

Minutes of the Schools Forum Meeting

Meeting title:	Schools Forum Meeting	
Date/time	07 February, 17.30-19.00	
Members:	<p><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) Andy English (Maintained Sec Headteacher rep) Farzana Chowdhury (Nursery School Headteacher rep) Richard Brown (PRU rep, Headteacher)</p>	<p><u>Academy Members</u> Phoebe Clapham (Governor rep)</p> <p><u>Alternative Provision</u> Anna Cain (Special Academy rep)</p> <p><u>Special School Members</u> Jo Clare (Special School rep) Kevin McDonnell (Special School Headteacher rep)</p> <p><u>Non School Members</u> David Davies (Staff rep)</p>
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) Martin (Observer)	
Apologies:	Kevin Reynold (Maintained Pri Headteacher rep); Anna Cain (Special Academy rep)	
Members Absent:		

	Item
1.	<p>Welcome and introduction</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Apologies above were noted.
2.	<p>2.1. Minutes of the last meeting held 08 November 2023</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Minutes taken as accurate <p>2.2. Action log</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It is noted that actions related to Universal Free School Meals, and the Delivering Better Value Plan are on today's agenda whilst the action related to the clawback mechanism will be partially addressed also but will be fully responded to in the next forum. <p>2.3. Matters arising</p> <p>Paper regarding Universal Free School Meals (UFSM) to be shared with School Forum members</p> <p>The briefing paper addresses unintended consequences due to delays in funding for the Universal Offer. The approach taken is to promote registering for free school meals, emphasising benefits for families rather than coming from a political stance. Data matching exercises have been conducted to identify potentially eligible families and support schools in encouraging registration.</p> <p>Auto-enrollment is being explored while considering GDPR compliance. Local processes for FSM application and monitoring are robust, with a low rate of unidentified eligible families. Ongoing engagement to address concerns with colleagues across London Authorities continues.</p> <p>Member comment: In regards to section 7.2 where is the LA currently at in working on and exploring auto-enrollment? The secondary question relates to secondary schools, the issue is about the extent to which parents of eligible pupils currently in year 5 & 6 are applying for FSM entitlement in September. What is the data for year 5 & 6?</p> <p>The LA has reviewed families who have not registered or applied at all as part of the data matching exercise. This process can be conducted biannually to address issues that may arise at the secondary stage. Mechanisms and data sharing agreements are in place to continue running this process. Currently, validation is being carried out with census data. It is hoped that within a few weeks, the LA can provide schools with a narrowed list and a resource pack that can be adapted, including support routes for families, considering possible language or relationship barriers with schools.</p> <p>The Director of Education (DoE) commended school forum members on their efforts of championing this agenda and addressing challenges, particularly in identifying and supporting families.</p> <p>The Chair emphasised the importance of targeting communication to families facing immigration status and social stigma, expressing concern for their inclusion in the program.</p>
3.	<p>Administration arrangements for allocation of grants to schools: annual report 2024-25</p> <p>SF members are requested to note that no changes are intended for the process. Funds received from the DfE will be passported directly to schools unless schools request specific changes or have queries regarding the current arrangement.</p>
4.	<p>Administration arrangements for allocation of Early Years Funding 2024-25</p> <p>The report discusses the administration arrangements for allocating Early Years Funding for 2024-25. It notes significant changes, including expanded funding entitlements for two-year-olds and children from nine months old. With a £51 million increase in funding, there's a need to ensure systems can handle the workload. Communication with settings is crucial, including providing local authority rates and establishing individual rates based on various criteria. Challenges include the census timeline and budgeting uncertainties. Strategies to address demand uncertainty include increasing the inclusion fund size and encouraging prompt data submission. However, there's still uncertainty about funding covering all costs for settings with higher expenses. Monitoring and stakeholder engagement are ongoing to address challenges.</p> <p>The Chair inquired about specific strategies to address uncertainty surrounding demand and asked for clarification on the actions being taken.</p>

	<p>In addition to increasing the inclusion fund size and encouraging prompt data submission, a portion of the budget is being retained for central administration to cover statutory duties and provide support to settings. This ensures having contingency funds to address any emerging needs.</p> <p>Member comment: Is providing these places affordable; is it enough to cover all costs? The concern was acknowledged as valid. While the rates are generous, some settings may still struggle, especially if they have higher operational expenses. The LA is working closely with settings and petitioning the government to provide more generous funding to meet potential demands.</p> <p>The work of the early years service was commended by members as they provide valuable support not only to childminders but also to schools offering preschool facilities. However, there are concerns about the affordability of continuing to provide these places, especially with potential top-up requirements from parents.</p>
5.	<p>Final Schools Budgets and Funding Formula 2024-25</p> <p>The report concerns the final school budget and funding formula for 2024-25. It outlines the income available and factors contributing to the final school budget. Notably, there was a reduction in pupil numbers compared to the previous year, leading to adjustments in funding allocations. Primary and secondary funding rates have increased by 4%, with some funds redeployed due to lack of growth. The local funding formula has been adjusted to align more closely with national standards.</p> <p>Schools due to close will be allocated 5/12th of the 24/25 budget with final budgets being distributed by 29 February. A virtual workshop is being offered to address budget queries, allowing school leaders to submit questions in advance.</p> <p>The recommendations included noting the allocations and income available in the school's budget for 24-25 and acknowledging the agreed formula by the Director of Education. The impacts of large role variances in budgets are also of note.</p> <p>Member comment: There is considerable anxiety regarding finances, and additional explanations during headteacher briefings would be greatly appreciated. Additionally, it has been noted that the budget data spreadsheet was not password protected this year.</p> <p>All attendees are welcome to join the virtual forum whilst schools will be receiving a thorough analysis of the budget alongside the final budget allocations to schools, offering enhanced transparency. It's important to note that the budget data is publicly accessible, and thus, password protection is not required. In addition they are added to the appendices attached to the Schools Forum documents which are published on the website for public access.</p> <p>Member comment: The information regarding academies in the secondary sector is absent. Full disclosure around the academies should be made available and should feature in future on these documents</p> <p>The DoE acknowledged the concern and assured that efforts would be made to include academy data in future reports.</p> <p>Action: Information regarding secondary academies to be made available to members</p> <p>Chair queried the support available for schools with guidance on budget planning and dealing with falling rolls?</p> <p>Schools can approach the Local Authority for support, which is primarily focused on those experiencing deficits over several years and struggling with deficit recovery plans. However, it is acknowledged that the team has limitations in providing comprehensive assistance and emphasises the importance of schools clearly articulating their specific needs.</p>

	<p>Member comment: There is confusion about whether schools would receive indicative budgets, particularly special schools and AP settings.</p> <p>The allocation process for special schools and AP settings is ongoing and indicative budgets will be issued during the course of the month (February).</p> <p>Member comment: Approach the falling rolls group to obtain ideas from those sitting on the committee.</p> <p>The suggestion was taken on board.</p> <p>Member comment: What is the status of maintained nursery schools why wasn't it part of the list?</p> <p>Rates for maintained nursery schools have not been agreed yet, and budgets will be provided in early March.</p>
6.	<p>Action from SF meeting held 8 Nov 2023: Actual deficit reduction plan to be presented to the forum in the February meeting.</p> <p>A presentation on DVB was shared (see here) which highlighted that unmitigated spending is forecasted to be £185 million by 27/28, with concerns raised about high spending in the independent sector.</p> <p>Professionals found that 27% of children could potentially be supported without an Education, Health, and Care Plan (EHCP), though methodologies and sample sizes for determining this were questioned.</p> <p>Action: Matrix used for the deep dive to be shared with school forum members</p> <p>Member comment: What are the risks of the LA using this limited data to reduce funding for children with SEND in schools?</p> <p>There's ongoing debate about whether the DfE intends to restrict funding for the high needs block. The language surrounding this issue has evolved throughout discussions, with initial mentions being tightened later on. Mitigation efforts in the plan were made without a guarantee of success. There are various ongoing efforts, including a robust building program, that need addressing. The Director of Education acknowledged the financial pressures and emphasised the need to drive down costs yet noting that officers will operate within the framework outlined by the DfE, which offers limited flexibility.</p> <p>Member comment: Children in Hackney with SEND and EHCPs are performing well compared to national standards. How will the impact of this be tracked to ensure they aren't disadvantaged by funding cuts? It is hoped the LA won't use this evidence as a rationale to reduce EHCP provision and cut top-up funding. Additionally, what is the plan for earlier intervention so that very young children who can't communicate and aren't toilet trained are identified and supported before needing an EHCP?</p> <p>Despite efforts outlined in the deficit reduction plan, spending remains outside the budget. The statutory override will end in 2026, at which point the LA will be responsible for the overspend. To address this, the LA must rebalance priorities, primarily through investments in building infrastructure and changes in practices. The importance of this issue for both the LA and schools is acknowledged. Ongoing fieldwork by the DfE is examining practices, some of which are considered exemplary. Any actions that could destabilise the situation would be deemed irrational.</p> <p>The Chair emphasised the need for a closer examination of methodology and sample size to ensure the robustness of the data being produced. Pertaining to the 27% of children with EHCPs who have been identified as probably not requiring one, the Chair asked how the LA would assist schools in finding alternative support. Immediate plans to address EHCP overspending and short-term strategies were queried also.</p>

Few short-term strategies exist. Funds may be allocated to early intervention, and collective lobbying efforts with other LAs would be. Monitoring occurs via annual reviews, and Hackney historically prioritises EHCPs over early intervention, but efforts aim to rebalance without compromising school funds.

Member comment: The overall concern is about reducing spending and having fewer plans but it is acknowledged the need for funding to improve efficiency. It is reassuring that the LA isn't aiming to reduce effectiveness, but the LA cannot wait for a change in government. It is important to understand the problem's scale and questions whether creating more places in specialist settings saves money.

Placing children in special schools is better value for money than non-maintained independent settings. Despite efforts to mitigate overspending, a significant shortfall remains. Uncertainty exists regarding whether the budget gap will be met by the government or the education system within the borough. Intense negotiations are ongoing, with some other LAs having declared bankruptcy. The LA is demonstrating to the DfE its efforts to mitigate overspending within statutory powers.

Member comment: It is acknowledged that the LA is in a difficult position but there is concern that disabled children might be excluded from education to cut spending. The limited sample size of 40 EHCPs used does not provide reassurance of being able to provide equal education within a mainstream setting without funding. The risks associated with excluding children from funding is concerning, particularly for conditions like autism where challenging behaviour could lead to exclusion. It is felt that an agenda is being pursued to exclude disabled children from the education system, both mainstream and special schools, by not providing the necessary funding which makes their inclusion in education possible or effective.

The narrative that the LA aims to exclude disabled children from the education system was refuted. The Secretary of State has recognized flaws in the current support system and is implementing a SEND and AP improvement plan to address this. This plan includes greater inclusion in mainstream schools and investment in new free schools. However, there is a need to reconcile the funding allocation with the requirements of the improvement plan. Efforts are being made to mitigate concerns and demonstrate financial management capabilities.

Member comment: The increasing inequality in Hackney is apparent whilst having a high level of need in the private community, particularly regarding speech and language issues, which were not addressed in the report. What are the early interventions and plans for these to happen sooner for instance preschool intervention should be happening with health services?

The intervention plan involves rewriting the graduated approach and linking it to banding levels to ensure quicker allocation of funds to schools. Regarding preschool children, early intervention falls under the jurisdiction of the inclusion fund within the early years sector. This fund focuses on early identification and meeting the needs of children with emerging needs. The inclusion fund supports early years with toolkits and additional resources, which may not always lead to the need for a formal plan once adjustments are made.

Member comment: There is an increasing risk of exclusion for children with EHCPs or significant SEND, particularly those who are homeschooled and may re-enter the system presenting challenges. Given the issues with outdated EHCPs and the methodology used by the LA to assess support needs without an EHCP is flawed. Additionally, the evidence of the impact of having an increase and new role of plan coordinators has been lacking. The Chair echoed these concerns, emphasising the need for EHCP reviews.

The DoE suggested forming a subgroup for further focused discussion on this matter.

Action: Subgroup to be formed to further discuss this as a single agenda item

	<p>Member comment: It is mentioned that the management plan will be owned by a subgroup of the forum and the executive with the SEND partnership, is there a plan for that?</p> <p>The DoE stated that local determination would occur, with the relevant chair reporting to the Schools Forum whilst noting that this will be discussed at the next board meeting.</p> <p>Action: Recirculate the DSG management appendix</p>
7.	<p>Any Other Business</p> <p>None raised</p>
8.	<p>Upcoming dates for 2023/24</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wed 19 June 2024 <p>Dates for 2024/25</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wed 6 Nov 2024 • Wed 5 Feb 2025 • Wed 7 May 2025 • Wed 2 July 2025
<p>Summary of actions agreed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agenda item 5: Information regarding secondary academies to be made available to members • Agenda item 6: Matrix used for the deep dive to be shared with school forum members • Agenda item 6: Subgroup to be formed to further discuss this as a single agenda item • Agenda item 6: Recirculate the DSG management appendix 	