



MINUTES OF THE SCHOOLS FORUM

Held as an online meeting on Thursday 26 February 2026 at 6:00pm

Membership

Representing

PRESENT (all in remote attendance):

Governors

Mike Heiser (Chair)
Martin Beard
Jo Jhally
Mahendra Negi
Michael Odumosu

Headteachers

Siobhan Ali
Jude Enright
Jayne Jardine
Nisha Lingam
Melissa Loosemoore
Raphael Moss
Andy Prindiville (Vice-Chair)
Ranjna Shiyani
Hermann Farrington (representing Nick Cooper)

Non School Members

Wioletta Bura

Councillors

Councillor Grahl, Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Education & Employment

Trade Union

Lucy Cox

Officers

Nigel Chapman, Corporate Director Children Young People and Community Development
Shirley Parks, Director Education, Partnerships and Strategy
Gareth Drawmer, Head of Education and Learning
Folake Olufeko, Head of Finance
Ravinder Jassar, Deputy Director Corporate and Financial Planning
Roxanna Glennon, Head of Inclusion
James Kinsella & Abby Shinhmar, Governance Team

1. Apologies for Absence and Membership

Apologies for absence were received from Nick Cooper with Hermann Farrington attending as a substitute.

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 Monday 26 January 2026 as a correct record subject to the following amendment:

Reference on Page 6 to the increase in maintained nursery schools supplementary funding from £91m to £92m, being amended to reflect this represented an **uplift of 0.9%**. The hourly rate has also increased by 3.8%.

5. **Actions arising**

The Chair took the opportunity to thank Andy Prindiville for chairing the previous Schools Forum meeting.

6. **DSG High Needs Block Budgets 2026-27**

Folake Olufeko (Head of Finance, Brent Council) introduced a report that informed Schools Forum of the detailed DSG High Needs Block (HNB) budgets for adoption in 2026/27. The Forum noted the following key points as part of the update provided:

- The DfE's HNB funding had been confirmed at £95.3m for 2026/27. This was £4.3m more than that received in 2025/26 and represented an increase of 4.7%.
- £9.9m of the total HNB funding would be recouped by the Department for Education (DfE) to be paid directly to academies for their base funding, leaving a balance of £85.4m.
- The previously approved 0.5% (c£1.5m) transfer from the Schools Block to the HNB would not apply in 2026/27.
- The government had suspended the High Needs National Funding Formula (NFF), which previously determined Local Authorities' high needs allocations. As an interim measure, while the high needs funding methodology was being reviewed to ensure alignment with wider Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) reforms, allocations had been based on 2025/26 funding levels. Brent's HNB allocation of £95.3m for the next financial year was therefore derived from the Local Authority's 2025/26 funding, rather than a full NFF calculation that would have reflected increases in commissioned school places for children with SEND in 2026/27.
- As a result of the NFF suspension, the HNB allocation for the 2026/27 financial year did not include updated basic entitlement pupil numbers for special schools, nor the usual special free school adjustment. However, the import/export

adjustment, which reflected movements of pupils across Local Authority boundaries and the associated cost implications would continue to apply for 2026/27.

- The £4.3m year-on-year increase in funding against the HNB largely reflected the consolidation of the annualised 2025/26 Core Schools Budget Grant (CSBG) relating to special units and resourced provision. Consequently, this increase would not provide sufficient capacity to meet new demand pressures or inflationary cost increases in 2026/27.
- As part of wider SEND system reforms, a number of initiatives had been announced with further details to be set out in the upcoming Schools White Paper. The aim was to make specialist places in mainstream schools a core part of the local school offer across the country.
- The cumulative DSG deficit forecast was £18.4m by the end of 2025/26, following an in-year quarter 3 forecast overspend of £4.8m in 2025/26. As of January 2025, the number of EHCPs had increased by 8% compared to January 2024, with demand continuing to grow.
- The growth in EHCPs was a national and London wide trend, with the number of children assessed as meeting the threshold for support continuing to increase. As funding had not increased at the same pace as the increase in EHCPs, this continued to create financial pressures for many Local Authorities. This pressure was likely to be compounded by increasing price costs in the independent sector in the new financial year, associated with increasing wage costs following changes in the employer's national insurance contributions. A funding gap of up to £14.9m was forecast in the HNB for the next financial year 2026/27.
- The forecast £14.9m funding gap in 2026/27 had arisen from several cost pressures, including:
 - £2.3m for out-of-borough placements
 - £2.3m for independent sector placements
 - £1.3m for post-16 placements
 - £6.1m linked to increased commissioned SEND places and complexity of need.
- The budget assumed that the top up banding rates would remain the same for the Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) and Special Schools (as detailed in Appendix 3 of the report).
- The rates for Additionally Resourced Provisions (ARPs) had been standardised to £12,500 following Schools Forum approval in June 2025.
- There were increases in the overall top-up funding allocations for special schools and mainstream pupils both in and out of the borough. These budget increases reflected the rise in demand through increased commissioned places and the spending patterns of previous years. In total, £11.8m of the increased HNB funding had been allocated to meet demand pressures.
- A zero-based approach had been used to set the SEN Services budget. The £0.5m increase reflected the alignment of staffing to establishment levels, a projected 3.8% pay award and higher demand within the Speech and Language Therapy contract.
- Based on current modelling, pressures were projected to increase the cumulative deficit to £29m by March 2027 and £46m by the end of March 2028 when the statutory override was planned to end. These projections did not reflect any additional grant funding, but included mitigations set out the council's DSG Deficit Management Plan, which members were advised was the subject to a separate report on the Schools Forum meeting agenda.

- The available resources had been allocated within the funding constraints, leaving a forecast budgetary gap of £14.9m in 2026/27, in addition to the current deficit projection of £18.4m by the end of March 2026. In line with the above, if 90% grant funding was allocated to Brent to address the cumulative deficit, the current deficit forecast of £18.4m will reduce to £1.84m. The forecast cumulative deficit by March 2027 was therefore £16.7m.
- The main risk against the HNB budget remained the rising number of children and young people with EHCPs. In Brent, as of December 2025, there were 4,163 children and young people with an EHCP compared to 3,798 in December 2024, representing a 9.6% increase.
- For 2026/27, the Local Authority was required to consolidate all relevant legacy funding into a single Core Schools Budget Grant (CSB) combined rate, applied to each school's agreed place numbers for the year. This included the four 2025/26 funding streams now rolled into the CSBG: the historic Teachers' Pay and Pensions Grant (TPPG), the additional 3.4% cost-pressure funding, the 2025/26 Core Schools Budget Grant and an annualised 2025/26 pay-award funding. £6.4m had been set aside to pass on these grants to Pupil Referral Units (PRUs), Alternative Provision (AP) and Special Schools. This represented an increase of £4.5m compared to the additional grants allocated in 2025/26, utilising the total £4.3m growth against the HNB.
- Appendix 2 of the report set out the £14.9 million pressure including the Special Schools budget grant of £5,601.399.
- Appendix 3 of the report contained the banding rates.

The Chair thanked Folake Olufeko for her report and welcomed any questions from the Forum with the following being noted:

- Jude Enright sought clarity on the increase in the number of EHCPs, as at January 2025 given the impact on the deficit and pressure being compounded by increasing price costs in the independent sector and projected growth in the number of children requiring EHCPs alongside the budget allocations for individual schools detailed in Appendix 1 of the report. In response, Folake Olufeko clarified that the individual allocations reflected the current projections as well as forecast increase in ECHPs.

In response, it was agreed that details of the latest forecast and place numbers on which the individual school allocations had been based would be provided for members of the Forum with concern also expressed at the impact of the cost pressures being identified in placements and packages outside of the commissioning alliance.

Action: Folake Olufeko to provide figures on which schools allocations had been based.

The Chair thanked officers for the report. As no further questions or comments were raised the Forum **RESOLVED** to note the report and agree the HNB budgets as set out in Appendix 1.

7. Update on the DSG High Needs Block Deficit Management Plan

Folake Olufeko (Head of Finance, Brent Council) supported by Roxanna Glennon (Head of Inclusion) introduced a report detailing the progress to date against the DSG Management Plan aimed at supporting a reduction in expenditure against the High Needs Block of the Dedicated Schools' Grant (DSG) at a sustainable level. The Forum noted the following key points as part of the update provided:

- This report provided a further update on progress to date against the DSG Management Plan aimed at supporting a reduction in expenditure against the High Needs Block of the Dedicated Schools' Grant (DSG) at a sustainable level.
- The cumulative DSG deficit forecast was £18.4m by the end of 2025/26, following an in-year quarter 3 forecast overspend of £4.8m in 2025/26. The main cost driver of this deficit was the rising number of children with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) without a comparative increase in DSG HNB funding. As of January 2025, the number of EHCPs had increased by 8% compared to January 2024, with demand continuing to grow.
- Table 1 within the report showed the year-on-year increase of EHCPs over the past 6 years in Brent. The recent trend showed an average rate of growth of 10%, in line with the national trend, with a reduction in the last two years to 8% per year. Members were advised the decline could be attributed to the successful pilot of the DBV in SEND Programme in Brent which had commenced in 2022. For additional context, the HNB allocation from the DSG had increased by 3% in 2024/25 and 6% in 2025/26 and 4.7% in 2026/27, highlighting the on-going budget pressures.
- Following the end of Brent's DfE funded 'Delivering Better Value' (DBV) programme in April 2025 and in response to the ongoing challenges within the SEND system nationally, Brent had recently (January 2026) refined its HNB Management Plan to better reflect the current position. The central elements of the Management Plan, namely improving local sufficiency of special school places, further developing Brent's support offer for students with SEND and improving oversight of individual EHCPs, remain similar to before. However, some important changes were included as outlined below:
 - Improving sufficiency of local places: Brent's Phase 1 capital programme for SEND had to date delivered 298 additional places for children with SEND in Brent (with a further 84 expected to be delivered by January 2030). Despite this significant increase, further places were required.

To mitigate these pressures, a Phase 2 capital programme had been developed in 2025 (approved by Cabinet in January 2026). The Phase 2 capital programme aimed to deliver an additional 212 places for children with SEND in Brent focused on special school places. Based on the proposed completion dates, the programme had been designed to achieve potential cost avoidance of £4.3m over its duration, including £2.6m in 2026/27. This was based on creating 212 new places, with an average cost avoidance of £21k per place, representing the difference between placing a Brent child in an independent special school versus an in-borough special school. There was also the potential for transport cost avoidance estimated as £1.3m.

- Further developing support for students with SEND: In the 2025/26 financial year, additional capacity had been added to Brent's SEND Outreach teams

including capacity in the SEND Support and Brent Outreach Autism Team (BOAT). Further plans to expand Brent's SEND Outreach offer were currently in development and included a proposal for a service to replicate the most successful aspects of Brent's DBV funded 'Intervention First Team' (IFT) offer (an early intervention SEMH support service for children aged 5-7 and their families). However, progressing plans to a stage where their financial impact could be accurately modelled had been paused whilst details were awaited on release of the Schools White Paper (expected in Spring 2026). This decision had been made, as it was unclear what funding would be available within local areas for SEND Outreach and also where responsibilities for commissioning certain types of service would lie.

- Financial management workstream: This had involved a deep dive into each area of spend to identify efficiencies, including administrative charges to other local authorities for out-of-borough pupils in Brent (an increase of £125k in income) and a review of commissioning arrangements for placements within the independent sector. Additional proposed capacity in both SEND commissioning and the SEND 0-25 teams was being actively explored and a cost/benefit analysis completed. The focus of these roles would be on effectively managing spend in the independent non-maintained school sector (INMSS) and on education other than at school (EOTAS) packages, as well as spend on personal budgets. Brent was currently forecasting spend of £12.6m on INMSS provision for the 2025/26 financial year for 245 places (£51.4k/place/annum), an increase of £1m (and 8.5%) as compared with SEND on INMSS in the 2024/25.
- The government had confirmed that grant funding would be allocated to cover up to 90% of local authorities accumulated SEND deficits up to the end of March 2026, subject to an agreed local SEND Reform Plan. Importantly, any future support would be linked to assurance that the Council was taking steps to deliver a reformed, inclusive SEND system, aligned with the wider national reforms expected to be confirmed in the forthcoming Schools White Paper.
- In line with the above, if 90% grant funding was allocated to Brent to address the cumulative deficit, the current deficit forecast of £18.4m would reduce to £1.84m at the end of March 2026. However, the current forecast overspend in 2026/27 was expected to be £14.9m based on current demand and spend projections. The cumulative deficit by March 2027 could therefore rise to £16.7m. Treatment of the remaining 10% of deficits accrued by 31 March 2026 had not yet been confirmed.
- Not taking into account any further grant funding from central government to support the cumulative deficit, the modelling of the current DSG Deficit Management Plan showed the cumulative deficit could increase to £29m by March 2027 and £46m by the end of March 2028 when the statutory override was planned to end. These projections included mitigations set out the Management Plan (detailed with Appendix 1 of the report).
- The Management Plan would be revised to reflect new priorities in line with the SEND Reform Plan that was being developed in conjunction with the DfE (the Local Authority had been allocated a DfE SEND Finance Advisor). The modelling would also be updated once confirmation of the additional grant allocation to cover 90% had been received, as this was subject to the DfE's approval. Members were advised that further updates on the Management Plan and on-going work with the DfE would also continue to be provided for future Schools Forum meetings.

- In terms of the government White Paper, this was expected to set out a new policy framework for support for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities. As part of these reforms, the DfE had already announced changes to the national SEND system, such as every member of staff in nurseries, schools and colleges being required to receive SEND and inclusion training, supported by a £200m national training programme and a strengthened SEND Code of Practice. While these updates signalled a stronger national emphasis on inclusion and on ensuring that mainstream settings were better equipped to meet a broad range of needs, it was noted that the government had not yet set out detailed expectations or the funding arrangements that would underpin the wider reforms. In the meantime, Brent was continuing to drive forward agreed actions on the DSG Deficit Management Plan and to develop the local SEND system. In this regard, a Headteacher SEND Reference Group had been established with representation from early years, primary, secondary and special schools. The group was being used to shape changes to the local system, including the SEND support offer, to ensure it met local needs.

The Chair thanked Folake Olufeko and Roxanna Glennon for the report and update on progress against each workstream and welcomed any comments or questions from the Forum with the following being noted:

- Raphael Moss recognised the direction of travel outlined and challenging nature of the position needing to be addressed in terms of ongoing demand and the increasing costs associated with placements and packages within the independent sector, seeking further details on the plans to address this position whilst also ensuring care needs continued to be met. In response, Roxanna Glennon outlined the range of costs involved in the provision of some of the most expensive types of placements and packages with those at the highest end (above £100k) often involving some form of residential and more complex care packages for which providers were more limited. Below that level, there were a wider range of providers who would be selected on the basis of need although challenges were still experienced in the approach adopted by some independent providers around their selection approach with it noted that schools were often supporting pupils with more complex need on a cheaper basis. The need to address the approach adopted by private sector providers was highlighted as one of the key issues for government to address within the SEND White Paper by the Chair, given the impact on the remit of the Forum.

As no further questions or comments were raised the Forum **RESOLVED** to note the updated Deficit Management Plan in the context of recent updates from the government regarding support towards local authorities' accumulated DSG deficits and in consideration of the Schools White paper that is expected to be published in Spring.

8. Any Other Urgent Business

8.1 Release of SEND White Paper

Shirley Parks was invited to provide a brief summary of the key headlines within the Government's recently announced SEND White Paper *Every Child Achieving and Thriving*. In introducing the key themes, the Forum was advised that the aim of the White Paper was to make mainstream schools more inclusive with targeted support and a reduction in EHCPs backed by a £3.7 billion investment with proposals including

establishing a standardised, tiered support framework and streamlining the EHCP (Education, Health and Care Plan) process based on a 10 year programme of change. Key proposals included:

- Tiered System of Support: Introducing a standardised, four-layer approach to needs: Universal, Targeted, Targeted Plus, and Specialist.
- Individual Support Plans (ISPs): Requiring all schools to create ISPs for children with identified SEND to provide a clear, trackable record of interventions.
- Mainstream Inclusion: Investing in new places for 'inclusion bases' in mainstream schools and providing enhanced staff training to reduce reliance on specialist placements.
- Reformed EHCPs: Streamlining the EHCP application and review process to reduce bureaucracy, digitise records, and increase transparency.
- Specialist Staffing: Placing more educational psychologists, speech and language practitioners, and specialised leaders directly within mainstream schools and educational hubs.
- Cost Controls for Independent Schools: Ensuring local authorities pay a reasonable and standardised price for placements at independent special schools, preventing inflated fees.

In noting the financial requirements to deliver the programme, the Forum was advised of the establishment of a Specialist SEND Head Teacher Working Group to support development of the plans with further details now awaited from the DfE on the SEND Reform Pack. Once received, the Council would then need to prepare and submit a SEND Reform Plan to enable the release of funding.

In terms of initial comments raised, Jude Enright felt that it looked like the funding would be targeted where needed but sought details on any modelling undertaken in relation to the age at which EHCPs currently remained in placed (up to 25). Roxanna Glennon explained the DfE's modelling showed an increase in EHCP numbers and it was expected for EHCPs to continue to rise until 2030 and this equated to 8-9% of the school population. It was not clear if modelling had been done around the impact of the proposed changes on demand. It was, however, expected that the number of EHCPs would reduce to reflect current levels of 5% within the school population by 2035.

Shirley Parks stated that the government had undertaken national modelling and looked at transitions between education which included plans for the older cohort, which could be national systems of banding. Folake Olufeko confirmed that a management plan had been completed until the end of 2028, which would be updated following work with the DfE.

Gareth Drawmer said that following the release of the White Paper there would be significant changes in relation to the approach involving Academies & Multi Academy Trusts, addressing levels of attainment and the Pupil Premium.

Nigel Chapman further highlighted the proposed changes as mentioned in the White Paper, which included a proposal to review the high needs funding formula, the role of Schools Forum in making decisions and how resources could be used in early years and for Post 16 services with further details expected by the end of the financial year. The Chair asked if a special Schools Forum meeting was needed before June 2026.

Nigel Chapman said that the High Needs Sub-Group may need to meet before June and that, if required, a further updated could be provided for the June Schools Forum.

8.2 Forum Membership Changes

Members were advised that this would be Andy Prindiville's final meeting as a member of the Forum, pending him moving to take up a new position in April 2026 and therefore leaving the role of Vice Chair. The Chair took the opportunity, on behalf of the Forum, to thank Andy Prindiville for his efforts and work as a member and Vice-Chair and to wish him well in his new position with anyone interested in taking on the role of Vice-Chair also encouraged to put their names forward.

It was also reported that Melissa Loosemore would be stepping down as a member of the Forum, following retirement from her current headteacher position. The Chair also took the opportunity to thank Melissa Loosemore for her valuable input as a member of the Forum and to wish her well in her retirement.

As a final update the Chair advised that he was pleased to welcome Mahendra Negi (Secondary Governor) and Shiobhan Ali (Primary Head) as new members of the Schools Forum.

9. Dates of Future Meetings

Members noted the provisional schedule of dates for meetings of the Forum during the 2025-26 Municipal Year would be circulated once the Council's draft calendar of meetings had been finalised.

The meeting closed at 7:10pm.

Mike Heiser
Chair