Brent

MINUTES OF THE SCHOOLS FORUM
Held as an online virtual meeting on Wednesday 18 June 2025 at 6.00pm

Membership	**Representing**
PRESENT (all in remote attendance):	
Governors	Mike Heiser (Chair) Jo Jhally Ilana Myers Martin Beard
Headteachers	Jayne Jardine Raphael Moss Andy Prindiville Ranjna Shiyani Melissa Loosemore Michelle Ginty Herman Franks (attending as a substitute for Nick Cooper) Simrita Singh
Councillor/s	Councillor Grahl, Cabinet Member for Children, Young People & Schools
Officers	Nigel Chapman, Corporate Director Children, Young People & Community Development Shirley Parks, Director Education, Partnerships and Strategy Pallavi Shah, Senior Finance Analyst Roxanna Glennon, Head of Inclusion Folake Olufeko, Head of Finance Abby Shinhmar, Governance Team

1. **Apologies for Absence and Membership**

Apologies for absence were received from Wioletta Burra, Nick Cooper (with Herman Franks attending as a substitute) and Jude Enright.

2. **Declarations of Interest**

None.

3. **Deputations (if Any)**

None.

4. **Minutes of the previous meeting**

It was **RESOLVED** to approve the minutes of the previous meeting held on Thursday 13 February 2025 as a correct record.

5. **Actions arising**

None.

6. **Dedicated Schools Outturn Financial Outturn 2024-25**

Folake Olufeko (Head of Finance, Brent Council) introduced a report, which set out the final Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) outturn against the budget set for 2024/25 and provided detail on the in-year 2024/25 deficit of £0.4m.

The Forum noted the following key points as part of the update provided:

- The in-year deficit was mainly due to overspend of £2.1m against the High Needs (HN) Block offset by a £1.5m underspend against the Early Years (EY) Block, £0.1m underspend against the Schools Block and £0.1m underspend against the Central Schools Services Block (CSSB).
- The High Needs Block budget was £77.4m and the allocation included a contribution of £1.4m (or 0.5%) of Schools Block income. This excluded £8.9m, which was recouped by the DfE to allocate directly to academies.
- The High Needs block supports pupils in specialist provisions and mainstream settings. It also covers specialist support services and costs in relation to post-16 provision. The main reason for the £2.1m overspend was the top-up funding for children placed in special schools and academies due to an increase in the number of pupils with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) and an increase in average unit costs since January 2025. The number of children requiring EHCPs was 3,892 at the end of March 2025 compared to 3,598 in March 2024, an increase of 8.2%. This had led to increases in the top-up funding for in-borough mainstream academies and special schools, additional placements in independent day special schools and alternative education settings for children awaiting placements, as well as increased pupils in post-16 provision.
- Additionally, an overspend of £0.3m had been incurred for the cost of placing Brent children in settings out of borough due to increased rates.
- A £1.2m pressure against the independent day and residential top-up funding is due to the increased number of pupils placed in these settings in addition to an increase of fees for some settings. The number of pupils placed in independent school pupils had increased by 9% in 2024/25.
- The £1.2m underspend against the SEN Services budgets was due to unutilised funds held for contingencies. Additionally, a further £0.6m underspend was reported across the SEN support and support for inclusion budgets.
- The £1.5m underspend against the EY Block was mainly a result of additional funding from the DfE to cover the increase in provision of free childcare for working parents from September 2024 to 30 hours. This allocation was provided based on an estimated take-up of hours by working parents in Brent. However, take-up had been lower than predicted leading to underspends of £0.5m and

£0.7m reported against the under 2- to 2-year-old and the 2-year-old working parent entitlements respectively.

- The EY Block was a self-contained block based on headcount and therefore there was a risk that the DfE could claw back the surplus following a final in-year adjustment expected in July 2025. The accounts had been adjusted to make a provision for this potential clawback.
- The Central Block allocation of the DSG totalling £2.1m which funded central services for schools. This budget had seen an underspend of £0.5m.
- At the end of the financial year 2024/25, the DSG deficit had increased to £13.6m. This was based on the DSG reserves opening balance at the start of the year of £13.2m and the in-year DSG deficit of £0.4m, as detailed in Appendix A of the report.
- The DSG deficit would be disclosed as an earmarked unusable reserve in line with DfE regulations (the School and Early Years Finance (England) Regulations 2023). These regulations required any DSG deficit balance to be held within the Local Authority's overall DSG and carried forward to be funded from future year's funding and/or recovery plans agreed with the DfE.
- Of the 45 maintained primary schools, 22 (49%) compared to 18 (38%) in 2023/24 had increased their reserve balance by an average of £73k, and 23 (51%) compared to 26 (55%) in 2023/24 decreased their reserve balances by an average of £85k.
- Two schools had cleared their deficits, and three additional schools had moved into deficit in 2024/25, resulting in eight schools being in deficit at the end of 2024/25. Of the 45 maintained primary schools, 18 had closed with balances of 8% or more and 27 have closed with balances of less than 8% reserve
- Of the two maintained secondary schools, one had seen no significant change in reserves and the other had seen a 210% decrease in reserves.
- The only maintained special school saw an increase in reserves of 12% with a £1.5m reserve balance. One of the two PRUs decreased their reserves by 29% and the other saw an increase of 269% (from £75k to £276k) compared to balances in 2023/24.
- The government had announced the national Spending Review on Wednesday, 11 June 25, which had included an increase in core school budgets in England by 0.4% or £2bn (£3bn increase in 2025/26) in real terms on average over the next three years, reaching £69.5bn by 2029, compared to 2025/26, which ensured average real terms growth of 1.1% a year per pupil. The DSG budget for Brent had increased by 4.3% in 2025/26 with a 1.7% increase seen against the Schools Block.
- The impact of the extension of Free School Meal provision to around 500,000 more children whose parents were receiving benefits was noted and that this would likely cost around £1bn up to 2029.
- The financial pressures on the HN Block continue to present a significant challenge, both locally and nationally. The HNB position continues to be closely monitored with cost containment measures being implemented in line with the Delivering Best Value (DBV) plan.
- The arrangement for the statutory override set out in the School and Early Years Finance Regulations 2021, which required Local Authorities to either carry forward any cumulative DSG deficit to set against the DSG in the next funding period or carry forward some or all the deficit to the funding period after that was due to end in March 2026. At the time of Schools Forum, there was no confirmed plan for how DSG deficits would be treated beyond March 2026 with the Brent

continuing to work towards deficit recovery through local planning and continuation of the DBV initiatives. Further updates will be provided for the Schools Forum as more information became available from the DfE.

- Folake Olufeko added an amendment to paragraph 12.1, and it should read: *Core schools' budget in England to go up by 0.4% or £2bn (£3bn increase in 2025/26) in real terms on average over the next three years, reaching £69.5bn by 2029, compared to 2025/26, which ensured average real terms growth of 1.1% a year per pupil. Brent schools' core budgets increased by 4.3% in 2025/26 with a 1.7% increase seen against the Schools Block.*

The Chair thanked Folake Olufeko for her report and as no questions or comments were raised the Forum **RESOLVED** to note the report.

7. **Update on the DSG High Needs Block Deficit Management Plan and the Delivering Better Value (DBV) in SEND Programme**

Shirley Parks (Director Education, Partnerships and Strategy, Brent Council) introduced a report, providing a further update on progress to date against the DSG Management Plan and an update on Brent's participation in the Department for Education's (DfE) Delivering Better Value (DBV) in Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) programme, aimed at supporting a reduction in expenditure against the High Needs Block of the Dedicated Schools' Grant (DSG

The Forum noted the following key points as part of the update provided:

- The Delivering Better Value programme was focussed on understanding and testing elements of how the SEND system worked and to see if efficiencies and better value could be found in the use of High Needs Block Funding.
- A rise in demand of Education, Health & Care Plans (EHCPs) had been noted over the years and there was a concern that the budget would not keep pace with the growth in EHCPs. Allocations for EHCPs had increased by 3% in 2024-25 and 6% in 2025-26, however EHCPs increased by 8-11% over the same period.
- To manage the rising demand of EHCPs, it is important to only maintain EHCPs for as long as they are needed, to make use of all available funding and to ascertain whether a child's needs could be met through ordinary provision.
- Much work was being done to improve the sufficiency of school places and work with schools to consider setting up satellite provisions or expanding existing special school places.
- The Delivering Better Value programme had officially come to an end in March 2025. However, as detailed within the report some of the DBV pilot projects were being taken forward into business as usual. These included work in relation to Intervention First, SEND Assurance, Workforce, inclusive environments and Commissioning and a focus (working with a group of Head Teachers) to develop the structure of SEND support services across the borough.
- Roxanne Glennon highlighted the concern around the pressure on spend for children placed in independent sector placements and the need to ensure appropriate and robust commissioning arrangements.

Following this, the Chair asked the Forum for any comments or questions with the following noted:

- Nigel Chapman highlighted that work had been ongoing with partners over the last 3 years with Brent having maintained a stable position in relation to management of its deficit and commended all colleagues involved.

- The pressures experienced by schools in regard to management of their budgets was recognised with colleagues thanked for their hard work.

- Further details were sought in regard to costs and allocations for independent schools. **ACTION:** Folake Olufeko and Roxanna Glennon agreed to provide this information at the next meeting.

- Clarification was sought on whether the Intervention First approach would be retained in the Harlesden cluster as well as expanded to other clusters. Roxanna Glennon emphasized the importance of positive and impactful intervention. This academic year, the Intervention First project had been extended to January 2026, as the ICB had started offering mental health intervention and added that it was crucial to commission accordingly to avoid any duplication.

The Chair thanked Shirley Parks for the report and as no further questions or comments were raised the Forum **RESOLVED** to note the report.

7. **Updated Scheme for Financing Schools & Schools Financial Regulations 2025/26**

Folake Olufeko (Head of Finance, Brent Council) introduced a report, which detailed the Scheme for Financing Schools and the Schools Financial Regulations for the financial year 2025-26. The Forum noted the following key points as part of the update provided:

- All changes applied in the revision were in line with the March 2025 Department for Education's Scheme for Financing Local Authority Maintained Schools – Statutory Guidance issued to Local Authorities, changes to the Local Authority's own regulations, the new EU Public Procurement Regulations and all relevant regulations.
- The Scheme for Financing Schools for 2025/26 attached in Appendix A had been updated, with the summary of changes itemised in Appendix B. The changes would be immediately effective following Schools Forum approval.
- The Schools Financial Regulations for 2025/26, attached as Appendix C, had been updated, with the summary of changes itemised in Appendix D. The changes would be immediately effective after consultation with Schools Forum.

The Chair thanked Folake Olufeko for her report and asked the Forum if they had any questions in relation to the information provided. In noting that approval of the proposed changes to the Scheme for Financing Schools and consultation on the 2025-26 Schools Financial Regulations would only be open to maintained school members on the Schools Forum it was **RESOLVED**, with no further comments having been raised, that the maintained schools' representatives on the Forum:

(1) Approve the amendments to the Scheme for Financing Schools 2025/26.

(2) Note (having been invited to formally comment) the Schools Financial Regulations 2025/26.

8. **SEND Funding Allocations for Additionally Resourced Provisions (ARPs) and Early Years**

Shirley Parks (Director Education, Partnerships and Strategy, Brent Council) introduced the report, which provided an update on the Additionally Resourced Provisions and Early Years Banding Review. The Forum noted the following key points as part of the update provided:

- Schools Forum had received a report on 19 June 2024 on a proposed banding SEND Resource Allocation System (RAS) to move away from the current hours led system to a needs-led, provision-based approach for mainstream schools and Additional Resource Provisions (ARPs), early years settings and post-16 settings. Following consideration of that report it had been agreed that consultation would be undertaken with schools and settings in the autumn term on the proposed new approach.
- The report presented for consideration covered two proposed changes to HN funding in EY and ARPs. The Early Years Inclusion Fund (EYIF), which totals just under £1.7M, as outlined in Table 1. The funds are allocated through two main channels: 'Children with Disabilities' (CWD) places and Additionally Resourced Provision (ARP) places. Additionally, EYIF provides financial support to Private, Voluntary, and Independent (PVI) settings, as well as childminders to support children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) via SENIF.
- There is currently disparity in Brent in relation to how ARPs were funded.
- Currently, allocation of the EYIF was overseen by the Under 5s Nursery multi-agency panel (held monthly). CWD or ARP places are agreed using supporting evidence from a paediatrician report or an EHCP. SENIF funding to the PVI settings is awarded using a two-tier banding system, where either £2,850 or £4,560 top-up is awarded.
- Many Local Authorities do not offer enhanced nursery provision. The SENIF bandings cover most levels of need and for those children with complex needs, there were some early years resourced provisions which provide specialist support.
- Currently Early Years SENIF funding has only two bands. This means that emerging needs are either not supported or are financially over-supported. For children with more complex needs, PVI settings are not always appropriately funded to meet need. This in turn is driving demand and pressure on the enhanced nursery settings and limiting parental choice.
- Early Years providers can face a significant administrative burden in applying for Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) before a child starts school, often at a stage of a child's development where it remains uncertain what their long-term needs would be. It is recognised that Early Years providers need resources to be provided in a timely manner.
- SENCOs report that they find the Graduated Approach Framework useful, but they cannot always access funding quickly enough, particularly for those children who clearly have complex needs. In addition, waiting times for EHCPs and paediatrician reports can impact on the timeliness of allocating funding.

- There is a lack of clarity about the difference between enhanced nursery placements and the nursery resourced provisions. The funding of different placements at different levels needs to be clearer, alongside clear reporting on delivery from the providers.
- The proposed approach will change Early Years terminology regarding 'CWD' and 'ARP' places, with the term 'enhanced places' used to cover all places allocated additional resource.
- The new SENIF banding system and Early Years Banding Matrix Resource Allocation System (RAS) would standardise enhanced place funding. Introduction of the new SENIF bandings would mean that emerging needs were supported appropriately and for children with more complex needs, PVI settings were appropriately funded.
- New staff resource has been put in place to quality assure settings receiving funding alongside a new SLA. Allocating staff resource to quality assure and oversee the use of SENIF and enhanced place funding, in addition to implementing SLAs (Service Level Agreements), would ensure the optimum use of funding thereby improving service delivery.
- The current requirement for a child to have an ECHP and paediatrician report to be considered for SENIF and enhanced place funding would be removed. The Under Fives Nursery Panel approving enhanced places in the absence of an EHCP and/or paediatric report could improve efficiency in filling available places.
- Increasing the enhanced place top-up value to £12,500 would bring average funding across all enhanced places to £22,500 (the agreed number of places attract £10K base funding). The EYIF currently provided funding for 60 places in MNSs and Willow Nursery at an average of £22,238.60/place. These places would see an uplift of up to £261.40 per place on average in the level of funding allocated to enhanced nursery placements.
- Benchmarking against other Local Authorities had shown that there are two main methods of allocating funding: a banded system and a set rate for each provision.
- Tables 5 and 6 within the report set out the financial modelling for increasing the enhanced place top-up value to £12,500.
- The proposed new approach for the HNB contribution to Early Years would result in an increase of approximately £44k, raising required funding from £1.698m currently to £1.743m.
- With regards to the funding of places in ARPS, the proposed new approach to standardise ARP rates at £12,500 would result in an increase of £268k against the overall annual budget allocation of £4.6m for ARPs (including the Maintained Nursery School ARPs). This would create an additional budget pressure of £168k for the 2025/26 financial year, if implemented from September. However, this approach would ensure consistent funding for all ARPs in Brent and provide schools that previously received less funding with adequate resources to continue meeting the needs of children in line with other ARPs. Additionally, it is anticipated that this could reduce the number of children requiring special school places if their needs could be effectively met within an ARP.
- The proposed funding approach is consistent with the Children and Families Act (2014) and the SEND Code of Practice (2015). An SLA would be put in place with each school and that sets out responsibilities, expectations and KPIs.

Following this, the Chair asked the Forum for any comments or questions with the following noted:

- In expressing support for the approach outlined within the report, further details were sought on the clawback position with members were advised would depend on when a pupil joined a school as that would have an impact on funding.

- Details were sought on whether the deficit had been costed for 2025-26 and how the offset would be calculated. In response, the Forum was advised that the team addressed affordability and sustainability when doing the costings for 2025-26 and £168k had been allocated for the offset.

The Chair thanked officers for the report. As no further questions or comments were raised the Forum **RESOLVED**:

(1) To approve the introduction of the new approach to SEND funding in Early Years settings as set out in section 4 of the report.

(2) To approve the introduction of a standard and consistent approach to funding ARPs across the borough, as set out in section 5 of the report.

9. Any Other Urgent Business

None.

10. Dates of Future Meetings

Members noted the remaining schedule of dates for meetings of the Schools Forum during the 2025-26 Municipal Year as follows with all meetings to be held online starting at 6pm:

- Tuesday 11 November 2025
- Monday 1 December 2025 (additional date if needed)
- Monday 26 January 2026
- Thursday 26 February 2026

The meeting closed at 7:01pm.

M Heiser
Chair