

# DRAFT

Note: These Minutes will remain DRAFT until approved at the next meeting of the Committee

## SCHOOLS FORUM

### MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON MONDAY 16 JUNE 2025

**Schools' Forum Members Present:** 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 (Executive Portfolio Holder: Children and Family Services), Paul Davey (Maintained Primary School Governor), Jacquie Davies (Pupil Referral Unit Headteacher), Mel Godliman (Early Years PVI Provider), Richard Hand (Trade Union), Keith Harvey ((Vice-Chair) Maintained Primary School Headteacher), Jon Hewitt (Maintained Special School Headteacher), Trevor Keable (Academy School Governor), Jo MacArthur (Maintained Primary Headteacher), Gary Norman (Academy School Governor), Chris Prosser (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:** Neil Goddard (Service Director Education and SEND), Elizabeth Griffiths (Interim Financial Consultant Lead for Management Accounting), Claire Denner (Senior Accountant), Rose Carberry (Principal Adviser for School Improvement) and Jessica Bailiss (Democratic Services Officer)

**Apologies for inability to attend the meeting:** AnnMarie Dodds (Executive Director - Children Services), Jo Lagares (Maintained Primary School Headteacher), David Fitter (Academy School Headteacher), Julie Lewry (Academy School Headteacher) and Charlotte Wilson (Academy School Headteacher)

## PART I

### 1 Election of Chair and Vice-Chair 2025/26

Neil Goddard invited the Schools' Forum to nominate and vote on the position of Chair for the coming year.

**RESOLVED that** Graham Spellman would continue as Chair of the Schools' Forum for the 2025/26 financial year.

Graham Spellman invited the Schools' Forum to nominate and vote on the position of Vice-Chair for the coming year.

**RESOLVED that** Keith Harvey would continue as Vice-Chair of the Schools' Forum for the 2025/26 financial year.

### 2 Minutes of previous meeting dated 20th January 2025

The minutes of the meeting held on 20<sup>th</sup> January 2025 were approved.

### 3 Actions arising from previous meetings

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

### 4 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest received.

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### 5 Membership

Jess Bailiss advised that the post-16 provider representative position was currently vacant following the departure of Jamie Morton from Newbury College. She had contacted the new finance director about joining the forum and hoped the position would be filled shortly.

### 6 Schools' Forum Work Programme 2025/26 (Jess Bailiss)

The Chair stated that following a period of change within the Local Authority (LA) and schools, it was a good opportunity to review the Schools' Forum work programme, terms of reference, number of meetings and reporting deadlines. It was proposed that a working group be established to review the terms of reference and work programme for presentation at the July meeting of the Schools' Forum. Trevor Keable and Keith Harvey volunteered to join the group.

Neil Goddard suggested including a review of the Heads Funding Group's (HFG) role in this work.

Trevor Keable suggested including Jess Bailiss in the working group. Neil Goddard confirmed Jess's support and proposed including a local authority finance representative. Elizabeth Griffiths highlighted resource constraints in the finance team at the current time, which might impact its ability to support the working group.

Edwin Towill requested that the group consider the respective roles of representatives from maintained schools and academies. He was aware that some agenda items only applied to maintained schools and therefore it would be helpful if consideration could be given to whether all members needed to be present for particular agenda items at Schools' Forum meetings.

Trevor Keable confirmed that he was from a single academy trust (SAT), which was a secondary school and therefore he would represent both academy schools and secondary schools on the working group.

Neil Goddard proposed emailing all forum members to ensure those that had not been able to make the Forum meeting had the opportunity to form part of the working group.

The Chair proposed that a vote on the work programme be postponed until the July meeting, pending the outcome of the working group's review.

#### **RESOLVED that**

- A working group be set up to review the work programme, terms of reference, number of meetings and reporting deadlines for both the HFG and Schools' Forum (as detailed above). The outcome of this work would be brought to the next meeting of the Schools' Forum on 14th July 2025.
- An email would be sent out to all Forum Members to ensure those that were not present were given the opportunity to join the working group.

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

Elizabeth Griffiths introduced the report (Agenda Item 8), which sought approval of the proposed consultation on the updated Scheme for Financing Schools (SFS). It was proposed that the updated SFS go out to consultation with schools from 17<sup>th</sup> to 26<sup>th</sup> June 2025 and return to the next Schools' Forum in July for approval.

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Elizabeth Griffiths drew attention to changes to the SFS detailed in Appendix B to the report on page 55 of the pack. It was proposed that the consultation document be amended to state that responses should be sent to Claire Denner in Lisa Potts absence.

The Chair drew the Forum's attention to the recommendation in section 2.1 of the report, The recommendation was proposed and seconded by maintained school members and at the vote the motion was carried.

**RESOLVED that** the Schools' Forum approved that the proposed SFS go out to consultation with all schools from 17<sup>th</sup> June to 26<sup>th</sup> June 2025, with adoption of the updated SFS following Schools' Forum approval at the next meeting in July.

### 8 **DSG Outturn 2024/25 (Elizabeth Griffiths)**

Elizabeth Griffiths introduced the report (Agenda Item 9), which sought to inform the Forum on the outturn of the services funded by the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG), highlighting any under or over spends, and to highlight the cumulative deficit at 31st March 2025 of £16.13m, projected to rise to £31-£37m in March 2026.

Elizabeth Griffiths raised that the key concern was the rate at which the overspend was rising, which was due to increasing pressure on the High Needs Block (HNB). There was currently a statutory override in place until March 2026 however, interest was having to be paid (currently at around £1.5m per annum), which was creating a revenue pressure on the Local Authority (LA). There was no clear direction from Government regarding what would happen to balances once the statutory override was removed in March 2026.

Keith Harvey said that he had written to his MP about the deficit, particularly within the high needs budget, asking for a response from the Secretary of State for Education. He would share the reply when he received it.

Trevor Keable enquired about the impact of the deficit on the overall education budget for West Berkshire. Elizabeth Griffiths reported that they would not be looking to decrease the education budget by £1.5m to compensate the interest being paid however, it was an overall pressure to West Berkshire. Many would be aware that West Berkshire Council had needed to seek exceptional financial support, and this was because the LA no longer had enough funding to cover its expenditure.

Reverend Mark Bennet raised concerns about the Schools' Forum's lack of visibility over the cost of financing the deficit that had been accumulating. He asked what the rationale had been for treating the interest in this way and he queried the amount of interest that had already needed to be covered by other budgets to support the deficit. Elizabeth Griffiths explained that LAs had to balance their overall position, and it was not always possible to attribute costs directly because there was not always capacity to do this. It had been difficult for LAs due to rising social care costs and this inevitably put pressure on other areas. The LA was constantly trying to navigate its way through a difficult situation and it had gone back out to services in the current year asking for further savings.

Reverend Mark Bennet commented that in a sense the Forum had been accountable for the deficit but not for the cost of financing it and he did not feel that this was the right approach.

Councillor Heather Codling agreed with Elizabeth Griffiths' comments and that it was largely a juggling act. Not having the funding was preventing the LA from doing other things. Councillor Codling acknowledged the financial challenges facing LAs and emphasised that it was a national issue. Councillor Codling commended the work undertaken by Officers to keep budgets down.

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Neil Goddard stated that the education department formed part of the overall Council, and savings were expected like they were for other areas of the LA, which had an impact. He noted that the Government's statement on this was that they would produce a fully costed, but not necessarily funded, special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) plan in the near future. It was clear that the system was not currently working, and he highlighted that other LAs in neighbouring areas had much higher deficits than West Berkshire. Scrutiny of what was spent against the HNB, particularly having been through Delivering Better Value, continued to be very high to ensure spending was happening in the right way. The vast majority of the HNB budget went to schools so the pressure to create savings in this area would lead to schools being given less money for SEND. He was aware schools were already struggling to balance budgets so having less money for SEND would make this even more difficult. The LA was trying to be as creative as it could be across the LA's budget as a whole however, it was a national issue. The statement from Government might confirm continuation of the statutory override but at least this would provide more certainty that the situation currently, where S151 Officers were having to manage an unreasonable level of risk.

Trevor Keable asked about the legal responsibility of the Schools' Forum on education budgets. Neil Goddard explained that this could form part of the review of the Forum's terms of reference. The Schools' Forum's role has changed significantly, with limited flexibility due to the national funding formula. The HNB was the responsibility of the LA and it was required to consult with the Schools' Forum and take views. The Forum could scrutinise the local authority and make comments regarding how the HNB was used and they were fortunate to have Councillor Codling present at Forum meetings, who was able to communicate and reflect on discussions with the Executive. The aim was to manage all blocks as effectively as possible. Neil Goddard highlighted that the central schools services block was being reduced year on year, so the pressure was increasing in this area too. Neil Goddard commented that the terms of reference for the Forum needed to clearly set out its statutory decision making responsibilities, areas of statutory consultation and areas of joint working across the broader area.

Richard Hand stated that he had read that one option the Government might consider was writing off a portion of the debt and the interest. He was not sure how credible this was due to the size of the situation. Neil Goddard felt that it would be impossible for the Government to write off the debt without some sort of contribution or demonstration of commitment to savings. It was possible the Government might offer a contribution linked to local government reorganisation however, this was not yet confirmed. Elizabeth Griffiths agreed and thought it would be very difficult for the Government to write off the debt. Neil Goddard added that the Government could allow LAs to charge the interest to the DSG itself. This would cause the deficit to increase more quickly however, would take the pressure off LAs. He was not sure this was a route the Government would choose but it could not be discounted. More certainly was need.

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

### 9 **School Balances 2024/25 (Elizabeth Griffiths)**

Elizabeth Griffiths introduced the report (Agenda Item 10), which set out for information purposes the year end balances for all maintained schools, highlighting those schools with a deficit or significant surplus.

Elizabeth Griffiths drew attention to Table 4 on page 71, which listed schools with significant surpluses (balances exceeding 10 per cent of their funding), and noted that Compton had since been removed from the list due to errors in their submission. iCollege had also been removed from the list. The remaining schools on the list had been

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contacted and asked to submit information for review, which would be reviewed by the Heads Funding Group at their next meeting in July.

Reverend Mark Bennet identified inconsistencies in the table in Appendix A on page 72, noting that the final column appeared to show a two-year difference rather than one. He asked about the current state of school budgets and whether schools were planning deficits, given pressures from unfunded pay increases. Elizabeth Griffiths confirmed she would check the numbers in the table in Appendix A.

Regarding the second part of Reverend Bennet's question regarding deficits, Neil Goddard explained that the analysis of maintained school budgets was still ongoing. There were three options when a school submitted its budget to the LA – it could be accepted; accepted with caveats; or rejected. In a meeting the previous week, seven school budgets had been reviewed, and all had been rejected due to deficits not returning to a balanced position. Neil Goddard anticipated a significant increase in the number of schools in deficit compared to the previous year.

Neil Goddard explained that the Forum had agreed a surpluses policy including possible clawback and this needed to be conducted in a timely fashion. A decision on this would be required at the next round of meetings in July to ensure schools were clear in terms of any clawback. Schools would be met with individually to look at their three year budget plan, and a clawback proposal that was in line with the agreed policy would be brought back to the Forum for decision. Neil Goddard added that school budgets had been received in May and the process of reviewing them took some time. He reiterated that more schools were expected to go into deficit due to falling pupil numbers, SEND costs, and unfunded pay rises.

Reverend Bennett asked if there was sufficient capacity to support schools in managing deficits. Neil Goddard reported that support was provided to schools through colleagues in finance. General support was provided through the licensing of deficits, which was essentially an overdraft and provided a school with time to turn a situation around and move back into a surplus position. Historically this had been provided over three years, but now potentially over five or seven years, depending on the risk analysis and level of confidence of turnaround. Neil Goddard acknowledged the increasingly difficult decisions being asked of governors and schools, and the possibility that some schools might not be able to bring their budgets back into balance. Elizabeth Griffiths agreed with these comments. There was staff within the finance team that supported schools. Regarding the Forum's visibility of the matter, it was noted that there was a standing item on each agenda, which looked at schools in deficit and the next report was due to be brought to the HFG and Forum in July.

Neil Goddard commented that he often said that the role of governors was to provide the best education within the resources available. This was a delegated responsibility however, it was noted this was getting increasingly difficult. If a school was not able or willing to set a balanced budget then one tool available was to remove delegation from the school and the LA took control of managing the school's budget. This was not a preferred route as it could be very disruptive but was something that formed part of the Schools' Forum's responsibilities and would require its sign off. He commented that this was not a position anyone wanted to be in, and the main aim was to support schools to reach a sustainable and resilient position with their budgets.

Jo MacArthur commented that she did not disagree with comments about the importance of school governors who played an exceptionally important role particularly regarding finances however, she stressed how difficult it was to recruit governors and that some schools were carrying vacancies.

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Chris Prosser expressed concern about clawing back surpluses from schools that were demonstrating sustainability, arguing that it created more work for both schools and stretched finance teams. It was not massive amounts of money involved, and he suggested that there should be common sense with regards to the claw back when there were bigger priorities that required focus. Neil Goddard acknowledged the point particularly when schools were being asked to budget responsibility. He confirmed that the clawback policy would be discussed at the next meeting and there would be an opportunity to discuss its impact in the broader context of budgets.

### **RESOLVED that:**

- Elizabeth Griffiths would check the numbers under the table in Appendix A in accordance with comments from Reverend Mark Bennet.
- The Forum noted the report and that a further report would be brought back to the meeting in July for decision regarding potential clawback.

### **10 Trade Union Facilities Time - Annual Report for 2024/25 (Richard Hand)**

Richard Hand introduced the report (Agenda Item 11), which aimed to inform members about the activities of the teaching trade unions for 2024/25.

Richard Hand reported that the overall picture was slightly more positive than the previous year, with possible strike action being averted. He hoped that industrial action was not something that would come to pass.

The report highlighted improvements in teacher recruitment however it was important not be complacent in this area.

Richard Hand flagged issues around child poverty because members were increasingly seeing the impacts of this in schools. Schools were having to provide so much more care than they had historically. This was placing pressure on schools.

Richard Hand urged schools to have robust stress management policies and noted the importance of flexible working in attracting and retaining staff.

Richard Hand reported that Private Eye had recently covered SEND, which signified what a major issue it had become. It was being far more widely reported on in the media. He felt that this was a good thing as it served to cast a light on the matter.

Richard Hand raised concerns about the increase in malicious and vexatious complaints, which placed particular stress on headteachers and he stressed the need for schools to have robust policies in place to address these issues. Grievances were an area that was often raised, and Richard Hand reported that they were quite good with dealing with these so that did not escalate.

Rose Carberry endorsed Richard Hand's comments regarding malicious and vexatious complaints, highlighting the rise in AI-generated complaints and the importance of schools having a robust vexatious complainant policy. Training on this area had been provided and would be run again either during the summer or into the autumn term. Schools were urged to reach out to the school improvement team who could provide support in terms of the wellbeing of headteachers and advice to boards of governors.

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

### **11 Contracts Forward Plan**

**RESOLVED that** the Schools' Forum noted the contracts forward plan.

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### 12 Date of the next meeting

The next meeting of the Schools' Forum was scheduled for Monday 14 July at 5pm. The Forum discussed whether future meetings should be in person or virtual, with a range of views expressed. Geographical dispersion was noted as a reason for continuing with virtual meetings however, it was expressed that face to face meetings generated better discussion. A number of Forum Members expressed that they preferred face-to-face meetings however, the challenges around attendance were recognised.

It was suggested that one option would be to have one or two in-person meetings per year. It was also suggested that a requirement for membership, that could be added to the Forum's Constitution, was to include attending one face to face meeting per year. This could be considered by the working group as part of the review.

Exploring alternative locations, hybrid meetings and different more convenient meeting times was also suggested.

Regarding suggestions about hybrid meetings, Edwin Towill referred to his earlier comment about the relevance of agenda items to different members. He felt it would be very difficult to get maintained or academy school members to attend a series of meetings in person if the agenda was only partly relevant to them. He felt that this was where hybrid meetings would work better as representatives could attend for the items they were required for.

**RESOLVED that** it was agreed that the July meeting would take place virtually, with the format of future meetings to be considered as part of the working group's review (detailed in discussions under agenda item seven).

*(The meeting commenced at 5.00 pm and closed at 6.21 pm)*

**CHAIR** .....

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