

Meeting title:	Schools Forum Meeting	
Date/time	0.5 February 2025, 17.30-19.00	
Members:	<u>School Members</u> Kevin Reynolds (Maintained Pri Headteacher rep) Robin Warren (Maintained Pri Headteacher rep) Sian Davies (Maintained Pri Headteacher rep) Lisa Neidich (Maintained Pri Governor rep) Sam Billington (Maintained Pri Governor rep) Chris Howard (Maintained Pri Governor rep; Chair) Andy English (Maintained Sec Headteacher rep) Farzana Chowdhury (Nursery School Headteacher rep) Richard Brown (PRU rep, Headteacher)	<u>Academy Members</u> Phoebe Clapham (Governor rep) <u>Alternative Provision</u> Anna Cain (Special Academy rep) <u>Special School Members</u> Jo Clare (Special School rep) Kevin McDonnell (Special School Headteacher rep) <u>Non School Members</u> David Davies (Staff rep)
Additional attendees:	Cllr Anntoinette Bramble, Cabinet member for Education, Young People & Children Social Care Cllr Caroline Woodley, Cabinet member for Families, Early Years & Play Jacquie Burke (Group Director, Children & Education) Paul Senior (Interim DoE & Inclusion, Hackney Education) Joe Wilson (AD Send and Inclusion) Jason Marantz (AD School Standards & Improvement) Donna Thomas (AD Early years, Early Help and Well-being) Nick Wilson (Head of SEND Delivering Better Value Programme) Vernon Stowbridge (Interim Director of Finance (C&Ed), Hackney Council) Sajeed Patni (Interim Head of Finance, Children & Education) Ophelia Carter (Head of Schools Finance) David Court (Interim AD School Estate Strategy) Kathryn Lloyd (Interim Head of Education Operations, Hackney Education) Ann Yiadom (Clerk to the Forum) Chris Scott (Group Accountant) Suhail Kadir (Finance Manager - Schools) Sandra Hall (attending obo David Davies)	
Apologies:	Kevin Reynolds (Maintained Pri Headteacher rep); Sian Davies (Maintained Pri Headteacher rep); David Davies (Staff rep)	
Members Absent:		

	Item
1.	Welcome and introduction <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Members were welcomed and introductions made
2.	2.1. 2.1. Minutes of the last meeting held 04 December 2024 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Minutes approved 2.2. Action log <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reviewed

2.3. Matters arising

2.3.1 Schools in Financial Difficulty Grant Schools Forum Report - Schools in Financial Difficulty Grant (1

Sajeed Patni noted that a report on schools in Financial Difficulty Grant was previously brought to the forum, but further details were requested on how the criteria was applied. From Section 5 onwards, the report outlines the deep dive conducted into the application of the criteria for the grant, which totaled approximately £360k. Just under £50k was awarded in support. Section 6 highlights key learning points.

As part of the deep dive analysis, it was noted that four schools that closed in August 2024 were not considered for the grant, as they were in the process of closing. A school was classified as having a falling roll if the total number of children on roll from Reception to Year 6 at the October 2023 census had decreased by 5% or more. Fifteen schools or federations fell into this category; however, they were not considered to be in financial difficulty.

Three schools or federations received funding from other sources, such as the redundancy panel process or contingency funding, which helped address their deficits.

Key lessons learned: While this grant will not be repeated in the foreseeable future, if a similar grant is introduced by the DfE, the funding amount awarded to each school should be sufficient to make a material impact. A lower amount—around £30k—could have supported more schools (12 in total), albeit to a lesser extent. Consideration was also given to allocating funds on a per-pupil basis, which would have distributed the money more thinly but may have been seen as a fairer method.

In future, grants will not be restricted to primary schools but will also include secondary schools, as they are also facing significant financial challenges.

Finally, it was acknowledged that consulting the Schools Forum would have ensured a more transparent and consultative approach. However, due to time constraints, this was not possible. Moving forward, at the very least, the chair of the Schools Forum or a select group of volunteer members will be consulted.

Member comment: It is appreciated that lessons have been learned and that there is the commitment to consult the Schools Forum on methodology if a similar programme is introduced in the future. However, the LA is urged to pay greater attention to proportionality in the criteria. One of the key issues was the vast differences in the size and trend of deficits among the schools that received grants. The disparity was so significant that, in some cases, grant allocation did not seem justified.



Sajeed acknowledged that this was a fair point.

Member comment: Why were Maintained Nursery Schools not considered for the grant?

Sajeed explained that, at the time, the decision was made based on the assessment that they were not in an overall financial position that warranted inclusion.

Member comment: Regarding potential workarounds, particularly in relation to indicative numbers for Reception places, it is noted that some schools with increasing or high deficits are still oversubscribed for their PAN and do not appear to be losing pupils, yet their deficits continue to grow. Meanwhile, some schools that have successfully worked to reduce their deficits and move towards healthy budgets are now losing pupils. This raises questions as to the moral responsibility to address the situation where schools have been allowed to fall into deficit despite high demand, while others that have made financial adjustments now face low reception numbers, impacting the provision they can offer. Can this be looked into?

Jason Marantz confirmed that this issue is being examined and has been shared with the primary consultative and would also be shared with secondary heads. It is an important discussion, as school leaders and governors must manage budgets effectively. The Local Authority has both a responsibility to support schools and a duty to challenge financial practices where necessary. The priority of this is acknowledged and the questions raised are welcomed.

	<p>Member comment: It is clearly seen that where pupil numbers are falling, schools are actively trying to save money and improve their financial position. Meanwhile, other oversubscribed schools may appear more luxurious but have overspent.</p> <p>Terry Bryan responded that when reviewing these schools' spending patterns and financial history, it is evident that their deficits are not solely due to falling rolls. Benchmarking is being carried out, and a broader profile of school needs is being considered, including the impact of a high proportion of SEND pupils. It cannot simply be assumed that schools are not managing their finances properly, but acknowledged that the concerns raised were valid and are being closely examined. In addition, curriculum provision and affordability are being reviewed to identify areas for improvement.</p> <p>Terry, alongside Jason, an advisory teacher, and financial colleagues, are leading a deep dive into this issue. A report will be brought back to the Schools Forum to outline the Local Authority's approach to addressing these concerns.</p> <p>Action: A deep dive investigation led by Terry Bryan, Jason (advisory teacher), and financial colleagues to be conducted to gain a comprehensive understanding of school deficits.</p>
3.	<p>School Forum Membership  _ Report - School Forum Membership.docx.pdf</p> <p>The number of primary representatives and the number of academy representatives should be broadly proportionate. Following several academy conversions, the current ratio between academy and maintained school representatives is no longer aligned.</p> <p>Academy membership now represents a lower proportion of the total, which creates a conflict with policies. Membership is not intended to be broken down by headteachers and governors separately either. The proposal is to increase the number of academy seats to 7 and remove the division, allowing academy members to nominate their representatives as they see fit.</p> <p>The Chair inquired about the last review of membership and whether a regular review should be conducted in line with academy conversions.</p> <p>Chris responded that this could be done annually when recalculating the budget, as it would be a straightforward exercise to review the numbers and make any necessary adjustments.</p> <p>The Chair questioned whether removing the division would still allow for adequate representation.</p> <p>Chris explained that the regulations do not specify a required breakdown for academy representatives. However, it remains their entitlement to nominate representatives of their choice.</p> <p>Decision: Six members agreed to the proposal; this constitutes the majority in favor.</p> <p>Action: The clerk to update the membership list, agendas, and minutes, and notify Hackney academies of the vacancies, inviting expressions of interest.</p>
4.	<p>Administration arrangements for allocation of Early Years Funding 2025-26  Administration of Early Years Block Budget 2025_26.docx.pdf</p> <p>Chris Scott presented the report outlining the breakdown of the £52.5m Early Years grant and sought the Schools Forum's endorsement to proceed.</p> <p>One key point highlighted was the pass-through rate, which refers to the proportion of the overall grant passed directly to providers as cash. Historically, this rate was 95%, but in recent years, the limit on how much the central</p>

budget could be top-sliced was reduced from 5% to 4%. Additionally, the category for two-year-old funding has changed; previously referred to as "deprivation," it has now been reclassified as "additional support," with a lower top-slice. Despite this, the overall division of the Early Years block remains the same, with the only change being a slightly higher pass-through rate.

The second table in the report shows an underlying increase in funding rates, with healthy increases across most categories, except for the Early Years Pupil Premium, which has seen a significant rise. It is hoped that this increase will encourage greater uptake among Private, Voluntary, and Independent (PVI) providers, as data suggests schools currently claim a larger proportion of this funding compared to PVIs.

Another notable change relates to the data source used for funding calculations. Previously, the spring dataset was used, and funding rates had to be published by the end of March. However, due to regulatory changes, the deadline has moved to the end of February. Anticipating this, a consultation took place last term regarding the use of the autumn dataset instead of the spring dataset.

The final section of the report concerns the central budget, which relates to the 3-4% top-slice and details the functions and services funded through this amount. The proposal maintains continuity in the funding approach. A key benefit of this arrangement is that as the grant size increases, the LA top-slices a smaller proportion, leading to higher funding rates for providers. Additionally, individual funding rates are expected to be published by the end of February, which is expected to be well received by providers.

Member comment: It is encouraging to see that the earlier publication of funding rates has been agreed upon, as this will help providers set their budgets effectively. How does this correlate with the working families payment, and are the figures for those funded places included in the published rates?

Chris explained that the new entitlement for working families, covering children aged 9 months and 1 year, will be funded at a standard rate, published alongside the 3- and 4-year-old rates. For 2-year-olds, there will be two separate funding rates: one for the additional support cohort and another for the working parent cohort. For children under 3, each group has a single funding rate, which reflects the grant rate minus the top-slice. These rates will be included in the final published funding breakdown.

Member comment: Will those funding rates be published for 2024/25?

Chris confirmed that the rates were published a year ago.


Member comment: Schools have not received any payments since the September intake.

Chris agreed to check with colleagues regarding the six-month delay in payments,

Action: Chris Scott to follow up on the six-month payment delay with the relevant colleagues

The Chair queried the £2 million being retained for essential functions and services, asking whether this proportion was appropriate or if more funding could be allocated directly to providers.

Chris responded that while reducing the top-slice was possible, it would require cuts to central staff supporting the sector, as staffing costs form the majority of this budget. He noted that the pass-through rate is set to increase to 96% next year, with a possibility of rising to 97% in the future. Nationally, when the new early years entitlement was introduced, it was assumed that central functions would not need to grow at the same rate as the Early Years block, which led to the decision to increase the pass-through rate. From September 2025, the new entitlement will increase to 30 hours per week, and another pass-through rate increase is likely, depending on government announcements.

	<p>The Chair commented that given an increase in the pass-through rate is likely, can efficiency savings be reviewed in advance to ensure the LA is prepared rather than reacting at the last minute?</p> <p>Chris acknowledged the point and agreed that this is something to consider over the next year. However, he also noted that the number of funded children is declining, which must be factored into any decisions on future funding structures.</p> <p>Decision: All in favor.</p>
5.	<p>Approval of Central Schools Services Block 2025/26  _ Report - Central School Services Block.docx.pdf</p> <p>Chris Scott presented this paper to provide an update on the central schools service block.</p> <p>Section 3 compares the current situation with previous years. The block consists of a historic commitments element, which is being reduced by 20% in line with government policy as it is gradually phased out. There is also an increase in the ongoing responsibility element within the per-pupil rate, despite a reduction of over 700 pupils.</p> <p>The report outlines a small decrease in the size of the block, and it includes a table showing how the money is spent, which has remained unchanged in recent years. Although the council has more funds available that could be eligible for this block, the spending aligns with how the grant has been used in the past.</p>
6.	<p>Raising Achievement in Primary Schools: interventions for under-achieving groups 2023/24</p> <p>Patrick Alexander explained that the funding is primarily focused on improving the educational outcomes of Black Caribbean, Turkish Kurdish, and Turkish Cypriot pupils in Hackney. A breakdown of each intervention, including percentage uplifts, was reviewed, showing strong effects in most cases. However, it is important to acknowledge both successful outcomes and the limitations of the fund in fully addressing all challenges.</p> <p>Some variations in impact were noted, with certain interventions showing significant positive outcomes. These findings will inform current strategic planning, supported by borough-wide research conducted to align with the LA's efforts.</p> <p>Chair commented that given the breadth of data and the questions raised, this should be brought back once a strategy has been developed. A key focus should be on Black Caribbean heritage students, who continue to perform less well compared to their peers. Consideration should be given to balancing targeted and universal support. While forum members are welcome to ask questions, the Chair suggested that questions be submitted to the clerk for a detailed response.</p> <p>Cllr Bramble commented that it is important to track not just the underperformance of young Black African and Caribbean students but also to monitor their predicted outcomes over time. Data from EYFS to Key Stages 2, 3, and 4 shows that their predicted grades decline over time. The issue is not only about initial underperformance but also about the widening gap as students progress. This should be explored further.</p> <p>Member comment: Having been a longstanding member, I've noticed that these same groups have been identified as underperforming over the years. Previously, the data was also separated by gender. Has anything changed? Additionally, is it useful to categorise pupils by ethnicity when looking at underperformance, or should interventions be targeted towards all underperforming students?</p> <p>Jason responded that last year, a decision was made to broaden the focus to include schools with large Irish Traveller heritage populations. However, it remains a valid point that these groups continue to underperform nationally. Unlike other groups, there is no national comparative data for Turkish and Kurdish students, which presents a challenge. Historically, funding was allocated to Teaching Assistants (TAs) working in schools. A proposal will be brought forward for Schools Forum input, which will also be shared with other relevant forums. While interventions have been implemented for Turkish, Kurdish, and Cypriot heritage children, there has not yet been a holistic approach to drive long-term change.</p>

	<p>In addition, anecdotal evidence from the Turkish, Kurdish, and Cypriot communities suggests that language barriers play a significant role in educational outcomes. The EAL (English as an Additional Language) offer is good, but a different approach may be needed to effectively support these students.</p> <p>Jacque Burke commented that she supports Jason's point about EAL challenges. Data collected across London boroughs suggests that families with EAL backgrounds or literacy challenges have an impact on exclusions and academic achievement. There is a need to strengthen educational support for these children and families.</p> <p>Chair agreed that literacy concerns can present a challenge, including Caribbean heritage students. This should be considered when developing a new EAL support package.</p> <p>Cllr Bramble commented that it is important to distinguish between EAL challenges and other barriers to achievement. While some children and parents struggle due to language barriers, there are British-born students for whom English is not an issue. Understanding these differences will help in developing more targeted interventions.</p> <p>Member comment: The proposal references SEMH (Social, Emotional, and Mental Health) needs, but none of the interventions appear to specifically target Black Caribbean pupils in this regard. The ARP (Additionally Resourced Provision) at Gainsborough disproportionately serves Black Caribbean heritage children, highlighting that this is about more than just academic support—it's also about whole-child and family support. There are issues around inclusivity across schools, and the data should be reviewed through an ethnicity lens to identify the barriers these students face.</p> <p>Chair suggested it would be useful to discuss ARP provision in the context of SEMH support and explore how it can better support Black Caribbean pupils where SEMH is a concern.</p> <p>Action: a discussion on ARP provision in the context of SEMH support, focusing on how it can better support Black Caribbean pupils where SEMH is a concern to be brought back to the forum</p> <p>Mayor Woodley commented that there is an ongoing concern about both overrepresentation and underrepresentation in SEND diagnoses. There are also cultural barriers to diagnosis, which must be considered. As the LA moves toward a more inclusive approach in mainstream settings and expands ARP provisions, it will be important to ensure consistency across schools, as there are current inconsistencies with different behaviour policies and approaches.</p> <p>Patrick echoed this concern, noting that moderation efforts are being explored. The analysis in the report implies a need for greater consistency in SEND support and intervention. The LA will provide an update to Schools Forum on how it is working to address disproportionality in this area, including collaborating with SEND teams to improve support structures.</p>
7.	Pupil Referral Unit Budget - deferred to the next meeting
8.	<p>School Estates Update</p> <p>Terry Bryan provided Schools Forum with an update on the current progress of the school organisation change proposals.</p> <p>In January 2025, Cabinet approved proposals affecting up to six primary schools in the borough. Two of these decisions involve the proposed closure of St Dominic's and St Mary's CofE in August 2025. Thomas Abney had two initial options: Closure; Closure and merger with Holmleigh, with Holmleigh relocating to the Thomas Abney site. The final proposal being put forward is the closure of Thomas Abney and a merger with Holmleigh.</p> <p>Oldhill will close and merge with Harrington Hill, which was the agreed proposal, while there are plans to establish a Special Resource Provision at Harrington Hill.</p> <p>Oldhill Children's Centre will remain on-site, with discussions ongoing to determine a new provider to run the provision in the interim.</p>

	<p>The report will be taken to Cabinet in April for final recommendations.</p> <p>Member comment: the reception admissions and the indicative numbers now being out, Thomas Abney and Holmleigh combined only have a 20 first-place preference, and Oldhill and Harrington Hill only have 16 first-place preferences. What is the risk to those families of those schools being closed as their children potentially attend schools at risk of closure?</p> <p>Terry explained that there were two things to consider. Firstly, those numbers would inevitably be affected whenever school organisation proposals were issued, as the uncertainty around a school's future impacts parental applications. However, now that there is clarity around the merger rather than outright closure, it is expected that the numbers will improve. At the time when parents were making applications, there were discussions about potential closure, which likely influenced their decisions, but with the proposal now finalised, this should bring more certainty.</p> <p>Secondly, Terry highlighted the importance of considering funding models, which are currently under review to ensure long-term sustainability rather than just short-term solutions. He explained that when looking at pupil projections, it was evident that the number of places being retained was necessary, and that is why the LA is proposing to keep them. It would not have been viable to close Thomas Abney outright, as that would have created a shortage of school places in the area. Instead, transferring those places to Holmleigh allows for the creation of two single 2FE schools, which is a more sustainable model than running two separate 1FE schools, which would not be viable.</p> <p>Terry acknowledged that while these changes aim to create a more efficient and sustainable school model, he could not guarantee that there would be no further closures in the future, nor that these schools would not be in scope for review again. The focus, however, is on establishing a model of sustainability alongside efficiency, ensuring that the borough has the right number of places available while being mindful that the future remains uncertain and all schools remain under review.</p> <p>Cllr Bramble added that when questions were raised about the sustainability of closing and/or merging schools, she was reassured that if decisions are made, there will be a clear plan of work to support the schools and ensure their sustainability over the next three to five years. A significant amount of planning, financial modelling, and support will go into ensuring that the school remains viable as a 1FE on a 2FE site. Additionally, she noted that if, over time, the local authority needs to provide additional school places, it will have the capacity to expand on some of the larger sites where necessary.</p>
9.	<p>Schools' Contingency Fund</p> <p>Jason Marantz provided an update on the contingency fund, a small pot of approximately £230K that Schools Forum makes available to the Director of Education to allocate to schools facing challenging situations. School Forum members were reminded that there had been previous discussions about increasing transparency around the fund. A process was devised and shared with various groups of headteachers, outlining an application system for schools to complete. However, he clarified that the criteria for accessing the fund require a unique circumstance—falling rolls alone would not be considered a qualifying factor. While the final decision on allocations lies with the DoE, Jason noted that he has been asked to discuss this further with Andy English, as the Chair of Schools Forum.</p> <p>Patrick added that the process has already been presented to other forums to provide greater clarity around the school contingency fund. The approach taken by the LA requires schools to submit a small business case, which will inform decision-making by the DoE and SF Chair. He also confirmed that a request for the fund has already been made. He emphasised that the contingency fund exists to address unforeseen circumstances that are not covered by other funding streams, such as the school estates strategy. Examples of qualifying situations include cyber-attacks or damage to school infrastructure that would impact the continuity of business and the delivery of high-quality education.</p> <p>The process requires school heads to contact the DoE with a formal application, which will also be shared via the schools bulletin. The DoE will then present the request to the SF Chair for a final decision. Patrick reminded SF members that this is a limited pot of money, drawn from de-delegated funds, and that schools seeking support must demonstrate in their business case that they had accounted for unforeseen circumstances in their budgeting. The hope is that by sharing a formal paper, SF members will have a clear understanding of the process. Jason</p>

	<p>and Andy will also ensure that SF members receive updates on how decisions are being made and how the fund is being utilised.</p> <p>Hoxton Garden and Sebright Transition Funding Impact</p> <p>Patrick Alexander provided an update on the impact of funding allocated to Hoxton Garden and Sebright Primary Schools. A decision was taken last year to support these schools due to significant pupil movement. Both schools experienced a 7% increase in their rolls.</p> <p>The rapid increase in pupil numbers led to rising costs. Sebright Primary welcomed 42 children from Randal Cremer, and the funding allowed the school to manage this increase, primarily through staffing. Additionally, the funding covered basic provisions, including classroom furniture, as well as additional pastoral interventions and specialist support for pupils with complex needs.</p> <p>Similarly, Hoxton Garden Primary saw an intake of 78 pupils, including 56 from closing schools. The funding supported the hiring of necessary staff to manage admissions and transition arrangements. It also covered SEND and complex needs, enabling the school to adapt effectively.</p> <p>The funding was deemed vital at the time, ensuring both schools maintained the quality of their provision. The decision was based on a business case and aligned with the School Estate Strategy, which outlines how schools impacted by structural changes receive support.</p> <p>Jason added that this report was provided in addition to the paper in Matters Arising for greater transparency in decision-making. He emphasized that while the Local Authority (LA) reviews how it supports schools, decisions may not follow the same approach in the future. With Terry Bryan now involved, there will be a review of the process, and Schools Forum members will be kept informed.</p> <p>The Chair expressed being pleased to hear that the funding allocation had made a difference. However, given that some of the impacts are short-term, the Chair questioned what mechanisms are or should be in place to monitor the long-term academic and wellbeing outcomes of pupils affected by sudden school closures, in the background of high mobility within schools, such as All Saints as an example where differences can be seen in the outcomes of students subject to mobility against others. The Chair inquired whether there is a plan to monitor the long-term impact of outcomes and wellbeing.</p> <p>Patrick responded that this issue has been raised in TAG (Trust Action Group) meetings as part of the <i>Good to Great policy</i>. The LA is exploring ways to support schools facing mobility challenges, including conducting a separate analysis on student progress post-transition. He acknowledged that the question points to a broader area of work that would be beneficial for the LA to take forward. Patrick and Terry are working through school improvement initiatives to address these concerns, and a review of relevant policies is planned for the remainder of the academic year.</p> <p>Terry added that a key priority is ensuring a sustainable school estate that aligns with school improvement objectives. He recognized the financial and viability challenges involved and noted that maintaining and improving standards depends on how quickly a sustainable estate can be achieved. Initial efforts are focused on strengthening the system through school improvement, financial planning, and ensuring an affordable curriculum while delivering high-quality education.</p> <p>Cllr Bramble commented that ongoing dialogue with headteachers is essential, as they have firsthand knowledge of the impact of pupil transfers. She provided an example of a conversation with a Nightingale Primary teacher and all the activities they had done including a video that was prepared where children expressed excitement about transitioning to their new school. While there is no formal tracking system in place, information needs to be gathered through headteachers and teacher feedback during transitions. This dialogue helps determine whether a more detailed tracking system is needed, alongside parental feedback. At present, no parents have raised concerns about the transition process to her.</p>
10.	<p>Any Other Business</p> <p>None raised</p>

Dates for 2024/25

- Wed 2 July 2025

Proposed dates for 2025/26

- Wed 5 Nov 2025
- Wed 4 Feb 2026
- Wed 6 May 2026
- Wed 1 Jul 2026

Summary of actions agreed:

- **Agenda item 2:** A deep dive investigation led by Terry Bryan, Jason (advisory teacher), and financial colleagues to be conducted to gain a comprehensive understanding of school deficits.
- **Agenda item 3:** The clerk to update the membership list, agendas, and minutes, and notify Hackney academies of the vacancies, inviting expressions of interest.
- **Agenda item 4:** Chris Scott to follow up on the six-month payment delay with the relevant colleagues
- **Agenda item 6:** a discussion on ARP provision in the context of SEMH support, focusing on how it can better support Black Caribbean pupils where SEMH is a concern to be brought back to the forum