

Minutes of the meeting of Herefordshire Schools Forum held at virtual meeting platform on Tuesday 20 January 2026 at 9.30 am

Present: **Councillor Mr P Jennings (Academies) (Chairperson)**
 Mr R Foster (Local Authority Maintained Primary School) (Vice-chairperson)

Ms A Banner	LA maintained secondary schools
Mr A Breakwell	Maintained Primary - headteacher
Mr A Davies	Academies (primary)
Mr S Debenham	Maintained Primary - headteacher
Mr P Deneen	Trade Unions
Mr R Foster	Local Authority Maintained Primary School
Ms N Gilbert	LA Special Schools
Ms K Joiner	Academy Special School
Mr T Knapp	Academies
Mr C Lewandowski	Trade Unions
Mrs R Lloyd	Early Years Providers
Ms H Manns	Early Years providers
Ms C Perez	16-19 Providers

In attendance:

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

14. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Beverley Blower and Gemma Martin.

Officers

Cllr Ivan Powell, Cabinet Member Children and Young People.

15. NAMED SUBSTITUTES (IF ANY)

There were no named substitutes.

16. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Tim Knapp as Head Teacher of Whitecross School declared an interest with regards to the Whitecross's PFI contract. Paul Deneen and Christopher Lewandowski declared an interest as members of the Trade Union.

17. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 21 November 2025 were agreed as an accurate record.

18. DEFICIT MANAGEMENT PLAN

The Director of Education, Skills and Learning provided an overview of the deficit management plan to address the high needs deficit, focusing on four priorities:

- managing demand through early intervention,
- increasing local specialist provision (including for pupils with complex needs), and
- maintaining close financial scrutiny of high needs workstreams. Progress is reported regularly to the Budget Working Group.

Updates were provided on progress on intervention workstreams and sufficiency planning.

The Harvest Project (HPRS) is operational, with 11 children currently attending against a capacity of 24 places. Additional short- and long-term commissioned places are being developed to support pupils with social, emotional and mental health needs. This includes new provision at St Martin's, which has been subject to some minor construction delays, but is expected to open in September.

The Inclusion Service has been expanded to provide broader support to schools, building on the existing Social Emotional Mental Health (SEMH) model. This now includes autism outreach (no longer dependent on diagnosis), neurodiversity intervention specialists, and enhanced support for cognition and learning needs, including adaptive teaching and the Inclusive Classroom Project. A single referral pathway is now in place, supported by strong links with the Physical & Sensory Support Teams (PASS) team, and a growing, subsidised training offer for schools.

On sufficiency, members were advised that the Department for Education has decided not to proceed with the planned free school, which would have provided 80 specialist places. The Council is making formal representations before the end of February, highlighting rural need, significant demand pressures, and the shortfall between current specialist capacity (c.300–400 places) and need (c.700 pupils).

Other capital projects remain on track, including the expansion of Hampton Dene (September 2026), Westfield under the School Rebuilding Programme, and the Ryefield Moderate Learning Difficulties provision (January 2027).

Members welcomed the progress made, recognised the challenges of the high need's deficit. Members also expressed strong support for further representations to the Department for Education, including potential joint correspondence from the Schools Forum and the Budget Working Group.

19. SCHOOLS BUDGET 2026/27

The Head of Strategic Finance presented an overview of the 2026/27 Schools Budget, based on funding allocations received in December. The total Dedicated Schools Grant allocation is £196.2m, with the report covering the Schools Block, Central School Services Block (CSSB), and Early Years Block, while the High Needs Block will be considered separately in March.

For the Schools Block, funding increases to just under £144m, representing a like-for-like increase of 2.47% despite a reduction of 274 pupils. Two grants have been baselined into the national funding formula, and the Minimum Funding Guarantee is set at 0%. To balance the funding formula, the basic entitlement factor has been marginally reduced by 0.6%, remaining the fairest approach and still delivering overall growth of around 3% to schools. The Authority Proforma Tool submission is being finalised, with school budget shares to be confirmed by 28 February.

Within the CSSB, £963,000 is allocated to ongoing commitments, with budgets adjusted for inflation and updated pupil numbers. Provision has been made for DfE licence costs based on actual expenditure plus inflation, and members were advised that a comprehensive review of CSSB and delegated services will be brought to Schools Forum in June to inform 27/28 budget arrangements.

The Early Years Block allocation increases to £27.48m, an increase of £3.4m, reflecting the expanded childcare entitlements, including funding for children from nine months and increased take-up of two-year-old and extended entitlements. Key changes include a higher minimum pass-through rate to providers (97%), termly funding for three- and four-year-olds, increased hourly rates, and a one-off contingency fund to manage fluctuations during the transition. A retained element of 2.7% of funds is allocated to central early years support services.

Members of the forum thanked officers and the finance team for meeting challenging deadlines over the Christmas period and noted the fairness and child-focused approach taken in developing the budget proposals.

Questions were raised about whether increased Early Years funding would be sufficient to meet demand and about the impact of falling pupil numbers on staffing, particularly in small rural schools.

Officers confirmed that early year's sufficiency work indicates there are enough places to meet current demand and that pupil numbers are expected to rise gradually after reaching a low point. While school capacities have reduced slightly, officers are not currently concerned about sustainability. It was noted that potential support for rural schools, including through contingencies and delegated services, will be considered as part of a planned review in June, and that further detail on Early Years spending and DSG outturn will be provided later in the year. Officers also confirmed that in-year pupil growth is being closely monitored, with sufficient capacity in primary schools and mitigation plans in place for tighter areas in the secondary estate, including SEND provision.

The Chair moved to recommend that the Herefordshire's school funding proposals for 2026/27 adopt the National Funding Formula (NFF) values and be recommended to the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People as set out in the report.

The recommendation was carried 15 votes for, with 1 abstention

20. REVISIONS TO HEREFORDSHIRE'S SCHEME FOR FINANCING SCHOOLS

The Head of Strategic Finance reported on the consultation undertaken on proposed changes to Herefordshire's Scheme for Financing Schools, which ran from 1–18 December and received seven responses. Most respondents supported the proposed changes, with some mixed views on arrangements for licensed deficits and recovery planning.

Some amendments were required to reflect Department for Education guidance, including changes relating to borrowing and leases, which did not require a local decision. Other proposed changes were local, aimed at tightening the scheme, improving clarity, and updating sections on governors' liabilities and insurance cover to reflect current arrangements, including the DfE Risk Protection Arrangement.

Further changes strengthened controls on surplus balances, deficit planning, and recovery plans, setting out clearer expectations for schools and the support available

from the local authority. In particular, a mechanism was introduced to allow schools to re-purpose previously earmarked balances for capital projects to support one-off revenue costs where financial pressures arise.

Overall, officers recommended approval of the amendments, noting that the changes were in the best interests of schools, the local authority, and the DSG as a whole. Members welcomed the review and supported the updated scheme.

The Chair moved to recommend that revisions to Herefordshire's Scheme for Financing Schools be approved.

Voting was restricted by regulation to maintained school members (primary and secondary), special schools and PRU. The recommendation was carried unanimously.

21. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Friday 20 March 2026, 9:30am.

The meeting ended at 10:34am

Chairperson