MINUTES OF MEETING

Nottinghamshire County Council

Meeting title:	**Nottinghamshire Early Years and Schools Forum**
Date and time:	**11th June 2026, 2pm to 4pm**
Location:	**Microsoft Teams**

Membership
'A' denotes absence

A	Alison Prodger	Maintained Primary Head Teacher
	Steve Border	Maintained Primary Head Teacher
	Ben Trenowden	Maintained Primary Head Teacher
	Karl Hopkinson	Maintained Primary Head Teacher
	Kirsty Lowde	Maintained Secondary Head Teacher
	Anne Hall	Academy Representative – (Vice Chair)
	Neil Holmes	Academy Representative
A	James Macdonald	Academy Representative - (Chair)
	Neil Robinson	Academy Representative
	Daniel Moore	Academy Representative
	Ella Tuxford	Academy Representative
	Katie Thackery	Academy Representative
	Matt Rooney	Maintained Special School Head Teacher
	Jamie Hutchinson	Academy Special School Head Teacher
A	Colin Barnard	Governor Maintained School Representative
	Andy Palmer	Governor Maintained School Representative
	Penny Richardson	Governor Academy Representative
	Laura Gapski	PVI - Early Years Group Member
	Karen Richards	PVI - Early Years Group Member
A	Nigel Frith	Church of England Diocese Representative
A	Louise Knott	14-19 Partnership Representative
	Joe Jefferies	Trade Union Representative - NASUWT
A	Jo Myers	Trade Union Representative - UNISON

In attendance:

Anne Coyle	Executive Director Children and Families Services
Orlaith Green	Temporary Director of Education, Learning and Inclusion
Gareth Moss	Group Manager, Financial Services and Deputy Section 151 Officer
Karen Hughman	Head of Education Quality, Provision, Learning & Inclusion
Steve Hawkins	Senior Finance Business Partner, Children and Families Finance
Jason Gooch	Finance Business Partner, Children and Families Finance
Mandy Stratford	Early Years Strategic Manager
Rachel Livesey	Finance Business Partner, Children and Families Finance
Aaron Connor	Finance Business Partner, Children and Families Finance
Toni Gardner	Assistant Accountant, Children and Families Finance – (Clerk)

1. Welcome and introductions

- Anne Hall welcomed all members

Apologies for Absence

- Apologies received from James Macdonald, Colin Bernard, Nigel Frith, and Louise Knott.
- Apologies accepted.

2. Minutes of previous meeting (12th February 2026) — **ACTION**

- Minutes approved as accurate.

3. 3a 2025-26 DSG Final Accounts Outturn

- Jason Gooch presented the report.
- Report summarises Nottinghamshire's 2025–26 Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) outturn position. Table shows the four DSG funding blocks: Schools, High Needs, Early Years, and Central Services Schools.
  For each block, the table lists: the allocated budget, actual net expenditure (outturn), and the variance (over- or underspend).
- Nottinghamshire received £974M in Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) for 2025–26 but spent £1,015M, resulting in an overall overspend of £41.464M.
- Joe Jefferies – The teacher trade union representative wish to raise a concern about the Trade Union Facilities Fund (TUF), specifically regarding delegated and de-delegated funding.

  They were told that £18,000 from the TUF had been absorbed into the DSG to help offset the High Needs Block deficit.

  The unions state that the TUF is meant to be ring-fenced, ensuring contributions from schools are only used to support schools releasing union representatives. Removing funds for other purposes is seen as undermining the integrity and transparency of the fund.

  The unions have formally requested the £18,000 be returned. A further concern was raised about a possible error in the report, which references a £0.3 million underspend, as this exceeds the total TUF budget and does not make sense. The unions are seeking a clear explanation and resolution.
- Karen Hughman – acknowledges the concern raised about the TUF and notes it was unexpected for many, including herself as budget holder.

  Historically, any surplus in the fund has been carried forward, and no change to this approach had been anticipated.

  Clarified that the situation was not initiated by the local authority but is instead funding requirements for the Department for Education (DfE).
- Steve Hawkins – The £0.3 million underspend referenced is not an in-year underspend, but an accumulated balance (£284k) carried forward from previous years.

  2025–26, spending broadly matched the income received, with no significant new underspend generated in-year.

  Previously, surpluses could be carried forward, allowing funds like the TUF to build up reserves.

  However, position has changed because the overall DSG (non-ISB) reserve is now in deficit.

Under DfE regulations, once a deficit exists, the local authority is no longer allowed to carry forward underspends. Instead, any underspends must be used to offset the High Needs Block deficit, and this is considered when determining eligibility for High Needs stability funding.

The key point is that this change is mandated by the DfE, not a local decision by the council.

- Joe Jefferies – doesn't make sense for TUF money to be absorbed into the DSG deficit, since it is originally delegated from schools and academies and then paid back into a ring-fenced fund.

  Warns that if this continues, schools and academies may stop contributing, which could undermine or collapse the fund entirely.

  The concern highlights a risk to the sustainability of the Trade Union Facilities Fund due to the new treatment of underspends.

- Karen Hughman – due to the inability to carry forward funds, all available money each year must be spent and there is a need to work together to manage the situation going forward without changing existing support plans for this year.

- A suggestion was made that the trade unions consider formally raising their concerns with the DfE regarding the implications of the new funding arrangements.

- Penny Richardson – raised questions about Table 1 of the report, noting they may be better suited to the High Needs Working Group.

  Interested in how certain spending categories contribute to:
  - achieving desired outcomes, and
  - reducing the growing High Needs deficit.

  Suggested future reports could align more clearly with Section 251 budget lines to improve transparency and identified four specific budget areas that are unclear or require further explanation.

  "Family Network Funding (FNF)"
  - what it is?
  - how it links to operational guidance?
  - how it helps reduce ongoing overspend?

- Orlaith Green – FNF refers to Element 3 (top-up funding) within the High Needs Block for SEND pupils. Term is slightly misleading, as it actually relates to "families of schools" rather than individual families. Funding is devolved to groups of schools, allowing them to manage support for pupils collaboratively.

- Penny Richardson – asked for clarification on "divisional costs" within the High Needs budget. Noted if these related to support teachers or advisory services, they would typically appear under a different Section 251 category.

  Steve Hawkins/ Jason Gooch explained that divisional costs mainly cover business support functions, such as:
  - administrative support to teams listed in the budget,

  The cost was confirmed to be around £415,000 spent in the previous year, with a larger budget not fully utilised.

- Clarification on the "SEND improvement" budget line.

Orlaith Green - Funding supports SEND improvement activity following the 2023 inspection. The work is carried out by a dedicated team.

Involves working with schools through the school improvement team to enhance SEND provision, SEND specialists and school improvement advisors are employed to provide strategic leadership and guidance to schools. Their role focuses on supporting and driving school improvement, particularly in relation to SEND provision.

- SEND transport budget line (£1.7M), noting that Nottinghamshire appears unique among its statistical neighbours in including this expenditure.

  - why this cost remains, believed such arrangements were being phased out.

  Steve Hawkins - Nottinghamshire is one of the few authorities still permitted to charge this cost, as it is based on a historical arrangement predating 2013.

  Arrangement is approved annually by the Early Years and Schools Forum and is compliant with DfE guidance, which allows continuation of such legacy agreements.
  The SEND transport contribution forms part of a much larger overall transport expenditure around £24–25M.

- Penny Richardson suggested to approve budget proposals additional detail are required, particularly Section 251 references to enable cross-checking with operational guidance.

  Proposed adding a reference column or links to operational guidance in reports to improve accessibility and transparency.

  In response, it was suggested that future High Needs Block budget setting reports (e.g. in February) could include this mapping to Section 251 categories.
  Penny agreed with the proposal and concluded by thanking the group.

- Matt Rooney sought clarification on whether High Level Needs (HLN), Additional Family Needs (AFN), and FNF funding streams were fixed budgets and whether overspending was a deliberate decision.

  Orlaith Green – Explained AFN and FNF are fixed funding pots, but HLN is demand-led and not fixed.

  The overspend is primarily within HLN, driven by a higher number of children qualifying for support than anticipated, despite a prior budget increase.

  A smaller variation in AFN relates to cross-border funding issues, where expected income was not achieved due to delays and disputes with other local authorities. As a result, the income target for AFN has been removed to stabilise budgeting. Work is underway to improve cross-border processes, including collaboration with neighbouring authorities and a move toward greater regional consistency.

- Matt Rooney queried the special school overspend.
  It was explained that the overspend is largely due to more Nottinghamshire pupils being placed in other local authority special schools (especially in Nottingham City) than originally budgeted for, along with delays in recouping cross-border funding.

  The import-export adjustment acts only as a partial “shock absorber”, mainly covering place funding transfer between authorities, but not fully offsetting top-up funding pressures, where most overspend occurs.

Karen Hughman added that historical accounting practices masked overspends, as costs for mid-year placements were previously recorded elsewhere. A correction made around two years ago now ensures that all additional and mid-year placements are correctly recorded in the special school budget line. Also noted that, although this creates an apparent overspend, it still represent better value than more expensive independent or non-maintained placements, effectively achieving cost avoidance.

- Matt Rooney asked how many pupils are currently attending New Horizons School compared to its funded capacity of 144 places.

  Ben Trenowden shared that the school is currently operating at around 40–50% capacity, as part of a planned phased approach to allow the school to establish itself and integrate pupils effectively.

  Orlaith Green - 60 students currently on roll at Horizons, a phased approach has been adopted to support effective transition for the children.

  Seconded a request by Penny Richardson to reinstate the High Needs Block Working Group to enable more detailed and focused discussion of complex High Needs budget issues. **OG/TG**

- Ben Trenowden representing Mansfield schools raised concerns about the amount spent on independent specialist provision (ISP), describing it as inefficient and “money leaving the system” without building long-term capacity.

  Schools feel this spending is unsustainable and likely to continue increasing, with no current indication of reduction.

  Highlighted that many children are waiting extended periods (2–3 years) for specialist placements, negatively affecting their outcomes.

  There is a strong view that Nottinghamshire does not have enough maintained specialist places to meet growing demand.

  The long-term strategy of increased inclusion in mainstream schools is acknowledged, but it is noted that financial benefits will take time to materialise.

  Question raised whether financial modelling has been undertaken to assess when investing in additional local provision would become more cost-effective than relying on ISPs.

  Ben suggested considering a strategic shift to:
  - reduce reliance on ISPs,
  - increase local specialist provision, and
  - shorten waiting times for children with named placements.

- Orlaith Green supports the concerns raised and emphasised the need to reconvene the High Needs Working Group to review previous work and next steps.

  Proposed strengthening SEND governance, including aligning the Schools Forum Chair more formally within SEND structures, in line with the White Paper.

  Outlined the strategic direction from government, focusing on:
  - Inclusive mainstream education
  - Developing more local provision
  - Reducing reliance on distant independent placements.

		Plans include creating enhanced provision units, SEND hubs, and satellite special schools closer to communities. Priority will be given to children currently waiting for specialist placements. Work is also underway to improve placement processes, consultations, and transport arrangements to support more local schooling. Significant new investment (£6M in year one, with similar or greater funding in years two and three) will support these changes. Funding will expand specialist services, including: - speech and language therapy, - educational psychology, - occupational therapy, and - specialist SEND teachers. Overall, there is confidence that system reform and investment will improve inclusion, capacity, and outcomes over time. • Anne Coyle – Schools Forum previously funded two consultants to review provision across Nottinghamshire. Their findings suggested that some pupils in special school placements may not be in the most appropriate provision. There is an opportunity to review placements across the system to ensure children are in the right settings. It was highlighted that a placement in a special school should not always be seen as permanent if a more suitable option becomes available. A system-wide approach is needed to ensure children are educated as close to home as possible. Keeping children local can lead to better transitions, including improved chances of future employment and independence. Overall, there is a need for ongoing review and collaboration to ensure placements best meet children's needs and long-term outcomes Highlighted that some funding decisions are beyond local control, the DfE recently withdrew previously allocated capital funding for special school facilities at short notice. This funding was redirected by the government into wider local provision funding streams. Such decisions were not made by the Council, but at a national level. The importance of continued lobbying and advocacy from school leaders was acknowledged and encouraged. The withdrawal of capital funding will have consequences, particularly for planned investment in specialist provision. • Orlaith Green – Local authority has helpful infographic, proposed it be shared with the Early Years and Schools Forum which shows the range of SEND provision, including current and planned units, to improve visibility and understanding. Ben Trenowden emphasised the need to consider both geographical (north/south) and phase (primary/secondary) gaps when planning provision. There was agreement that gaps in local provision must be prioritised to better support children closer to home. It was confirmed that future planning is already being driven by identified geographical need, with close collaboration between place planning, estates, and service teams.	**OG**

- Karen Richards - Front loading support working with settings and families before school, i.e. in Early Years provisions, would also have an impact, as evidenced in Hertfordshire over recent years

  More children had their needs met following this initiative, reducing the amount of EHCPs which can only be of positive benefit, not least in terms of school budgets

- Jason Gooch – Appendix A details the budget monitoring position, including funding received and payments made to providers for each entitlement. Last financial year the Early Years Block underspent by £522,000.

  Main driver of the underspend was the difference between the funding received by the local authority and the funding paid to providers. Funding for the three and four-year-old entitlement and the existing two-year-old entitlement was calculated using the average January census count, while payments to providers were based on termly headcounts. This resulted in the local authority receiving funding for more pupils than were ultimately funded through provider payments.

  From April 2026, the Department for Education (DfE) will change the funding methodology, with local authority allocations based on termly headcounts, bringing funding calculations into line with provider payments. As a result, the additional funding benefit experienced under the previous methodology will not continue in future years.

  DfE has recognised the impact of this change and included a 19p per hour uplift in the 2026/27 Early Years Block base rates to reflect the move to the termly-adjusted funding model.

  Forum noted that the funding mechanism was the principal reason for the 2025/26 underspend.

  Other variances within the Early Years Block, as detailed in Appendix A, were discussed. These included the overspend on the SEN Inclusion Fund and the underspend on the Disability Access Fund. The reasons for these variances were outlined, and members noted the financial position and associated budget movements. All other variances presented in Appendix A were discussed and noted by the Forum.

- Jason Gooch – after taking account of all DSG block under and overspends during 2025/26, the cumulative DSG deficit carried forward into 2026/27 was £39.803M.

  Members noted that the DfE had announced a High Needs Stability Grant for local authorities with accumulated DSG deficits. Subject to approval of Nottinghamshire's SEND Reform Plan, due for submission in June 2026, the authority could receive up to £35.823M, equivalent to 90% of the deficit. This would reduce the remaining deficit to just under £4M.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Forum:

1. Notes the content of the report - report noted.

3b Reform Plan

Orlaith Green shared a presentation with the forum:

- An update was provided on the development of Nottinghamshire's SEND Reform Plan, which must be submitted to the DfE by 19 June 2026. Members were advised that the timescales for completion had been extremely challenging, with guidance continuing to be released throughout the process, including key information on High Needs funding received only recently.

  Submission will include the local SEND Reform Plan, a self-assessment of the local SEND partnership's readiness to deliver the reforms and supporting data on children and young people with SEND, including future projections.

  The self-assessment covers the partnership between Nottinghamshire County Council, the Integrated Care Board, parent carers, education providers, health services and young people.

  Engagement activity had taken place across the partnership and that feedback from meetings, including Early Years & Schools Forum, would be used to inform the final submission.
- Development of the SEND Reform Plan had been supported by partnership engagement events, a representative working group, and surveys completed by over 80 children and young people and 600 parents and carers.
- SEND Reform Programme focuses on improving outcomes through earlier intervention, greater inclusion, and support closer to home.
  Priorities include better use of data, strengthening mainstream provision, improving value for money, and developing the SEND workforce.
- Nottinghamshire expects to receive £6M of Expert at Hand (EAH) funding over three years to support inclusion and early intervention.
- Around 60 additional specialist and assistant specialist posts are planned to expand SEND support capacity.
  The Family of Schools model will be strengthened through enhanced SENCO roles, linked therapists, and increased specialist support in schools.
  Strategic leads will focus on key areas including Speech and Language, Neurodiversity, SEMH, Transitions, and Sensory Needs.
  A new multi-agency alternative education team will support children who are excluded, out of school, or receiving EOTAS provision.
- Key risks include specialist workforce recruitment, delivery timescales, and stakeholder engagement.
  Success will be measured through improved outcomes, increased mainstream inclusion, reduced reliance on specialist placements, and better management of High Needs spending.
- Questions from Penny Richardson
  1. does the EAH funding continue - or is it time limited over a number of years?
  2. Is any of the funding for EAH being allocated to the ICB for health specialists - MH teams; therapists - or is there a contribution at national level from the DOH
  3. Will the approach to EAH be underpinned by some sold services?
- Orlaith Green responses: -
  1. The Expert at Hand funding is a time-limited, three-year programme. While there is currently no confirmation of funding beyond this period, the investment is intended to strengthen early intervention and inclusion,

reducing demand and expenditure across the High Needs Block over the longer term.
2. Some of the Expert at Hand funding will be used to commission Speech and Language Therapists through an existing provider in partnership with the Integrated Care Board (ICB), enabling support to be established quickly. However, this approach will only be pursued if there is assurance that the provider can deliver services in line with the programme's objectives and model of support.
3. No, all of this will be free at the point of delivery for schools and settings, and there will be early years and post 16 built in as well.

- Ben Trenowden - proposals are a positive step towards improving inclusion and supporting mainstream schools, one big barrier to children needing specialist provision are physical factors such as significantly more space, smaller class sizes, break-out rooms, safe spaces and multiple sensory rooms, most maintained primaries do not have any spaces in their building.

  Katie Thackery 2nd what was said by Ben Trenowden and added without additional space and capital investment in school buildings, mainstream schools will struggle to meet the needs of children requiring more specialist provision. Leaders need to be assured that this level of funding and development will be delivered.

  Anne Coyle – This is where the collective campaigning by school leaders has to be part of the bigger picture about capital funding.

- Karen Richards – is the Early Years (EY) funding for all EY provisions or just maintained / school settings?

  Orlaith Green – funding will support all education providers, including maintained schools, academies and early years settings, with access delivered through established early years networks. It was also clarified that the Inclusive Mainstream School Fund is not intended to replace or offset the SEND reform investment; schools will benefit from both funding streams alongside one another.

- Jamie Hutchinson – How will the proposed model operate for schools, will the primary route for accessing support and specialist services be, the family of schools or the Trust?

  Orlaith Green – the model is based on Families of Schools, not Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) structures. Funding is specifically intended for mainstream schools, which are already organised into Families of Schools and form the basis for the distribution of High Needs funding.
  For special schools, the intention is to identify and formalise links with a number of Families of Schools so that support and collaboration can be planned effectively. Further discussion will take place with special school leaders to ensure there is clarity over which Families of Schools each special school is connected to and how the offer will work across those relationships.

- Mandy Stratford provided further detail on the Inclusive Practice Fund, explaining that funding has currently been confirmed for the first year of a three-year programme, although allocations for future years are not yet known. Funding is expected to be approximately £1,000 per group-based provider and will be allocated directly rather than through an application process or linked to individual children.

The fund is intended to help providers strengthen overall inclusion.

Consultation with early years providers is underway to determine how the funding should be used, including proposals to support workforce development through the provision of SEND Level 3 and Level 4 qualifications for staff across settings.

3c Pupil Growth Funding 2026/27

Karen Hughman presented the paper:

- Nottinghamshire has been allocated £1.16M, which is lower than the allocation received in 2025/26. However, it was explained that this reduction does not currently present a financial concern.
- In line with DfE guidance, the Growth Fund can be used to:
  - Support growth in pupil numbers within mainstream schools.
  - Fund additional classes where infant class size regulations are breached.
  - Contribute to the opening costs of new schools.
  - Support schools in managing or repurposing surplus places.
- Planned expenditure for 2026/27 totals approximately £649,000, with details of recipient schools included in the report appendix.
- No schools have required Growth Fund support for infant class size breaches this year, reflecting reduced pupil numbers and increased availability of places across the county.
- The largest share of funding continues to support secondary schools that have created additional Year 7 places to accommodate increased demand. Fewer schools qualify for growth funding than in previous years because many have been admitting additional pupils for several years and now receive funding for these places through the standard school funding system.

  As a result, the lower Growth Fund allocation is not expected to create financial pressures, as many schools supporting additional pupil numbers are now funded through mainstream funding arrangements rather than requiring Growth Fund support.

RECOMMENDATION/S

That the Forum:

1. Notes the content of the report – report noted.
2. Continues to monitor the use of this fund throughout 2026-27 – agreed by members to continue to monitor

4. Any Other Business

Concerns raised by schools regarding recent price increases from Veritas Ltd.

- Gareth Moss acknowledged the concerns being expressed by schools and emphasised that the Council understands the financial pressures the increases are creating.
  Explained the Council previously operated catering and facilities management services at a financial loss and therefore made the decision to establish a joint venture with Veritas, a company owned by Suffolk County Council, to deliver these services on a more sustainable basis.
- Under the current arrangement, Veritas is responsible for the delivery and pricing of services, with the Council retaining a 1% shareholding in the joint venture.

The company has faced a number of significant cost pressures, including increases in:

Employer National Insurance contributions.
Pension contributions.
The Real Living Wage (approximately 6.6%).
Food costs (approximately 4-5%).
These increases have occurred alongside relatively low increases in government funding for free school meals, placing additional financial pressure on the service.

- Acknowledged concerns regarding the timing of communications to schools about the increases. Veritas has accepted this feedback and committed to engaging with schools earlier on future pricing decisions, with discussions on 2027 price increases planned to begin during the Autumn Term 2026.
- While pricing decisions rest with Veritas rather than the Council, Gareth confirmed that the Council has raised schools' concerns with the company and stressed the importance of reasonable pricing and timely communication.
- Ben Trenowden – Was there any indication that significant Veritas price increases were likely before schools were notified, or did the increases come as a surprise?

  Gareth Moss explained that schools had previously been briefed on the contractual arrangements and potential financial pressures associated with the transfer of services to Veritas. However, the scale of the increases could not have been fully anticipated, due to factors such as higher-than-expected inflation and lower-than-expected increases in government funding for free school meals.

  Ben Trenowden – The concern is that schools had effectively been given only a short period to respond to substantial increases in catering and cleaning costs, estimated at around £15,000 per school in some cases. The small window meant that: -

  - Schools now have limited time to explore alternative providers.
  - The increases may result in higher meal prices for families, potentially reducing uptake of school meals.
  - This could adversely impact wider health and wellbeing objectives for children.
  - The additional costs place further pressure on already stretched school budgets and may lead schools to consider reductions in staffing or other services.

  Earlier notification would have enabled schools to plan and budget more effectively; the timing and scale of the increases had created significant financial and operational challenges for many schools.
- A number of members commented that communication from Veritas had been poor since the commencement of the contract.
- Anne Coyle recognised the genuine anxiety and financial pressures that schools are facing. Confirmed that these concerns would be escalated to senior leaders within the Council.
  Stressing that this did not diminish the concerns about Veritas, highlighted the importance of maximising uptake of Free School Meals (FSM) and ensuring families are accessing all available financial support. FSM uptake in

Nottinghamshire remains relatively low compared with some other areas, and that increasing awareness and take-up could help support families experiencing financial hardship.

- Anne Coyle offered to arrange further engagement and information sharing on FSM and related family support measures and reiterated their commitment to ensuring schools' concerns regarding the Veritas situation are heard and acted upon.

SEND Executive Governance Board.

- Orlaith Green proposed that the Chair of Early Years & Schools Forum be invited to join the SEND Executive Governance Board. The proposal reflects recommendations within the SEND reform programme and is intended to strengthen links between the governance arrangements for Forum and SEND reform activity.
- Members supported the proposal, recognising the benefits of closer alignment between the two governance structures, expressed their support for the Chair joining the Board. The proposal was unanimously welcomed and will be recorded in the minutes.

Date and times for meeting in academic year 2026/27

- After a discussion around the February date the following dates for the 2026/27 academic year were agreed: -

  - Thursday 17 September 2026
  - Thursday 12 November 2026
  - Thursday 10 December 2026
  - Thursday 11 February 2027
  - Thursday 17 June 2027

5. Confidentiality

- No confidential items.

Date and time of next meeting

Thurs 17 September 2026	2-4pm	Hybrid (Microsoft Teams & Oak House)
Thurs 12 November 2026	2-4pm	Microsoft Teams
Thurs 10 December 2026	2-4pm	Hybrid (Microsoft Teams & County Hall)
Thurs 11 February 2027	2-4pm	Microsoft Teams
Thurs 17 June 2027	2-4pm	Microsoft Teams