by providing suggested ways of working and best practice examples.

## **2. CONSTITUTION OF SCHOOL FORUMS**

### **2.1 Size of forums**

The Regulations prescribe that school forums must have a minimum of 15 members to ensure that the membership is not too limited.

Size of forums is important to ensure that there is a wide spectrum of representation from all stakeholders to facilitate a balanced discussion. It should not be too large to be unwieldy or intimidating.

It is for each local authority to determine the size of the forum based on local circumstances. However, the recommended optimum size of a school forum is **20 members**. This may vary in accordance with the size of the local authority.

### **2.2 School members**

Members of a school forum must be representative of the schools within the area. Therefore the majority of the forum has to be made up of 'school members' who are either head teachers or governors of the schools maintained by the authority (there is no requirement for there to be an equal number of each). To ensure as many schools as possible are represented on the forum; local authorities should try to ensure that governor representatives are not from the same school.

Local authorities must make arrangements to ensure that school members represent primary and secondary schools proportionally and that all categories of schools within the authority are represented. Local authorities must also try to ensure that at least one school member is a parent governor. A wide selection of representatives willing to participate in open discussion would provide a cross section of views of the issues discussed, and an insight of the impact of discussions on particular schools.

### **2.3 Election of school members**

It is for each local authority to determine the numbers of school members of the forum and the selection procedures used. Local authorities may wish to make arrangements for nomination and elections with their local governor associations and local head teacher groupings although there is no obligation to do so.

### **2.4 Non school forum members**

It is for each local authority to decide whether or not to appoint non school members to the forum. No more than 25% of the forum can be made up of non school members and this limit includes representatives of the authority itself, should the authority decide to have representatives on the forum.

### **2.5 Benefits of having non-school members**

The benefit of including non-school members on forums is that it ensures there is representation by all stakeholder groups and gives a wider perspective of the issues facing schools. It has been reported that schools forums' effectiveness and their ability to influence decisions were enhanced by the presence of senior local authority officers. The Welsh Assembly Government recommends senior local authority officers to attend the forum meetings.

## **2.6 Local authority representation on school forums**

The only representative of the local authority who has voting rights on school forums are those included as part of the non-schools membership. In addition to membership from the education service, each authority may wish to consider having an elected member of the council and/or representatives from the authority's corporate services on the forum. The benefits of this would enable schools members to gain an insight into the implications of the wider funding responsibilities of local authorities and enable elected members and corporate officers to be aware of the concerns of schools.

## **2.7 Appointment of members**

Regulations require that local authorities must notify all of its maintained schools of the details of any non-schools members appointed to the schools forum within one month of the appointment taking place. As a matter of good practice it is also recommended that the authority notify all maintained schools of the details of schools members to the forum. Schools should be notified after the appointment of any new or replacement school members or non school members.

It is up to each local authority to determine how long members serve on the forum but it is recommended that the period of appointment should be between two and four years.

## **2.8 Staggered appointments**

Most local authorities do not operate a system of staggered appointments to school forums. However, there are benefits with this system. Staggered appointments serve to facilitate continuity by maintaining the levels of experience and expertise on a forum. It also ensures that there are sufficient numbers of members on the school forum if other members choose to resign from their position before the end of their term of membership.

## **2.9 Substitute members**

It may be useful for local authorities to consider having a group of substitute members appointed who represent all stakeholders. This would ensure regular attendance, maximum representation and continuity in the event of a designated forum member's inability to attend a meeting. Formal arrangements for nominating substitute members would need to be put in place. The group of substitute members would need to be kept informed of forum discussions and sent the papers and minutes of each meeting to be up to date with the issues.

## **2.10 Links with other forums or other local authority departments**

If school forums make links with other bodies (e.g. phase forums, special needs forums and other local authority departments) they would gain advice from experts in other areas of work which could enhance members' understanding of other related issues. An awareness of these issues will contribute to school forums becoming more effective and will develop their understanding of the impact and implications of the decisions they make in school forum meetings.

### **3. MEETINGS AND PROCEEDINGS OF SCHOOL FORUMS**

#### **3.1 School Forum Secretariat**

The current practice is that local authorities provide the secretariat for school forums. It is recommended that this arrangement should be continued as it has been found to provide effective and impartial support for school forums. However, local authorities should ensure that secretariat staff's workload is monitored to ensure that they have sufficient time to devote to their role in relation to schools forums as well as other duties for the authority.

#### **3.2 Chair of meetings**

An effective chair of a schools forum has an important influence and affects the dynamics of the meeting. It is important that the chair:

- is impartial,
- encourages all members to contribute to discussion,
- is proactive in covering all of the agenda items,
- ensures that the agenda items are equally balanced to ensure that the issues are representative of all of the groups on the forum and not favoured to one particular group, and
- keeps the meeting focused to the issues at hand.

#### **3.3 Frequency and timing of meetings**

Local authorities must determine the timing and frequency of meetings so as to facilitate the business of school forums.

The Welsh Assembly Government recommends that school forums should meet at least on a termly basis and schedule more frequent meetings to discuss any major issues that arise. It is beneficial for forum meetings to follow the local authority's financial cycle to enable school forums to feed into the decision making process at the appropriate times.

Local authorities should put a draft timetable in place as soon as possible so that members of the schools forum know when in the year meetings are likely to take place. This also provides an opportunity for members to inform whether they cannot attend a particular meeting due to some other commitment and allows sufficient time to re-arrange meetings to maximise attendance.

#### **3.4 Attendance at meetings**

It is evident that school forum meetings are most effective when there is regular attendance by representatives of all backgrounds. This ensures that there is continuity of discussion and familiarity of the ongoing issues as well as a variety of viewpoints to bring to the discussion.

#### **3.5 Meeting location**

It is for each local authority to determine where school forum meetings should be held. The majority of forum meetings are held in central locations such as local authority offices as it provides forum members with access to local authority officers and additional support when needed. It is recommended that this practice should be continued if this is the most feasible option.

## **4. CONDUCT OF BUSINESS**

### **4.1 Information sharing**

Effective school forums promote transparency of school funding arrangements by facilitating access to information and sharing this information with others.

It would be beneficial for local authorities to consult with school forum members to ensure that the type and level of information provided to schools is appropriate or whether there is a requirement for more information.

### **4.2 School forums website**

If not already in place, it is recommended for each local authority to establish a schools forum webpage to facilitate access and sharing of information. The website could include:

- details of members including information on which schools, organisations or groups they represent,
- approved minutes of meetings, agendas and detail of any ongoing issues being examined by the forum or its sub groups; and
- feedback / comments page.

This will provide opportunities to non-members to learn about the work of the schools forum and allow them to submit issues and comments to their representatives through a dedicated website.

### **4.3 Effective practice during meetings**

Many school forums already carry out their practices effectively and provide comprehensive information to their members in a timely manner. The Welsh Assembly Government would like this effective practice to be standardised across Wales. School forums and local authorities should have regard to the following best practice tips when conducting their business:

- Dates of future meetings to appear as an agenda item at each full schools forum meeting – the agreed date should then be circulated by email to members and non-members, with a reminder to non-members that they could ask their representatives to raise issues on their behalf.
- Supporting documentation should be circulated at least 7 days before a meeting to allow time for the information to be considered. This should be accompanied by more extensive dissemination among non-members, such as sending email notices alerting them to information on forum websites.
- Provide members with the opportunity to raise agenda items.
- The chair to effectively navigate the meeting to ensure that all issues on the agenda are discussed within a suitable timeframe.
- Provision of comprehensive reports from stakeholders to discuss at the meetings.
- Willingness of members to discuss contentious issues and provide open and honest opinions.

- Willingness of members to listen to the views and concerns of other members in the forum.
- Provide effective and accurate recordings of discussions and decisions.
- Timely dissemination of minutes.

#### **4.4 School forums working groups/sub groups**

It would be beneficial to establish sub working groups made up of a small number of forum members to meet between the school forums meetings to discuss specific matters. This gives members the opportunity to discuss important items in more detail such as legal and specific education issues before attending the school forum meeting. It also allows forum members time to explore those issues with other parties/departments and to discuss any cross cutting issues. A smaller body that works together is able to cover things in more detail, more quickly and bring the succinct points to the meeting.

### **5. NON-STATUTORY FUNCTIONS OF THE SCHOOL FORUM**

Whilst it is imperative that forums focus on matters within their statutory remit it can also be helpful to discuss other financial issues at their meetings. Local authorities can consult the forum as they see fit on any other matters concerning the funding of schools and should encourage them to contribute to strategic discussions (e.g. over school structures and the development of the role of support staff) that impact on budgetary issues.

Local authorities may wish to consult the schools forum on the financial implications of:

- arrangements for free school meals;
- arrangements for insurance;
- arrangements for the education of pupils with special educational needs;
- arrangements for the use of pupil referral units and the education of children otherwise than at school;
- early years education;
- allocation and use of specific grants; and
- school transport.

Forums may also wish to discuss other financial issues at their meetings such as procurement and joint/bulk purchasing.

#### **5.1 School forums as sounding boards**

Many local authorities benefit by using school forums to test ideas and opinions on other issues before embarking on formal consultations. Local authorities may wish to discuss with school forums issues such as school structures and general education policy alongside financial matters. This provides local authorities with a valuable group response to specific issues and provides school forum members with an insight into forthcoming changes that may affect their schools and an opportunity to discuss these issues and provide suggestions.

#### **5.2 School forum self evaluation**

Whilst this is not common practice at the moment, it is recommended that school forums undertake self evaluations. This will provide an opportunity for school forums to reflect on existing practice and consider how to be more effective and efficient. (The collection of self evaluatory data from members and non members could be developed through online



surveys and could be fed into other data gathering exercises undertaken by local authorities).

### **5.3 Training for school forum members**

To improve the effectiveness of school forum members, it would be beneficial for local authorities to audit members training needs. Training would develop forum members understanding of data and financial issues to enable members to contribute fully in discussions.