

## **Minutes of the meeting of Herefordshire Schools Forum held at virtual meeting platform on Friday 11 July 2025 at 9.30 am**

<b>Present:</b>	<b>Ms A Banner (LA maintained secondary schools) (Chairperson)</b> <b>Mr P Jennings (Academies) (Vice-chairperson)</b>	
	Mr A Davies	Academies (primary)
	Mr P Deneen	Trade Unions
	Ms N Emmett	Academies
	Mr R Foster	Local Authority Maintained Primary School
	Ms N Gilbert	LA Special Schools
	Ms R Ussher	LA Maintained Primary School

### **In attendance:**

**Officers:** **Senior Finance Business Partner, Service Director, Education, Skills and Learning, Head of Additional Needs, Democratic Services Officer, Finance Business Partner for Education and Schools and Strategic Finance Manager**

### **23. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies were received from Beverley Blower, Andy Gosling, Tim Knapp, Chris Lewandowski, Rose Lloyd, Gemma Martin and Clare Perez.

Officers;  
Louise Tanner - Head of Learning and Achievement

### **24. NAMED SUBSTITUTES (IF ANY)**

There were no named substitutes.

### **25. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest.

### **26. MINUTES**

**Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting held on 14 March 2025 were approved as a correct record.**

### **27. DEDICATED SCHOOLS GRANT 2024/25 OUTTURN, SEN PROTECTION SCHEME, AND DSG DEFICIT MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES**

Th Senior Finance Business Partner (SFBP) presented the report. The following principal points were noted;

- The final outturn position for 2024/25 was a deficit of £13.9 million made up of;
  - High needs block outturn - £13.7 million higher than funding with the main drivers being £6 million independent schools, £1.9 million top ups and £6 million budget deficit built into 2024/25 budget.
  - Early Years block outturn is £240k higher than funding driven by a late Easter date (20th April 2025) resulting in higher payments; this will offset in 2025/26 funding.

- Central block outturn £35k less than funding driven by favourability in staff in the admissions cost centre (due to vacancy/delay in hiring).

This increased the council's cumulative DSG deficit to £20million at 31 March 2025.

The cumulative DSG deficit is accounted for as an unusable reserve on the council's Balance Sheet, as permitted via statutory instrument, and will remain in place until 31 March 2028 having been extended by two years on 20<sup>th</sup> June by Government.

Measures to contain the deficit and mitigate future cost and demand pressures will be managed by the Service through the DSG Deficit Management Plan. It was noted that this issue is a major concern amongst local authorities nationally.

### **SEN Protection Scheme**

- The scheme was originally put in place to reward the most inclusive of schools, but this no longer happened. Due to affordability issues in both the schools block and high needs block, compromises were going to have to be made. The scheme would continue for 25/26 with a phased approach to end SEN Protection scheme in 2026/27.
- The Budget working group had been consulted and had recommended a more phased approach for the discontinuation of the SEN Protection scheme with further excel modelling required. This was shared with the forum.
- There would be no transfer from the Schools Block to the High Needs Block in 2026/27 and whilst schools would not get the SEN protection scheme, they would see an increase in their budgets.
- The block transfer process would be reviewed at budget setting in 2027/28.

### **DSG Management Plan -**

The Service Director, Education, Skills and Learning and Head of Additional Needs presented to the forum. The following principal points were noted;

- Herefordshire is feeling acute pressure on their High Needs Budget, despite increases in specialist provision having been commissioned over the past few years. More children and young people were being placed in the independent and non-maintained special schools at high cost.
- The removal of the SEN protection scheme would result in wiser spend on more targeted support which would help all schools at the right time.
- Increase in independent school places were, in part due to the special schools in Herefordshire being over capacity. The provision menu in Herefordshire was too narrow and needed to be expanded, the outdated code of practice which included parental preference is driving pressures in local authorities.
- Greatest growth areas in Herefordshire are primary needs in ASD and SEMH.
- The Four key actions of the DSG deficit management plan were explained to the group;
  - Intervention
  - managing demand
  - sufficiency of local places and
  - financial management of the high needs block.
- Regular updates would be brought back to the budget working group and schools forum.

On behalf of the BWG Richard Foster highlighted how valued the SEN protection scheme had been to all schools but equally they appreciated, the challenging times the authority was in financially. Officers had explained to the group how the scheme was no longer being used as its original intended purpose and that this would be a phased removal which had provided them with some assurance. The group had requested further modelling which officers had provided in their presentation at the meeting.

Paul Jennings (Chair of the BWG) highlighted how this was an extremely challenging time having several authorities announcing this week how they were no longer financially viable. The SEN scheme had been in place and supported by the BWG for as long as he had been involved, but it was known then that it was a luxury, of which the authority could no longer afford. The financial pressures were undeniable and unavoidable, with no other option but to slow down the growth in the debt and thanked the BWG and colleagues who had been looking at this over the last few years. The plan moving forward looked incredible, and it was hoped that the authority would deliver on it and start to turn around the growing deficit and provide the quality services that their young people deserved.

The forum were appreciative of the work of the finance and governance teams and particularly to the Director, Education, Skills and Learning and her team for their excellent support of young people in Herefordshire.

The Cabinet Member Children and Young People assured the forum that he was briefed frequently on the detail of the high needs budget and the strategies being employed by the Director, Education, Skills and Learning and her team and would continue to provide support to these elements of work.

The Director, Education, Skills and Learning explained through her meetings particularly with the f40, reform was coming, but how extensive and far reaching that would be, was not known.

## **28. ANNUAL REVIEW OF SCHOOLS FORUM MEMBERSHIP AND CONSTITUTION**

The clerk to the Schools Forum presented the report.

It was explained that using the spring 2025 School Census the annual review of membership had been conducted for the forum to ensure the allocation of seats remained proportionate. This year's review had followed the previous year in that there have been continued rises in the number of pupils attending Academies. The review therefore concluded in tables 14 & 18 that a change was needed to both the forum and working group to transfer 1 seat from the maintained schools to academies to maintain proportionality.

It was highlighted that the proposed constitution could be found at appendix 1 with the current constitution marked up with track changes at appendix 2 which highlighted all changes proposed.

Members were consulted on 3 June with the proposed changes, and their views also sought on a potential change to the members term of office and chair and vice chair term.

Originally a proposal was put forward that the chair and vice chair roles that currently held a two-year term of office to be aligned to the term of office of members at 3 years. However, after responses from members there were constructive arguments against the move with it being highlighted that the chair and vice chair roles carried greater weight of

responsibility and time. It was also noted that Chairs and vice chairs had no opportunity to serve as an ordinary forum member, and no other individual already on the forum was able in practice to put themselves forward for the role (as their term of office will by default be due to end before any take-up of tenure of Chairmanship/Vice Chairmanship).

Feedback also indicated that the forum would be open to extending the term of office for members to four years, as they had assurance they could resign at any point.

Therefore, it felt a sensible compromise for the two-year term of office for Chair and vice chair to remain against a four-year tenure of membership.

No comments were received from the forum.

**Resolved that the outcome of the annual review of proportionality was noted and the revised constitution as set out at appendix 1 be recommended to the Corporate Director, Children and Young People for a formal decision and adoption.**

## **29. ELECTION OF CHAIRPERSON OF THE BUDGET WORKING GROUP**

The clerk to the Schools Forum offered her sincere thanks to Paul Jennings who had chaired the Budget Working Group for six years and paid tribute to the knowledge, expertise and insight he had brought that had been invaluable to the group but explained that it was time to appoint his successor.

The Service Director Education and Skills also expressed her thanks and that of the Local Authority for his balance between understanding the pressures that the Local Authority were under financially, but remaining supportive, and, above all keeping all decisions, very much centred together on children and young people in Herefordshire. Her thanks were also extended to the Chair of the Schools Forum.

Alison Banner nominated and proposed Richard Foster.

Paul Jennings seconded the nomination.

A vote was undertaken by the forum and Richard Foster was appointed as the Chairperson for the Budget Working Group.

## **30. DATES OF MEETINGS AND WORK PROGRAMME FOR 2025/26**

The proposed meeting dates and work programme for the forum for 2025/26 were noted. No objections were raised.

The chair extended her thanks and that of the Forum to Kathy Weston, who had tended her resignation. She wished her well in her retirement and thanked her for her many years of support and contributions.

The clerk informed the forum that the Senior Finance Business Partner was leaving the authority and thanked her on behalf of the forum and budget working group. Many compliments had been passed on to her with regards to members feedback of her very clear and concise presentations.

The Senior Finance Business Partner expressed how she had enjoyed her time at Herefordshire Council, and how Schools Forum had been one of the highlights, having gotten to know the members and offered her thanks and best wishes. She assured the

forum that all officers that currently worked with her had full knowledge of what she did, and continuity would continue.

The meeting ended at 10:36

**Chairperson**