**Minutes of Schools Forum Meeting**

**24th June 2025 at 2.30 pm**

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| ***Members*** | ***Position*** | ***Voting*** | ***Attendance*** |
| **Vacancy** | **Primary Maintained Headteacher** | **Voting** | **n/a** |
| Vicky Aspen | Special Maintained Headteacher | Voting | Present |
| Victoria Richmond | Primary Academy Headteacher | Voting | Present |
| **Vacancy** | **Secondary Academy Headteacher** | **Voting** | **n/a** |
| Marie Woolston | Special/PRU Academy Headteacher | Voting | Present |
| Kyle Taylor | CFO Multi-Academy Trust | Voting | Present |
| Richard Warnham | Governor Primary Maintained | Voting | Apologies |
| Barbara Fincham | Governor Primary Academy | Voting | Present |
| Dympna Lennon | Governor Secondary Maintained | Voting | Present |
| Peter Martin (Chair) | Governor Secondary Academy | Voting | Apologies |
| Justin Stuart | Governor Special and PRU | Voting | Apologies |
| Hannah Cartwright | Early Years Representative | Non-voting | Apologies |
| Simon Cook | 16-19 Provider Representative | Non-voting | Apologies |
| **Vacancy** | **C of E Diocese Representative** | **Voting** | **n/a** |
| **Vacancy** | **RC Diocese Representative** | **Voting** | **n/a** |
| **Vacancy** | **Teaching Unions Representative** | **Non-voting** | **n/a** |
| Stuart Gardner | CEO, Multi Academy Trust | Voting | Present |
| Elizabeth Halton | SPI over 19 Provisions | Non-voting | Present |
| ***In Attendance*** |  |  |  |
| Celia Buxton | Assistant Director of Education and SEND LA |  | Present |
| Maria Beaney | Finance Business Partner LA |  | Present |
| Sarah Phillipson | Governance Professional |  | Present |
| Tracey Coombs | Portfolio Holder for Education |  | Apologies |
| Paul Clarke | Strategic Head of Education, Planning and Access |  | Apologies |
| Leanne Farach | Director of Children's Services |  | Apologies |

1. Welcome, attendance and apologies

As noted above.

Peter Martin gave his apologies and requested that SP Chair the meeting.

1. Declaration of Interests

No changes to the previously declared interests and no conflicts to the agenda.

1. Minutes from the previous meeting, 21st January 2025

Accuracy:

Matters Arising:

**Deferred to the next meeting in July 2025.**

1. 2024-25 DSG Outturn Presentation – Maria Beaney:

MB explained that as of 31st March 2024, the DSG reserve reported a £19.378m deficit; this reduced to £16.398m by March 2025, when the in-year underspend of £2.980m was transferred into the reserve. This is £702,000 worse than submitted as part of the Safety Valve Improvement Plan (SVIP) or £2.732m adrift on the HNB element only.

The DSG is split into four funding blocks: early years, high needs, school block, and central services. At the end of the financial year, all surplus and deficit amounts are consolidated into a single reserve.

The early years block had a budget of £32.85 million and spent £32.171 million. The largest expenditure was £22.4 million on funding for three and four-year-olds. The school block showed an underspend, particularly in growth funding, which was primarily due to schools delaying fund drawdown until April, crossing the financial year boundary.

**Q - The government is extending the safety valve programme. How does this affect us?**

A - Our current safety valve agreement ends at the end of March. The government is not extending our specific agreement, and not entering into new safety valve agreements with Local Authorities. However, the statutory override, which allows us to park our deficits and keep them separate from the general fund, has been extended to March 2028. This gives us a bit of breathing room, but do not mistake it for a complete solution. We still need to push forward with our safety valve programme. It is more of a slight pause than a comprehensive resolution.

**Q - With this statutory override, what real impact does it have for us?**

A - The extension is essentially just a delay. While we can technically park our deficits until March 2028, it does not solve our fundamental financial challenges. We cannot simply sit back and relax, continuing to work on our safety valve programme, implementing our strategies, and reducing our overall deficit. The override gives us a bit more time to manage our finances, but it is not a permanent fix. We need to continue our efforts to bring our spending under control and meet our financial targets.

The Schools forum members noted this report.

1. 2024-25 School Reserves Outturn Report– Maria Beaney:

MB presented the School Reserves Outturn Report, which detailed the financial status of 11 schools that had exceeded their maximum reserve rollover. The report outlined each school's reserve balance, explaining why they had gone over their permitted 8% maximum of government grant income. MB anonymised the data to protect individual school identities, allowing forum members to vote on each school's reserve status.

**Q - How do we verify that schools are not just holding onto reserves indefinitely for capital contributions?**

A - We monitor capital expenditure carefully. Schools must spend capital expenditure within four years. For instance, in one specific case, if the capital contribution is not made, the school would only have £7,000 to fund £157,000 worth of already commissioned capital works.

**Q - Multi-Academy Trusts typically have minimum reserve levels, usually around 5% of total income. Does this policy consider minimum reserve requirements?**

A - Currently, our policy does not include minimum reserve levels. I am planning to consult with schools about introducing both minimum and maximum reserve thresholds. My recommendation is to establish a minimum funding level of £50,000. However, implementing this is complex, especially for maintained schools that lack the same financial flexibility as Multi-Academy Trusts.

**Q - The report initially mentioned 11 schools, but only discussed 9. Are there two more schools to review?**

A - Yes, there were two additional schools. One had reserves of £103,453, over its maximum by £9,952. The last school had reserves of £269,640, technically over by just one pound.

The School forum members eligible, voted on each school as follows:

* £104k – Funding received on the 31st March – APPROVED
* £152k – Expected to make a revenue contribution to capital, delayed work - APPROVED
* £164K – In a deficit recovery plan, had to take action sooner and will be spent next year. APPROVED
* £16,426 – Building works, capital – APPROVED
* £13k - Building work – APPROVED
* £43k - Entering into a deficit plan, due to a member of staff – APPROVED
* £135k – Made plans on building works, the schemes were not taken forward – APPROVED
* £45k – Large allocation of High needs funding on 31st March – APPROVED
* £52 – APPROVED
* £9k – APPROVED
* £1 – APPROVED

**Decision - For each of the 11 schools discussed, the Schools forum voted NOT to claw back excess reserves. The Schools forum voted and agreed to allow schools to retain their full reserve amounts based on individual explanations.**

1. Safety Valve Recovery Plan update – Celia Buxton – Confidential:

CB noted the following reports:

* Safety Valve Recovery
* SEND Improvement Plan
* AP and High Needs Top-up Funding Arrangements 2025-26

CB presented a comprehensive update on the Safety Valve Recovery Plan, outlining significant challenges in the high-needs block funding. The update revealed that the total high-needs budget for 2025-26 was £62.2 million, with a current forecast spending of £70.2 million, resulting in a substantial £8 million deficit. The presentation highlighted critical issues, including a dramatic increase in EHCP needs assessment requests and the potential financial implications for special schools and mainstream provisions.

Key points:

* The independent sector currently costs nearly £21 million for a relatively small number of children.
* EHCP needs assessment requests have nearly doubled.
* The statutory override has been extended to March 2028, providing temporary financial breathing room.

**Q - Changing the banding for September seems extremely challenging. Would this not cause a significant disruption?**

A – We are not talking about dramatic cuts across all bands, considering a more nuanced approach, potentially introducing more layers between existing bands. We recognise the challenges, especially mid-academic year. Any changes would likely be phased and consultative, potentially not implemented until January 2025 at the earliest.

**Q – What is the timeline for developing systemic solutions to these challenges?**

A – We are looking to have the SEND Strategy consultation completed by 18th July. In September 2025, we will establish working groups to develop solutions.

**Q - How will schools be involved in developing these solutions?**

A - We plan to expand the working groups in September 2025, bringing in more voices to have detailed conversations about solutions. The goal is to build a comprehensive plan that addresses the systemic challenges we are facing.

**Q - Are we focusing enough on special schools and mainstream provisions, given the significant independent school spending?**

A - We have a dedicated commissioning team for independent sector management. However, we are often forced to use independent providers when we lack alternative placements. We are working with CEOs to develop local provisions that can reduce the need for expensive independent school placements. Nationally, about 3% of children should have EHCPs, but Medway's average is only 1.5%. Some mainstream schools have no children with an EHCP, which is statistically unlikely. We are considering increasing the school's block to high needs block transfer from 0.5% to 1% to support more inclusive practices.

**Q - How are you ensuring that reducing funding will not create more expensive problems?**

A - We need a phased approach and are trying to transition children from independent placements to local provisions. Our goal is to avoid costly tribunals and judicial reviews. By bringing children back to local settings, we can more effectively manage annual reviews, track attendance, and monitor their progress.

**Q - What infrastructure supports special schools beyond place funding?**

A - The infrastructure of special schools is supported by band funding. With smaller class sizes (e.g., eight children), achieving economies of scale is challenging. Everything beyond basic teacher and heating costs comes from banded funding, not place funding.

The Schools forum members noted this report.

1. Funding Support Business Cases – Standard Item:

MB noted that there are no business support funding collections included in the 2025/26 budget. She highlighted that there is one school for which the Local Authority is expecting a business case, which will be submitted to the CB for approval, as the Local Authority has already set aside the budget.

1. Governance Update - Term of Office Renewal – SP:

* Stuart Gardiner - Term of Office to be renewed – All CEO's MATs have agreed for SG to continue as their representative on the Schools forum.
* Primary Maintained Headteacher – Steve Geary, new member application.
* Richard Warnham is stepping down from the Schools forum in July 2025.
* Hilary Sanders has retired - SP has contacted the diocese for a nomination.

No response to date.

* Kyle Taylor - Term of Office to be renewed
* Barbara Fincham - Term of Office to be renewed
* Peter Martin - Term of Office to be renewed
* Hannah Cartwright - Term of Office to be renewed
* Simon Cook's Term of Office has ceased.

**Decisions – Stuart Gardiner confirmed to continue representing CEOs MATs, agreed by Schools forum members**

**Steve Geary, new Primary Maintained Headteacher member, agreed by Schools forum members.**

**Action - SP to email Schools forum members regarding their term of office renewal**

1. AOB:

None.

The meeting closed at 3.30pm.