Herefordshire Council

Minutes of the meeting of Herefordshire Schools Forum held at virtual meeting platform on Friday 10 July 2026 at 9.30 am

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

Ms B Blower	PRU - Management Committee
Mr A Davies	Academies (primary)
Mr S Debenham	Maintained Primary - headteacher
Mr P Deneen	Trade Unions
Ms N Gilbert	LA Special Schools
Mr C Lewandowski	Trade Unions
Ms W Priday	Diocese of Hereford
Mr D Williams	16-19 providers

In attendance:

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

31. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from members: Kate Andrews, Sarah Beard, Andy Gosling, Georgie Griffin, Tim Knapp, Hayley Manns, Kate Joiner & Rose Lloyd.

Officers: Cllr Ivan Powell – (Cabinet Member Children and Young People), Hilary Jones – (Head of Additional Needs), Wendy Pickering and Kirsty Lister (Strategic Finance Manager)

32. NAMED SUBSTITUTES (IF ANY)

Wendy Priday was in attendance as a substitute for Georgie Griffin.

33. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Paul Deneen declared an interest as member of the Trade Union.

34. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 20 March 2026 were agreed as an accurate record.

35. DSG DEFICIT MANAGEMENT PLAN AND SEND REFORMS

The forum received an update on Herefordshire's SEND Reform Plan, which was submitted on 19 June following co-production with a wide range of partners including education, social care, health services and parent carer representatives.

The plan was linked to the High Needs Stability Grant, which could see up to 90% of the High Needs deficit written off (to 2025–26) if the plan is approved. The plan will undergo extensive quality assurance, with a final decision by the Secretary of State expected in September. If not approved, a revised submission can be made, although this would delay associated funding.

It was highlighted that the reform programme is both ambitious and necessary, aiming to address challenges in the current SEND system and the growing High Needs deficit. The plan was developed within tight timescales and despite delays in receiving key national guidance.

Members were advised that, if approved, the majority of the existing deficit would be written off, although a residual deficit would remain. There would continue to be financial pressures over the next three years, with expenditure expected to rise in the short term before gradually reducing as reforms take effect. The year one implementation funding of £1.2 million was noted as limited, particularly given the requirement to establish multidisciplinary support teams.

The reform model focuses on creating a more inclusive and joined-up 0–25 SEND system, with greater emphasis on meeting children's needs within mainstream settings wherever appropriate. This includes earlier intervention, reduced reliance on waiting lists, and the introduction of a coordinated "front door" approach to accessing support. Implementation will take place over three years, with a phased transition and parallel operation of existing systems.

Members noted the introduction of locality-based multidisciplinary teams, comprising professionals such as educational psychologists, speech and language therapists, and occupational therapists. These teams would work directly with schools, focusing on building staff capacity and supporting whole-school approaches rather than individual withdrawal interventions. Year one would pilot the approach in two clusters, with full county rollout planned over subsequent years.

The importance of collaboration with schools was emphasised, including engagement with new support structures, participation in networks, and identification of staff development needs.

Additional tools such as a SEND portal, assistive technology lending library, and in-school triage services would support implementation.

Members were reassured that the reforms do not reduce the role of special schools. Instead, addressing the current shortfall in specialist provision remains a priority. Plans are in place to expand local capacity, including new SEMH intervention places, additional autism provision, and the development of a new special school in Ross-on-Wye by 2027, alongside ongoing capital improvements and accessibility works.

Key risks included recruitment challenges, managing the transition between systems, and ongoing financial pressures. However, Members agreed that the reforms present a significant opportunity to improve outcomes for children and young people by enabling earlier access to support and reducing delays within the system.

The forum were extremely supportive of the SEND reform programme and the pilot initiative offering their sincere thanks to all the officers involved.

In response to questions:

1. Members were advised that the SEND deficit was not expected to be eliminated within the Government's set three-year reform timeframe and acknowledged that financial pressures would continue in the short to medium term.
2. Members were reassured that there were no plans to remove children from existing settled placements and that the intention was to reduce reliance on

independent placements gradually over a three to five-year period as local provision developed.

3. Members were informed that the financial position would be closely monitored and regularly reported to the Forum and Budget Working Group, whilst the Council continued to lobby for improved SEND funding through organisations such as the F40 group.
4. Officers acknowledged the challenges associated with cross-border funding arrangements and confirmed that responsibility for funding rested with the pupil's home authority. Members were advised that new Government guidance on these arrangements had recently been published and officers would review and provide a more detailed briefing to a future Budget Working Group and Schools Forum meeting.

Action: A briefing on cross-border funding arrangements to be provided to the Budget Working Group and Schools Forum.

36. DEDICATED SCHOOLS GRANT 2025/26 OUTTURN

Members received an update on the 2025–26 year-end Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) position.

It was reported that the overall deficit at year end was £16.4 million, an improved position compared to the originally forecast £20 million deficit. The majority of the deficit (£17.5 million) relates to the High Needs Block, partially offset by smaller underspends across other blocks.

Underspends totalling approximately £8 million were noted, primarily driven by lower-than-expected costs in independent school fees, alternative provision, and elements of complex needs provision, alongside a £1 million underspend in the Early Years Block. This helped reduce the overall deficit position. However, these were partially offset by overspends, particularly in top-up funding for post-16 provision and maintained schools.

Members were advised that small underspends were also recorded within the Schools Block and Central Services Schools Block. The Schools Block underspend related to lower-than-anticipated traded union facilities time, while the Central Block variance reflected additional income in admissions offsetting higher Department for Education licence costs.

It was clarified that the Early Years underspend largely reflects a timing issue linked to the previous year's £1 million overspend, particularly relating to the placement of Easter payments across financial years. This had been anticipated but only confirmed following final funding adjustments.

The cumulative DSG deficit now stands at £36.3 million, which is lower than the previously forecast position of around £40 million. Based on this figure, Members noted that approximately £33 million could potentially be written off through the High Needs Stability Grant, subject to approval of the SEND Reform Plan.

Positive national feedback on submitted plans was highlighted, with an indication that funding is likely to be released where robust plans are in place. Subject to approval, it is anticipated that funding could be received in late October or early November.

In response to questions;

1. It was explained that, although the anticipated grant funding would provide significant financial relief, substantial deficits are expected to remain for several years. Forecasts indicated that High Needs Block pressures would continue to increase over the medium term, with the cumulative DSG deficit remaining significant despite the reforms.
2. It was emphasised that the financial position remained challenging and that both the additional funding and SEND reforms would take time to have a meaningful impact.
3. Members were reassured that funding would not be diverted from other elements of the Dedicated Schools Grant to support High Needs pressures, and that schools, early years and central services budgets would continue to receive their allocated funding.
4. It was noted that Herefordshire's financial position compared relatively favourably with many other authorities but acknowledged that rising SEND costs remained a national issue requiring further Government action and long-term reform.

37. DEDICATED SCHOOLS GRANT UPDATE AND 2027/28 BUDGET PLANNING

Members received an update on the budget planning for 2026/27, and the services funded through de-delegation arrangements. Attention was drawn to Appendix A which provided details of the services delivered and invited primary and secondary maintained school representatives to identify any additional information they might require ahead of the October meeting, when approval of the de-delegated services would be considered.

It was noted that a review of some existing arrangements, particularly the contingency budget, was being undertaken in light of changes to DSG regulations and increasing High Needs pressures.

Members were informed of significant forthcoming changes to free school meal eligibility processes, which may require a review of the current arrangements. It was outlined that schools may have greater flexibility in carrying out eligibility checks in future and indicated that proposals would be brought to a future Budget Working Group and Schools Forum meeting for consideration, including options for alternative service level agreements and administrative support for schools.

The forum commended officers for their work in promoting free school meal eligibility and ensuring schools understood the importance of identifying and supporting eligible families. It was noted that some parents remained reluctant to apply due to perceived stigma associated with free school meals, and consideration was suggested around how the support is described and promoted.

38. REVISIONS TO HEREFORDSHIRE'S SCHEME FOR FINANCING SCHOOLS

Members received an update on the Scheme for Financing Schools. It was noted that a review had been undertaken previously including local consultation and implementation of changes for 2025–26.

The Department for Education had since issued updated statutory guidance, confirming that there were no required or recommended changes for this year.

In light of the recent review, no further amendments to the scheme were proposed. Members were advised that the scheme would be updated to reflect the new date and formally republished.

39. ANNUAL REVIEW OF SCHOOLS FORUM MEMBERSHIP

Members received the annual review of Schools Forum and Budget Working Group membership based on spring census data to ensure proportional representation. It was recommended that one academy representative seat be removed from both groups and reallocated to maintained secondary representatives. This change would be implemented using existing vacancies on the Forum and a forthcoming vacancy on the Budget Working Group

Resolved that one seat be removed from academies on both the forum and budget working group and reallocated to maintained secondaries.

40. DATES OF MEETINGS AND WORK PROGRAMME FOR 2026/27

Resolved that the work programme and future dates for 2026/27 were agreed.

Friday 23 October 2026 9:30am
Tuesday 19 January 2027 9:30am
Friday 19 March 2027 9:30am
Friday 16 July 2027 9:30am

On behalf of the forum, the Chair offered his sincere thanks and appreciation to Nikki Emmett, who was standing down from the Budget Working Group, in recognition of her many years of service, support and valuable contributions to both the Budget Working Group and Schools Forum.

The Chair also acknowledged that this would be Chris Lewandowski's final Schools Forum meeting and thanked him for his significant contribution over many years, including his work representing union members, serving on various panels, and helping to shape policy through his constructive challenge and commitment to improving outcomes.

The meeting ended at 10.36 am **Chairperson**