

Meeting of the Schools Forum
Held on Thursday 15th May 2025 at 1.30pm
via MS Teams Digital Platform

Minutes

NAME	Organisation - School Members	Attended
Rachel Lewis	Hindley Sure Start Nursery	Yes
Louise Curran	Rowan Tree Primary	Yes
Anne Isherwood	Three Towers Alternative Provision Academy	Yes
Tracy Mingaud-Cunningham	Primary Governor	Yes
Adrian Hardy	Secondary Governor	Yes
Gary Hayes	Orrell St James Primary	Yes
Fiona Quinlivan	Howe Bridge St Michael's Primary	Apologies
Julie Hassan	St Oswald's Catholic Primary	Yes
Matthew Boyle	Leigh St Thomas CE Primary School	Yes
Lisa Hobden	St Patrick's Catholic Primary School	Yes
Alan Birchall	Byrchall High (Chair)	Yes
Andy McGlown	St. Peters RC High School	Yes
Martin Wood	The Deanery High School	Apologies
Paul Davies	Fred Longworth High School	No
	Organisation - Non School Members	
Sue Morris	Care Love Learn Childcare Limited	No
Peter McGhee	St John Rigby College	Yes
Max Atkins	Wigan NEU	Apologies
Need nominated member	Diocesan Representative	
	Organisation- Nominated observers	
Cllr Jenny Bullen	Cabinet Member	Apologies
Karen Parkin	NEU	Yes
Mike Wilkinson	Wigan NASUWT	Yes
Mark Clayton	GMB	No
	Organisation - In Attendance	
Mark Rotheram (KR)	LA Finance – Strategic Finance Manager	Yes
Kirsten Reid (KR)	LA Finance – Group Finance Manager (Schools)	Yes
Cath Pealing (CP)	Assistant Service Director, Education	Yes
Kellie Williams (KW)	Service Lead SEND	Yes
Jo Sullivan	Clerk to the Forum, Wigan Council Governor Services	Yes

Quorum: 40% (8 of the 18 current School/Non-School Members)

Item & Intended Outcome

1. Apologies for Absence

Apologies were received and accepted from Max Atkins, Cllr Bullen, Martin Wood, Fiona Quinlivan.

The Chair highlighted that two of the secondary school representatives had not attended meetings this year. The Chair asked the third secondary school representative to take this information back to the consortia and discuss options.

2. Agreement of Any Other Urgent Business to Be Added to the Agenda

No other business was raised.

3. Previous Minutes

Members **confirmed** that the minutes from the Forum meeting held on **16th January 2025** were a correct record.

4. High Needs Recovery Plan

Members had **received** the **CONFIDENTIAL** minutes of the spring term High Needs Subgroup (including a paper on Reforming SEND finance) in advance of the meeting.

Members had received a **confidential** update on the High Needs Block Recovery plan in advance of the meeting.

MR talked through the report and highlighted:

- On the 17th October 2014, proposals had been outlined to School's Forum, as set out in Wigan's DSG Recovery Plan (required by EFSA Conditions of Grant).
- The current position was considerably worse than last year, but in line with what the Council had been reporting this year at Forum.
- There would be no additional funding from the Government.
- Additionally, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) were yet to announce whether the regulations which ring-fence DSG deficits from the Council's wider financial position in their statutory accounts, would be extended or end as planned of the 31st March 2026. This meant that any DSG deficit balance that had been carried forward would have to be covered by Council reserves. It was therefore crucial that the pressures on the High Needs Block were addressed as a matter of priority to prevent the continued escalation of spend.
- Further to this the Home to School Transport service overspent by £3.8m in 2024/25. Whilst the Council had increased the 2025/26 budget for this service by £1.432m there remained an ongoing pressure in this area. Prior to 2025/26 the Council had been fortunate to maintain sufficient cash balances which had meant that overspends on the DSG and wider revenue budgets had been able to be managed. Going forward this would no longer be the case, and the Council would need to start borrowing to manage these cashflows which would incur interest.

- The HNB subgroup met in the spring term – minutes had been circulated to Members in advance of the meeting.
- The latest projected forecast for the High Needs Block without any further mitigation was as follows:

Year	23/24 Out-turn	24/25 Projected Out-turn	25/26 Forecast	26/27 Forecast	27/28 Forecast
High Needs Block total expenditure	49,911,886	62,674,949	65,963,708	70,516,346	74,495,173
High Needs Block Funding (after recoupment)	-47,397,657	-50,132,743	-55,039,502	-56,965,885	-58,959,691
In year position (+ deficit / - surplus)	2,514,229	12,542,206	10,924,206	13,550,461	15,535,483
Cumulative Position (+ deficit / - surplus)	5,585,390	18,127,597	29,051,803	42,602,264	58,137,747

- This assumed that HNB funding would increase by 3.5% in 2026/27 and 2027/28.

KW reported on the DSG Management Plan progress, which had been circulated to Members in advance of the meeting:

- The DSG Management plan detailed 11 initial proposals, all detailed in the report.
- The schools block top slice would need to be reviewed by Forum on annual basis.
- Exceptional funding – the initial proposal was to cease new applications for funding from 2025-26 with a saving of £1.1m.
- It was acknowledged that the Council need to review the High Needs Fund Banding System and the impact on any changes to the overall position.
- The Council would revisit the proposal and look at the HNB funding system in new academic year and report back to Forum.
- Out of Borough recoupment – there was an urgent need to strengthen the oversight of recoupment arrangements. We knew from our review last year that we could have saved around £165k if all this money was given back to the Council. We needed to ensure that we were receiving our sourced funding and schools were receiving top up funding for placements where children lived in other authorities. This process must be done as accurately as possible.
- The Council would be contacting schools to check information about EHCPs where pupils were educated in other Local Authorities.
- Early Years additional resource – some staff absence had resulted to delays in the financial modelling. This was due to start in June and would come to Forum in the new academic year.
- In terms of early identification, the Council needed to look at transition arrangements from Early Years to reception.
- Our biggest challenge was independent places. An additional paper had been circulated to Members around the increasing number of special school places. The proposal would reduce the need to place children in the independent sector and free up places in maintained schools.
- We also needed to make sure we were moving children away from independent provision at the natural transition point. We currently had between 10 and 20 children where that natural transition enabled us to do that.

Alan Birchall joined the meeting at 1:53pm.

- Meetings had been taking place with independent providers to tackle the large volume of fee increase requests and most of these were yet to be resolved.
- Risks remained the same as reported at the last meeting, the key growing concern was statutory override. SEND funding did not reflect the complexity of the needs of our children locally.
- The main aim and objective of this plan was to ensure we were reducing the number of independent schools and having the funding back in our budget.

Members **noted** the recommendations in point 5 of report.

Q. At an earlier meeting, the projected outturn was £62m and the proposed budget for 2025-26 detailed a £55m outturn. The list of savings did not seem to add up to that gap. Could you please clarify?

A. £55m was the grant for the HNB next year. When we set the budget, we needed to make the budget include that funding. The forecasted outturn for 2025-26 was £65.9m so £11m would be added to deficit next year.

CP – it was important to note that the SEND and Alternative Provision business case had been put forward as a way of reducing the budget. The Council want to have some capital investment, and this would prevent us from sending children out of borough. There would also be savings on transport costs and provide our children with a better education. Huge savings would not be made immediately but would be long term.

Members acknowledged that the Local Authority were doing their best to reduce the costs.

The following confidential paper had been circulated to Members in advance of the meeting:

‘Proposals to increase the number of special school places to enable more children and young people with EHC Plans to remain in an in-borough school’.

CP reported that there was as shortage of special school places at Landgate and Oakfield. The Council had been provided with the opportunity to develop the former Abram Bryn Gates Primary School site. We had met with the DfE who had agreed that we could use the building for next 12-18 months. We could develop a great provision short term and were looking at the long-term expansion of Landgate. There was a significant number of places currently at independent schools, 6 of whom cost £100k each per year. The cost of opening the provision had been detailed in the report. The cost was high but a lot less than what independent provision was costing us. We could also reduce the cost of transport.

Q. Where was the capital money coming from?

A. We get an allocation of SEND capital. The SEND sufficiency strategy may involve some borrowing but if we invested, we would reduce the revenue spend and what was coming out of the HNB fund. This was a great investment for Wigan and Aspire was a great provision.

Q. What was the timeframe?

A. The new provision would be open from September 2025.

KW – we had had conversations with secondary schools around the complexity of some of the children due to start Y7. Some of these higher needs' children would now be offered places at Oakfield. It would be a phased approach but addressed the medium- and long-term needs.

Q. Abram Bryn Gates had initially been earmarked as a Free School. Would there be any financial penalty for not going forward?

A. No and we would still go forward with the plan but as yet had no timescales from the DfE. We would re-negotiate in due course.

CP thanked colleagues for their continued support.

5. Any Other Urgent Business

No other business had been raised.

6. Future Meeting Dates

- Summer 2 – Thursday 26th June 2025 at 1.30pm.

The meeting closed at 2:20pm.

Background documents (available for public inspection):

Appendices to the circulated briefing reports disclose important facts on which the reports are based and were relied upon in preparing the reports. Copies of the background documents are available up to 4 years after the date of the meeting. If you would like a copy, please contact the Forum Clerk

j.sullivan@wigan.gov.uk.