

# **SCHOOLS FORUM**

## **MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON MONDAY 14 JULY 2025**

**Forum Members Present:** Councillor Heather Codling (Executive Portfolio Holder: Children and Family Services), Councillor Iain Cottingham (Executive Portfolio Holder: Finance and Resources), Paul Davey (Maintained Primary School Governor), Jacquie Davies (Pupil Referral Unit Headteacher), David Fitter (Academy School Headteacher), Mel Godliman (Early Years PVI Settings), Richard Hand (Trade Union), Keith Harvey (Maintained Primary School Headteacher), Jon Hewitt (Maintained Special School Headteacher), Trevor Keable (Academy School Governor), Jo Lagares (Maintained Primary School Headteacher), Jo MacArthur (Maintained Primary School Headteacher), David Ramsden (Maintained Secondary School Headteacher), Graham Spellman ((Chair) Roman Catholic Diocese), Phil Spray (Maintained Primary School Governor), Chloe Summerville (Maintained Nursery School Headteacher) and Edwin Towill (Academy School Headteacher)

**Also Present:** Rose Carberry (Principal Adviser for School Improvement), Neil Goddard (Service Director - Education and SEND), Elizabeth Griffiths (Interim Financial Consultant Lead for Management Accounting) and Jessica Bailiss (Democratic Services Officer)

**Apologies for inability to attend the meeting:** Kavash Bamfield (Maintained Primary School Headteacher), Reverend Mark Bennet (Church of England Diocese), Catherine Bernie (Academy Special School Headteacher), Nicolle Browning (Maintained Secondary School Headteacher), AnnMarie Dodds (Executive Director (Executive Director – People – Children and Family Services), Michelle Harrison (Maintained Primary Schools), Beth Kelly (Head of Early Years), Julie Lewry (Academy School Headteacher), Gary Norman (Academy School Governor), Chris Prosser (Maintained Secondary School Headteacher) and Charlotte Wilson (Academy School Headteacher)

### **PART I**

#### **1 Minutes of previous meeting dated 16th June 2025**

The minutes of the meeting held on 16<sup>th</sup> July were approved.

#### **2 Actions arising from previous meetings**

It was noted that the meetings from the previous meeting had been completed.

#### **3 Declarations of Interest**

Phil Spray, Keith Harvey, Paul Davey and Jo Lagares declared an interest in Agenda item 10 (Deficit Schools) due to their school being one of the schools listed within the report.

#### **4 Membership**

There were no membership updates.

#### **5 Update from Schools' Forum Task and Finish Group - Governance Review (Chair)**

The Chair introduced the report (Agenda Item 6), which provided an update from the first meeting of the Task and Finish Group set up to review the governance of the Schools' Forum. Schools' Forums had been a statutory requirement for local authorities since 2003 and had both decision making and consultative duties relating to local education

## SCHOOLS FORUM - 14 JULY 2025 - MINUTES

funding. The Chair reported that it was good practice to review practices and terms of reference from time to time to maximise efficiency and purpose, and to ensure that it was meeting current needs and taking note of best practice guidance.

The Task and Finish Group had met on 26th June to make recommendations and had agreed that all members' views were important and should be sought by means of a survey. The Chair thanked Trevor Keable for developing the survey, which Jess Bailiss would circulate during the coming week. All Forum members were encouraged to complete the survey by the deadline of 15<sup>th</sup> August. This would give the group a chance to review all the answers and report back to the Schools' Forum at their next meeting in October.

It was noted that the initial equality impact assessment indicated no impact, but it was hoped the review would lead to positive impacts.

The Chair invited the Forum to consider the recommendations set out in section two of the report that the revised Constitution and Work Programme were brought to the Schools' Forum for consideration in October 2025 to allow more time for the review to take place. It was also recommended that the current Constitution (as agreed in July 2024), membership and draft Work Programme 2025/26 remain in place until October 2025. The recommendations were proposed and seconded and at the vote the motion was approved.

**RESOLVED** that the recommendations set out under section two of the report were approved.

### 6 Surplus Balances (Elizabeth Griffiths)

Neil Goddard presented the surplus balances report (Agenda Item 7) recalling the process that had been followed the previous year and the commitment made to addressing surplus balances and clawback more quickly in the current year. He thanked the schools that had responded to the Finance Team with the information that had been requested. He stated that a number of schools had fallen under the surplus balance policy in terms of having more than the prescribed percentage within uncommitted balances through the accounts. He reported that engagement with those schools had taken place to understand the reasons for the surplus, and the same criteria as the previous year had been applied. He noted that there were no proposed clawbacks for the current year because the schools had clear reasons why those balances were being held.

Neil Goddard clarified that the role of the Forum was to agree whether the clawback should be applied and not to engage in a conversation about how the accounts were presented and what the balance was. He said that the paper was labelled as a decision, but there was no decision to be made on this occasion. The area could be closed off and not extended as it had been the previous year.

David Ramsden asked Neil Goddard to talk through the decision-making process regarding clawback for the current year. Neil Goddard detailed that the Finance Team had worked closely with schools in closing accounts more quickly each year. Once the accounts were closed a position for each school was reached and this was set out in the first table under section five of the report. This information was then reviewed against returns each school had made about why they had additional revenue held in their account and what this was for. The LA looked at each school's case and took a view as to whether this was appropriate or not in terms of the surplus balance held. Following this, the LA presented the position to the Forum. The Forum would then need to take a view whether or not to claw back.

## SCHOOLS FORUM - 14 JULY 2025 - MINUTES

The same process applied the previous year had been applied in the current year but much more efficiently and appropriately. Neil Goddard clarified that the review of the information from each of the schools was an LA decision and was reviewed by Finance colleagues and Education colleagues\*.

David Ramsden was glad the process had been applied more efficiently however, expressed concern about the shift from clawing back a significant amount in 2024 to none in 2025. The amount of work involved in the process for the LA and schools needed to be considered, if money was not going to be clawed back going forward. Neil Goddard highlighted that money had been clawed back the previous year, and this might again be the case in future years. The LA did not want to claw back money and there was a learning element involved in having the policy in place, in that it encouraged schools to manage their budgets. David Ramsden felt that clawback needed to act as a deterrent for schools to encourage them to spend money for that year and its children, in year.

Edwin Towill observed the timing issue if claw back had been recommended and suggested that the Task and Finish Group reviewing the function of the HFG and Schools' Forum needed to be aware and consider that the report had been withdrawn from the HFG discussion, which was problematic. The report had been sent to the HFG for comment at around 12 noon on Friday 11<sup>th</sup> July with a four hour turn around. This did not feel like an efficient way to ask headteachers to comment on a report as important and sensitive. If there had been a request for clawback he did not feel there would have been enough time for a serious discussion on the matter.

Edwin Towill stated that his second observation was that the current year's clawback concerned primary schools however, it was also noted that the report later on the agenda showed that there was an increasing number of schools with deficit budgets. He felt it was likely that the two areas were connected, and he understood why primaries might try to run a surplus budget due to the risk of falling rolls in the future and that they were trying to mitigate against this. He sought reassurance from the LA about a plan to deal with falling rolls. Neil Goddard accepted the point raised about the timings of the report. Secondly, he confirmed that there was a piece of work being undertaken currently around falling rolls. This work would be brought to both the HFG and Forum for discussion.

Keith Harvey questioned how long the LA would wait before clawing back capital funding. Neil Goddard acknowledged a balance was required between saving up to do a big project over time and having it saved up just in case. For almost all the schools on the list, there had been a significant capital project delayed, and funding was linked to an actual capital scheme in the programme. He stated that the same schools should not be on the list ten years down the line vaguely saving for an aspirational capital scheme that might not happen.

Councillor Iain Cottingham understood the LA had a statutory duty to ensure school funding was spent correctly. Clawback was one of the tools available to the LA to help ensure this happened.

Councillor Heather Codling stated that the LA did not want to close any schools. This was however an area under review, but there would be every effort to keep schools open. There was pressure on places in schools as there were not enough children.

David Ramsden proposed tracking responses for clawback more effectively now there was data available.

**RESOLVED that** the Forum noted the report.

\* The Finance Service collates the information returned by schools. This is then reviewed by the Education Service.

## SCHOOLS FORUM - 14 JULY 2025 - MINUTES

### 7 **Scheme for Financing Schools 2025/26 (Elizabeth Griffiths)**

Elizabeth Griffiths introduced the report (Agenda Item 8) regarding the Scheme for Financing Schools. The proposed changes had been reviewed by both the HFG and Schools' Forum and then it had gone out for consultation with schools, where the revised version had been supported. It was recommended that the Schools' Forum approve the suggested amendments and publish and adopt the updated SFS.

The Chair invited maintained school members to consider the recommendation. The recommendation to adopt the revised SFS was proposed and seconded and at the vote the motion was carried.

**RESOLVED** that the Schools' Forum agreed that the revised SFS be adopted and published by 15<sup>th</sup> July 2025.

### 8 **Delivering Better Value Closing Down Report (Neil Goddard/Hannah Geddert)**

Neil Goddard presented the close-down report (Agenda Item 9) for the Delivering Better Value (DBV) programme, thanking Hannah Geddert for her work in managing the DBV process throughout. The report outlined the progress achieved through DBV and set out the next steps and priorities to sustain and build upon this progress. The programme had ceased locally and nationally, and a fully costed Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) proposal was awaited from the Government within the year.

Neil Goddard noted that local authorities continued to struggle with high deficits in their High Needs Blocks. The vast majority of HNB funding went to schools.

Non-anticipated savings of around £500k had been delivered in year one of DBV through work around transition into reception and avoiding placements in independent schools. The £1m provided by the Government for DBV had now been spent or was still being spent on projects including SEND funding bands, ordinarily available and trauma-informed work around mental health. These projects would come to a natural end at the end of term.

Neil Goddard reported that DBV had been scrutinised heavily by elected Members, the Schools' Forum and the Department for Education (DfE) to ensure figures around savings were as accurate as possible. He added that savings were really cost avoidance, through reducing the rate of increase in the HNB. Overall, it was felt that DBV had been valuable, providing impetus and resources for data and projects. The DfE was due to sign the DBV paperwork off and the LA would then be able to move on.

Trevor Keable sought clarification on the savings achieved compared to the funding received. Neil Goddard clarified that they have been given £1m to reduce the rate of increase against the HNB. The £500k saved in year one had not been expected. It was anticipated that approximately £30 million would be saved by year five. Trevor Keable queried section 7.3 of the report which stated that to maintain momentum, it was essential that work continued to be strategically supported. Neil Goddard referred to the SEND Strategy and action plan that sat underneath this, which was very detailed and would drive work forward. The action plan was overseen by the SEND Improvement Group. Work included a recent review of the Fairer Access Panel, and a budget would be allocated to this panel going forward to support this work. Neil Goddard stated that whilst there was not new money, money was being spent differently. It was hoped the momentum would continue.

**RESOLVED** that the Schools' Forum noted the report.

**9 Deficit Schools (Elizabeth Griffiths)**

Elizabeth Griffiths introduced the report (Agenda Item 10), which reported on the outturn position of ten schools that had set a deficit budget in 2024/25 and four further schools that had closed 2024/25 with an unlicensed (unplanned) deficit.

The total deficit for licenced deficit schools was £652k which was an improved position compared the projected amount of £873k. The total deficit for unlicensed deficit schools was £344k.

Paul Davey sought clarification on the sources of information for the report, as he was of the understanding that Enborne Primary had been advised they were not in deficit by the LA's Schools' Finance Department, and he was therefore confused to see the school on the list. Elizabeth Griffiths confirmed that she had investigated this matter, and they could not trace back to the advice provided. Information held for the school showed that the school had closed the year in deficit on the finance system, with insufficient year-end information provided for the closing position to be any different to what was set out in the report. Some of this year end information was still awaited from the school. Paul Davey would take the matter forward with the school.

**RESOLVED** that the Schools' Forum noted the report.

**10 DSG Monitoring 2025/26 Month 3 (Elizabeth Griffiths)**

Elizabeth Griffiths introduced the report (Agenda Item 11), which reported the forecast financial position of the services funded by the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) for 2025/26, highlighting any under or overspends, and highlighted the cumulative deficit on the DSG.

The report provided the position at Q1 meaning there was a level of uncertainty. The key point to note was that there was a savings target of £14 million, which was the balancing item between expenditure agreed for the DSG and the amount of funding in the DSG. At Q1, no savings had been identified to contribute towards that £14 million. This was the main area that needed to be looked at and mitigated later on in the year.

Elizabeth Griffiths added that they had closed 2024-25 with a cumulative deficit on the DSG of £16 million. If the £14 million remained unmitigated, the deficit would reach £30 million by the end of the year.

Trevor Keable asked for the deficit to be put into perspective compared with other education budgets. Elizabeth Griffiths responded that there were budgets under pressure across the Council, but the DSG deficit for 2024/25 had been equivalent to the deficit across the rest of the Council as a whole. Trevor Keable further asked if the Forum was being asked to do something about it. Elizabeth Griffiths said that the report was for noting however, she had needed to draw attention to the savings target of £14 million, and she was concerned that at Q1 there was no plan to deliver those savings and would like to see some proposals. Trevor Keeble asked if the Forum should be a "pressure group" to address the deficit. Elizabeth Griffiths stated that it was hopeful that something could come forward from the Schools' Team and the Schools' Forum to help mitigate the overspend.

The Chair invited Neil Goddard to comment, and he reiterated that they were extremely dependent on the anticipated announcement from the Government and their approach to managing the overall SEND budget. He added that once this announcement came out, the Schools' Forum would have a key role to play in understanding the implications within the local area. Prior to this point it could be demonstrated how funding was being spent, and he commented that the vast majority of the DSG went to schools. Nationally there did not seem to be an obvious solution and West Berkshire was experiencing the same

## SCHOOLS FORUM - 14 JULY 2025 - MINUTES

pressures as other LAs, some of which were facing larger deficits. It was important to demonstrate that the money was being spent as efficiently as possible.

Councillor Iain Cottingham highlighted the "snowball effect" of the DSG overspend, projecting a deficit of £73 million by 2027-28. This meant that all borrowing by the LA in 2027/28 would be funding deficit and there would be no funding for capital projects. It was a huge issue for the LA as well as educational professionals and the potential impact upon residents of West Berkshire was very concerning. It was a matter that needed to be grasped by Government.

David Ramsden called for a deficit recovery plan and did not feel they could wait for the Government's announcement. This could then be adjusted accordingly once any announcement was made. He queried if the LA had a deficit recovery plan for the DSG. Neil Goddard stated the DBV plan was the deficit recovery plan, and it had been effective in reducing the rate of increase. He could not put a deficit recovery plan before the Forum that would balance the budget whilst remaining within legally set boundaries. A huge percentage of the DSG went to schools. It was difficult to reduce the amount given to mainstream or special schools as they were already struggling. The aim was to give less to non-maintained independent special schools, and this was how sufficiency was being created. The plan was to spend money as efficiently as possible and focused on sufficiently, and the SEND recovery plan, but this would not balance the budget.

David Ramsden suggested a 10 or 15 year deficit recovery plan was better than nothing. He felt that delaying the statutory override was cowardice on the part of the Government as it did not help anyone. In the meantime, they needed to show to the DfE that they had a plan in place. Neil Goddard reported that there were a set of principles that were applied including early intervention. Statutory areas did not generally include early help services. The dilemma was that if they did not provide early help then need would continue to increase but if early help services were provided then there was not enough money in year one. Managing these elements was a huge dilemma. Neil Goddard reported that the HNB proposed budget would come back to Forum in the autumn and at this point there could be a conversation about where resources could be redirected to help manage the budget.

Paul Davey asked for indication on when information was expected to come out from the Government, to which Neil Goddard felt it was difficult to predict but estimated some information would come forward by the end of the year.

Councillor Iain Cottingham stated that there needed to be more of a fundamental discussion as a country on how social care was funded and that the funding needed to be looked at to ensure best value. He shared the frustration raised by members of the Forum.

Edwin Towell acknowledged the challenges facing the LA but agreed there had been a lack of a plan for a very long period of time. He felt that a 10 or 15 year deficit recovery plan would be reasonable. He understood that the plan was to bring services in house that were currently contracted out to expensive independent special needs provision however, he felt that the lack of a plan was frustrating and it was a concern that there had not been a plan in place for a deficit that had been ballooning over a number of years. There was other LAs with deficit budgets in education and elsewhere that were increasing Council Tax. He appreciated it was not the time to have a discussion about Council Tax, which was a much wider issue, but he was concerned that the lack of a clear plan would have much larger implications.

Neil Goddard understood the frustrations raised. DBV was the plan and had been a huge piece of work. The plan formed as part of this was being executed. The SEND Strategy set out early intervention as the approach to longer term deficit reduction. Neil Goddard

## SCHOOLS FORUM - 14 JULY 2025 - MINUTES

understood that they were not able to spend Council Tax on the HNB or other DSG areas. Any income was limited to the HNB. Neil Goddard stressed that he would not be able to put a long term plan in front of the Forum that could bring the DSG back into balance that was realistic. He was happy to work with the Forum and go through it in as much detail as possible if they wished. Elizabeth Griffiths clarified that LAs were capped regarding what they could raise through Council Tax unless a referendum was held, which was unlikely to be successful.

Trevor Keable enquired if the Forum should formally ask for a plan to be brought to a future meeting. Neil Goddard responded that the HNB budget would be brought to the Forum in the autumn for scrutiny. This would support the need for a being a joined up and transparent plan going forward that was trackable through the systems in place.

### **RESOLVED that**

- It was noted that the HNB budget would be brought to the Schools' Forum in the Autumn.
- The Schools' Forum noted the report.

### **11 Contracts Forward Plan**

The Schools' Forum noted the contracts forward plan.

### **12 Date of the next meeting**

The next meeting of the Schools' Forum was scheduled for Monday 13<sup>th</sup> October 2025 at 5pm.

*(The meeting commenced at 5.00 pm and closed at 6.15 pm)*

**CHAIR** .....

**Date of Signature** .....