

# SCHOOLS FORUM

## MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON MONDAY 13 OCTOBER 2025

**Present:** Jay Armstrong (Maintained Primary School Governor), Kavash Bamfield (Maintained Primary School Headteacher), Reverend Mark Bennet (Church of England Diocese), Catherine Bernie (Academy Special Schools), Nicolle Browning (Maintained Secondary School Headteacher), Councillor Heather Codling (Deputy Leader & 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), Mel Godliman (Early Years PVI Settings), Richard Hand (Trade Union), Michelle Harrison (Maintained Primary Schools), Keith Harvey (Maintained Primary School Headteacher), Jon Hewitt (Maintained Special School Headteacher), Jo Lagares (Maintained Primary School Headteacher), Steve Lewis (Academy School Representative), Julie Lewry (Academy School Headteacher), Jo MacArthur (Maintained Primary School Headteacher), Gary Norman (Academy School Governor), Chris Prosser (Maintained Secondary School Headteacher), Phil Spray (Maintained Primary School Governor), Chloe Summerville (Maintained Nursery School Headteacher) and Charlotte Wilson (Academy School Headteacher)

**Also Present:** Toby Bradley (Service Lead, Financial Management), Neil Goddard (Service Lead for Education and SEND), Rose Carberry (Principal Adviser for School Improvement) and Jessica Bailiss (Democratic Services Officer)

**Apologies for inability to attend the meeting:** David Fitter (Academy School Headteacher), David Ramsden (Maintained Secondary School Headteacher), Graham Spellman (Catholic Diocese (Chair) and Edwin Towill (Academy School Headteacher)

*(Keith Harvey, Vice-Chair, in the Chair)*

### PART I

*The Vice-Chair noted that it was Rose Carberry's final meeting and thanked her for the work she had done for the Schools' Forum and for West Berkshire generally.*

*The Vice-Chair also welcomed Steve Lewis (Chair of Trustees at Denefield School) who had joined the Forum as a new academy governor representative following a recent election.*

#### **1 Minutes of previous meeting dated 14th July 2025**

The Minutes of the meeting held on 14<sup>th</sup> July were approved as a true and correct record and signed by the Vice-Chair

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

The Vice-Chair drew attention to the letter on page nine of the agenda pack regarding the high needs budget deficit. A reply had been received on behalf of the Secretary of State, though it did not contain any new information. This was noted by the Forum.

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

Jo Lagares declared an interest in agenda item 11 due to being the headteacher at one of the schools listed in the report.

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### 4 Membership

Jess Bailiss confirmed that Jackie Davies' term of office was due to end in October 2025 and she had agreed to continue for a further term. Charlotte Wilson's term was also due to end and she had confirmed she was willing to continue after consulting with academy colleagues.

### 5 Schools' Forum - Governance Review (Schools' Forum Task and Finish Group)

Paul Davey presented the final report on behalf of the Task and Finish Group, which had been formed to improve the effectiveness and functionality of the Forum. The aim of the group had been to refocus the Forum's attention on its core purpose, enhance its function through better dialogue and address anomalies. One of the proposals included increasing transparency and inclusion around the Heads Funding Group (HFG), proposing its establishment as a formal sub-group.

The Vice-Chair drew attention to the recommendations set out in section two of the report:

- That meetings of the Schools' Forum continue to take place online with one in-person meeting per year (location to be confirmed).
- That the number of Forum meetings be reduced to five with the addition of a training session for Forum Members.
- To approve the Schools' Forum Work Programme for 2025/26 (Appendix B), which had been revised as set out in paragraphs 6.5 to 6.8 of the report.
- To approve the proposed report template, which had been revised as set out in paragraph 6.9 of the report, (Appendix C).
- To approve the Schools' Forum membership as set out in paragraphs 6.10 to 6.14 of the report (Appendix D).
- To approve the Constitution (Appendix E) including the proposed changes set out in paragraphs 6.15 to 6.19 of the report.
- To approve the establishment of the HFG as a formal sub-group of the Schools' Forum, and to endorse the proposals outlined in section 6.20 of the report (*if approved a section will be added to the Constitution following the meeting, acknowledging the HFG as a formal sub-group*).

As no questions or comments were raised during the presentation of the report it was proposed that the recommendations be considered together. The Vice-Chair invited the Forum to consider the recommendations set out above. The recommendations were proposed and seconded and at the vote the motion was approved.

**RESOLVED that** the Schools' Forum approved the recommendations set out in section two of the report. A section would be added to the Constitution following the meeting, acknowledging the HFG as a formal sub-group.

### 6 Schools Funding Formula Consultation 2026/27 (Lisa Potts)

Lisa Potts introduced the report (Agenda Item 7), which set out the requirements and changes for setting the primary and secondary school funding formula for 2026/27. The aim was to mirror the National Funding Formula (NFF) as closely as possible, incorporating local factors. Lisa Potts explained that DfE allocations for 2026-27 had been delayed due to the spending review, with figures expected in the autumn. The consultation pack used 2025-26 data, which would be updated.

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The report recommended that the consultation be undertaken with all schools on the areas set out in section 2.1 of the report. It was proposed that the consultation run from 15th October to 7th November 2025, which was a slightly extended period to incorporate half term and to enable schools to respond. The questions that would be included with the consultation were detailed in Appendix A to the report.

Lisa Potts drew attention to the detail regarding block transfers in section eight of the report. Paragraph 8.4 set out transfers previously agreed from the schools block to the high needs block. If a 0.5% transfer was approved for 2026/27 this would equate to around £700k.

The Vice-Chair noted that there were no comments on the report however, he suspected there would be more questions and comments at the next Forum meeting in December.

The Vice-Chair invited the Forum to consider the recommendations set out in section 2.1 of the report, that the consultation be undertaken with all schools between the 15th October and 7th November on the following areas:

- West Berkshire Council's proposed school funding formula for 2026/27
- An up to 0.5% transfer from the Schools Block to other funding blocks
- The criteria to be used to allocate additional funds
- The proposed services to be de-delegated.

The recommendations were proposed and seconded, and at the vote the motion was approved.

**RESOLVED** that the Schools' Forum agreed the recommendations set out in section two of the report.

### 7 **Vulnerable Children's Grant - Annual Report for 2024/25 (Vanessa Grizzle)**

Neil Goddard presented the report (Agenda Item 8) as Vanessa Grizzle was unable to join due to internet issues. The report provided an annual update on the use of the Vulnerable Children's Grant (VCG).

The report set out proposals for how the funding could be used differently for the coming year, including a move towards a more coordinated approach across resources that were available to the Local Authority (LA). The approach would sit within the early intervention range of work. The approach would consolidate various funds previously applied for separately into a single triage route. This aimed to simplify access for schools and ensure better coordination of support. It would not mean that any resources were lost just that it could be accessed through a single front door to enable schools to access it as effectively as possible. The new system was expected to start in November, with guidance issued to schools before half term. The area of work had been led by Vanessa Grizzle, the Principal Educational Psychologist.

Neil Goddard also announced the appointment of a permanent Principal Educational Psychologist (starting December) and an interim Head of SEND (starting end of October).

Steve Lewis asked if there was a precedence for this type of initiative. Neil Goddard clarified that there was a precedence as the VCG already existed in a different format. It was an improvement of existing processes rather than entirely new.

Chris Prosser enquired whether there would be criteria for accessing the funding. Neil Goddard confirmed the criteria would be published prior to half term with the first panel

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meeting taking place around November. There would be a transitional period and they were not looking to change the criteria significantly. Chris Prosser asked if schools would be made aware of the total sum available and Neil Goddard confirmed that he was unable to confirm the exact amount, but schools would be made aware of this. The figure would be included in the DSG budget report for the whole Forum to see. The aim was to speed the process up and for funding to be provided to schools in a timelier way.

Jacquie Davies praised the "one door" approach. She queried if it would be triage by a panel and if it would be a skilled panel. She stressed that the speed of response would be critical and was concerned about possible delays. Neil Goddard assured that the panel would meet regularly to minimise delays and that direct communication with services would remain possible.

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

### 8 **Education Service Budget Monitoring - Quarter 1 (Lisa Potts/Neil Goddard)**

Lisa Potts introduced the report (Agenda Item 9), which provided an overview of the Education Services budget, which had been requested at a previous meeting. The quarter one outturn showed an overspend of £287,710, with savings in home-to-school transport due to an increase in this budget in the current year. Lisa Potts cautioned that figures might change in quarter two due to pupil movements in September, such as transitions to secondary school.

Pressures were identified in Management and Strategy due to efficiency targets and also the inability to trade with the Educational Psychology Service. Lisa Potts pointed out a notable change in the disabled children's budget, much of which had been transferred to Children's Services at the end of the previous year. The remaining budget related to short breaks for disabled children.

Neil Goddard added that the report aimed to provide a broader understanding of the overall education budget with home to school transport making up a significant portion. Home to school transport remained a concern due to the historical overspend in this area and it was hoped that there would be a clearer picture of the position in the next three to four months.

Neil Goddard reported that a substantial recruitment effort had taken place in recent weeks, including appointments for interim Head of SEND, Head of Commissioning, Head of Early Years, and a potential offer for the Principal Improvement Advisor post. He noted that these additions were expected to improve service responsiveness. Regarding the Educational Psychology Service, although a Principal and Senior Educational Psychologist had been appointed, many vacancies remained and would continue to be managed.

Neil Goddard confirmed that the LA's budget planning for the next financial year was underway and updates would be provided to the Forum on next year's budget along with necessary actions that needed to be taken. Like all LAs, West Berkshire Council was having to manage significant budget pressure and Education Services had a part to play in addressing these.

Jacquie Davies raised a comment regarding the home to school transport budget. She expressed interest in being involved in any analysis of the underspend, citing her concerns about the impact of transport funding on children's education. Neil Goddard commented that it was important to note the substantial increase in the home to school transport budget compared to the previous year, alongside efforts to improve contract efficiency. He highlighted the importance of using the budget to support early help and intervention, ensuring that spending was targeted and effective. Neil Goddard welcomed

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Jackie Davies' input and stated that a clearer picture would emerge in two to three months once the September intake had been fully processed.

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

### 9 **DSG Monitoring 2025/26 - Quarter 2 (Lisa Potts/Neil Goddard)**

Lisa Potts introduced the report (Agenda Item 10) noting that it was part of the regular quarterly reporting cycle. She summarised that the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) had carried forward a deficit of £16.1m and the current forecast projected an overspend of £30.2m by the end of the financial year. While this was a significant figure, Lisa Potts explained that it aligned with long-term projections, particularly in relation to pressures on the High Needs Block (HNB).

Lisa Potts highlighted several key changes, including updated grant allocations from the Department for Education (DfE). The Early Years Block had seen a substantial increase in funding due to the introduction of new funding streams for children aged nine months to two years, and for two-year-olds of working parents. As a result, the grant had risen from approximately £12 million to approximately £28 million. Lisa Potts explained that the Local Authority (LA) was permitted to retain four percent of this total to support centrally managed costs. It was anticipated that at least £300k could be used to reduce the overall deficit, with potential for more once trends for new funding streams were clearer.

Lisa Potts also reported a large change in the HNB due to Brookfields School's academisation. When the budget was originally set, Brookfields had been included in the LA's funding allocation. However, following the academisation, place funding went directly to the school from the DfE resulting in a £2 million adjustment in the LA's allocation. It was clarified that top-up funding would still be managed through the LA's budget.

Keith Harvey asked whether the funding now going directly to Brookfields followed the same formula previously used by the LA. Lisa Potts confirmed that the school received £10,000 per confirmed place directly from the DfE. She added that top-up funding would continue to be provided by the LA.

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

### 10 **Deficit Schools (Lisa Potts)**

Lisa Potts introduced the report (Agenda Item 11), which provided details of the schools in deficit in 2025/26 and information on lessons learnt from monitoring schools in deficit. She reported that ten schools had been granted licensed deficits, with three additional submissions pending review. The total deficit across the ten licensed schools amounted to £945,900, as detailed in Table 4.3 of the report. Lisa explained that the table also outlined the recovery plans for each school and the rationale behind the licensing decisions.

Underlying causes of these deficits were largely consistent with previous years, including falling pupil numbers, increased support needs for high-needs pupils, rising costs, and reduced income. Lisa Potts expressed concern that more schools were now entering deficit positions, reflecting broader systemic pressures.

Reverend Mark Bennet raised concerns about the pressures faced by school business managers, noting that whilst their expertise contributed to better financial outcomes, recruitment was challenging and the role often carried disproportionate responsibility. He also highlighted the operational considerations for schools of merging year groups and suggested that sharing best practice could help schools manage such changes more

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effectively. Lisa Potts acknowledged the challenges raised and explained that while the LA's Schools' Accountancy Team provided support for schools, it was not possible to know the finer detail of each school's budget. Lisa Potts agreed that cultural change was needed to ensure governors and leadership teams took more ownership and noted that many business managers did seek advice from the LA on this.

Neil Goddard added that the business manager role was highly skilled and vital to school outcomes. He mentioned national support networks and emphasised the need for innovative thinking across schools. He also updated the Forum on the LA's strategic response to falling pupil numbers, noting that a consultation on managing surplus places would be launched after half term. It was noted that the schools struggling with pupil numbers were not entirely the same as those struggling with financial issues, which was often due to a much broader set of issues. He hoped to bring an update on this back to the next Forum meeting in December, so that it could form part of the consultation process.

Reverend Bennet suggested that financial communications should be directed to governors and senior leaders as well as business managers, to ensure shared responsibility. Neil Goddard agreed and confirmed this was one of the areas of communication the LA needed to review.

Paul Davey called for a clear, overarching education strategy for West Berkshire, developed collaboratively with schools and Forum members. Neil Goddard noted and agreed with the points raised. Whilst individual strategies existed there was not a broader children's strategy. He was confident that this area would progress, supported by the recent recruitment. It was confirmed that Councillors would be briefed on school place planning and that it was not something that could be done without there being impact in some areas, and these would need to be managed as carefully as possible. Neil Goddard reiterated the importance of consultation and acknowledged the political dimensions of the issue. Paul Davey emphasised the value of the Forum as a powerful resource and urged greater involvement in strategic planning.

Michelle Harrison raised concerns about support for deficit schools following the retirement of a key staff member. Lisa Potts confirmed that rather than appointing a direct replacement the plan was to train additional team members to provide support to deficit schools, recognising the growing number and scale of deficits.

**RESOLVED** that 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 1<sup>st</sup> December 2025 at 5pm on Zoom.

*(The meeting commenced at 5.00 pm and closed at 5.53 pm)*

**CHAIR** .....

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