

# DRAFT

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

## HEADS FUNDING GROUP

### MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON WEDNESDAY 13 MAY 2026

**HFG Members Present:** Kavash Bamfield, Catherine Bernie, Nicolle Browning, Jacquie Davies, David Fitter, Michelle Harrison, Keith Harvey, Jon Hewitt, Jo Lagares, Jo MacArthur, Chris Prosser, Chloe Summerville and Edwin Towill

**Also Present:** Edith Cheng (Finance Manager), Emma Ferrey (Interim Service Manager of SEN), Kirstie Hanson (Head of Early Years), Ashley Milum (Service Director for Education and SEND), Joshua Ngeresa (Finance Manager), Hine Thompson (Senior Finance Business Partner), Tony Parker (Service Lead for Children's Commissioning), Ash Hussain (Senior Commissioner SEND and Joint Commissioning) and Jessica Bailiss (Democratic Services Officer)

**Apologies for inability to attend the meeting:** AnnMarie Dodds (Executive Director - People), Crystal Elkabbas (Principal Educational Psychologist & SEMH Service Manager), Julie Lewry, David Ramsden and Charlotte Wilson

#### PART I

##### 1 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting were agreed as a true and accurate record.

##### 2 SEND Commissioning and Efficiency Planning

Tony Parker introduced the item, explaining that Children's Commissioning in West Berkshire was a newly established service, with Ash Hussain having recently been appointed as SEND Joint Commissioner. A presentation was provided which outlined the establishment of the Children's Commissioning Team, its role in Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and wider Children's Services, current priorities, and future plans to strengthen joint working, improve value for money and develop local provision in line with national expectations.

The purpose of the presentation was also to seek feedback from schools on how the commissioning service could work more effectively with them. The HFG was invited to consider how feedback on commissioned services could be gathered and how schools could contribute to future commissioning decisions.

The HFG acknowledged the importance of the new commissioning function in improving quality assurance and ensuring services met the needs of children and young people. It was noted that the development of the service was at an early stage and would continue to be brought back to the HFG for further discussion.

**RESOLVED** that the update on commissioning arrangements was noted.

##### 3 EHCP Timeliness

Emma Ferrey introduced the report, which outlined the current position in relation to EHCP timeliness. The HFG noted that the key performance indicator around timeliness for completing EHCPs had significantly reduced between 2024 and 2025, driven by increasing demand and capacity pressures within the SEN Assessment Team, which had

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not expanded in line with rising demand. It was reported that demand had continued to increase following the publication of the Government's White Paper in February 2026 and that this was a situation that required ongoing monitoring. It was noted that there had been a significant increase in assessment requests from parents.

Following discussion at the previous meeting and subsequent analysis, it was considered that reduced timeliness was attributable to a combination of factors which were set out in section 4.6 onwards of the report.

The HFG discussed the specific factors contributing to demand and system pressures. It was noted that further work was planned to support schools and strengthen a system wide approach to inclusion.

It was noted that some queries raised by members, including in relation to the use of HIVE Educational Psychologist reports in assessment reports and consultation processes with schools for EHCP placements, would be taken forward for further review.

The HFG noted that information on the average length of time to complete an EHCP request would be provided following this meeting.

### **RESOLVED that:**

- The report was noted.
- Information on average EHCP processing times would be provided following the meeting. (*post-minute note: this information is included in the EHCP Timeliness Report for the Forum on 15 June.*)

## **4 School Balances 2025/26**

Edith Cheng introduced the report, which outlined the position of maintained school balances at the end of the 2025/26 financial year. The HFG noted that overall balances had reduced compared to the previous year, reflecting ongoing financial pressures across schools, particularly within the primary sector.

It was reported that the reduction in balances was driven by a combination of falling pupil numbers, sustained staffing costs and increasing SEND pressures. The HFG noted that while overall balances were declining, a small number of schools continued to hold surplus balances above the agreed threshold and would be required to submit balance statements for further review.

The HFG discussed the financial pressures facing schools, particularly in relation to the sustainability of smaller schools, and noted this as a key area of focus going forward.

**RESOLVED that** the report was noted.

## **5 Scheme for Financing Schools Consultation 2026/27**

Edith Cheng introduced the report, which provided information on the updated Scheme for Financing Schools (SFS) and recommended that it should go out for consultation with schools from 15<sup>th</sup> until 25<sup>th</sup> June 2026.

The HFG noted that the scheme set out the financial relationship between the Local Authority and maintained schools. It was reported that no major changes had been suggested by the Department for Education and that the updates proposed related to local practice, including additional clarity around financial monitoring and deficit recovery arrangements. The HFG noted that the proposals would be subject to consultation with maintained schools ahead of final approval by Schools' Forum in July.

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**RESOLVED** that the HFG supported the recommendation set out in the report, which would go forward to the Schools' Forum on 15<sup>th</sup> June for consideration and decision.

### 6 **Surplus Balances and School Balance Statements**

Edith Cheng introduced the report, which outlined the position regarding surplus balances held by schools and the process for reviewing balances above the agreed threshold. It was noted that the report would go to the Schools' Forum in July for decision.

Five schools had been identified as having a balance greater than 10 percent of their budget share and would be asked to provide a statement explaining how the balance was committed.

The HFG sought clarification on the process for reviewing surplus balances, noting that it had been contentious in the past. It was clarified that the agreed approach was for Officers to review the balance statements and present a report to the Schools' Forum, enabling a decision to be made on whether to claw back or not. Edith Cheng confirmed that a report could be prepared in line with this approach and shared with the HFG for comment in advance of the Schools' Forum meeting.

**RESOLVED** that a report setting out recommendations on surplus balances to be circulated to the HFG for comment in advance of it going forward to the Schools' Forum in July.

### 7 **Deficit Schools**

Edith Cheng introduced the report, which outlined the position regarding schools in deficit. The HFG noted that both the number of schools in deficit and the overall level of deficit had increased compared to the previous financial year.

It was reported that a number of schools had set planned deficit budgets, with a small number also ending the year in unplanned deficit. The main drivers of deficits were noted as falling pupil numbers, rising staffing costs and increasing SEND pressures.

The HFG discussed the position of schools in long-term deficit, noting that some schools had been in deficit for a number of years and that there was a need for a consistent approach to supporting schools alongside appropriate challenge. It was noted that further work was underway to strengthen this approach and provide greater clarity for schools.

**RESOLVED** that the report was noted.

### 8 **Any Other Business**

The HFG noted an update regarding training for Schools' Forum members. It was reported that an induction-style approach was being considered, to allow time to identify key areas for development. The induction training would be offered to new members and could also be shared with existing members to support their understanding. Feedback on the proposed approach was welcomed. It was noted that further work would be undertaken to develop this approach.

### 9 **Date of the next Heads Funding Group meeting**

The next meeting would take place at 3.30pm on Tuesday 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2026.

*(The meeting commenced at 3.30pm and closed at 4.45pm)*