MINUTES OF MEETING

Nottinghamshire County Council

Meeting title:	**Nottinghamshire Early Years and Schools Forum**
Date and time:	**17th September 2025, 2pm to 4pm**
Location:	**In Person – County Hall West Bridgford – NG2 7QP**

Membership
'A' denotes absence

A	Alison Prodger	Maintained Primary Head Teacher
A	Steve Border	Maintained Primary Head Teacher
	Ben Trenowden	Maintained Primary Head Teacher
A	Karl Hopkinson	Maintained Primary Head Teacher
	Kirsty Lowde	Maintained Secondary Head Teacher
	Anne Hall	Academy Representative
	Neil Holmes	Academy Representative
	James Macdonald	Academy Representative - (Chair)
A	Neil Robinson	Academy Representative
	Daniel Moore	Academy Representative
A	Ella Tuxford	Academy Representative
A	Katie Thackery	Academy Representative
A	Matt Rooney	Maintained Special School Head Teacher
	Jamie Hutchinson	Academy Special School Head Teacher
	Colin Barnard	Governor Maintained School Representative
A	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
	Nigel Frith	Church of England Diocese Representative
	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 for Children's Services
Peter McConnochie	Director of Education, Learning and Inclusion
Karen Hughman	Head of Education Quality, Provision, Learning & Inclusion
Steve Hawkins	Senior Finance Business Partner, Children and Families Finance
Elizabeth Broadhurst	High Needs Consultant
Jason Gooch	Finance Business Partner, Children and Families Finance
Toni Gardner	Assistant Accountant, Children and Families Finance-Clerk to Forum

1. Welcome and introductions

- James Macdonald welcomed all members to the meeting and extended a warm welcome to new members, Ben Trenowden and Penny Richardson.
- Anne Coyle, newly appointed Director of Children's Services, introduced herself and shared her background in social work and leadership across various councils. She expressed enthusiasm for collaboration and visiting schools to understand local contexts.

Apologies for Absence

- Apologies received from Alison Prodiger, Steve Border, Karl Hopkinson, Neil Robinson, Ella Tuxford, Katie Thackery, Matt Rooney, Andy Palmer, Louise Knotts, Nigel Frith, Jo Myers, Gareth Moss, Mandy Straford, Rachel Livesey, Sarju Sheta.
- Concerns raised about high number of absences for a first meeting.
- Suggestion to reconsider meeting timing and venue capacity for future sessions.
- Apologies accepted.

2. Minutes of previous meeting (12th June 2025) — **ACTION**

- Under item 3a, name clarification Jason Gooch Hawkins to read Jason Gooch.
- One action point for Steve Hawkins to be covered under Agenda Item 3C.
- Under item 3b action point for Karen Hughman.
  - The secondary bulge has been ongoing for approximately three years, resulting in several schools receiving funding to support increased pupil numbers.
  - Over time, funding for these additional pupils transitions to GAG (General Annual Grant) funding, reducing reliance on the growth fund.
  - By 2026, many partner secondary schools will be fully GAG funded for the additional places they've provided.
  - These schools will no longer draw from the growth fund, easing pressure on the allocation.
  - Work is underway with secondary partners to confirm:

    Which schools are willing to continue offering additional places beyond 2026.

    Whether any new schools need to be approached to meet future demand.

    Only schools newly offering places would draw from the growth fund going forward.
  - A detailed and accurate paper will be presented at the next forum, outlining, the projected funding requirements and the future structure of the growth scheme. — **KH**
- An update was given on a meeting with Rushcliffe MP James Naish, arranged by Steve Border, attended by James Macdonald and Peter McConnochie.
  - The meeting was productive and focused on the need for increased mainstream provision, in response to high costs associated with SEND and independent/non-maintained placements.
  - James Naish showed strong interest in the issue, and the team is keen to support similar MP engagements.

	- Offer extended to forum members: If meeting with MPs in a forum capacity, colleagues from Nottinghamshire County Council are happy to attend and contribute. - Emphasis was placed on the fact that this is a national issue, not just a local or constituency concern. - A briefing paper is being developed to support MPs in their discussions, summarising short-, medium-, and long-term actions that could improve sustainable school funding. - Forum members are encouraged to submit ideas to Steven Hawkins, particularly around SEND pressures and funding sustainability. - The briefing note is currently under financial review and will be shared once finalised. - James Macdonald suggested generalising the discussion for the next forum meeting, to ensure broader input and alignment. • Minutes approved as accurate after above amendment actioned.	
3.	**3a Election of Vice Chair** • Anne Hall volunteered and was unanimously seconded. • Acknowledged for her previous contributions and welcomed back. • The forum operates on a three-year leadership cycle. • James Macdonald confirmed he has two years remaining in his current term. • This structure supports continuity and smooth leadership handover within the forum.	
	3b Early Years & Schools Forum Membership Presented by Toni Gardner: • No changes required this year despite a 2.4% shift in pupil numbers. • Future reduction in maintained primary representation expected in 2026/27. • Ongoing vacancies noted in academy, governor, and diocesan categories. Actions: • Outreach to fill vacancies via newsletters, trust boards, and direct contacts. • The Diocese is considered as Local Authority (LA) for the purpose of making appointments. Toni Gardner and Daniel Moore discussed a potential contact who could fill the current vacancy. Daniel to send Toni contact details to approach the individual. **RECOMMENDATION/S** **That the Forum:** 1. Notes the content of the report; - report noted. 2. Agrees to retain the membership as set out in paragraph 5 of the report – agreed by all members	

3c DSG Budget Monitoring

High Level Needs section presented by Steve Hawkins:

- A financial monitoring report for the 2025/26 financial year, as one was not brought in June due to the early stage of the year.
- Paragraph 4 of the report outlines the makeup of the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) total funding received: £969 million
- Forecasted expenditure: £1,000 million, giving a projected overspend of £31 million
- The overspend is in the high needs block and driven by continued growth in Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) across mainstream, special schools, post-16, and independent specialist provision.
- Despite increased places in special schools and academies, demand for provision continues to rise.
- Independent Specialist Provision is a key pressure point: July 2025 668 pupils with EHCPs in independent/non-maintained special schools, July 2024 there was 460 pupils and July 2023 378 pupils.
- Average cost per place in an independent special school: £63,000. Estimated cost increase: £12.5 million (plus mid-year starters from last year)
- Page 3 of the report breaks down variances, £27 million of the £31 million overspend is attributed to independent specialist provision

James Macdonald raised a question: “Where will the £31 million overspend come from?”

Steve Hawkins explained that:

- The overspend will be reflected in the non-Individual Schools Budget (non-ISB) reserve.
- The financial year began with £1 million in the non-ISB reserve.
- The statutory override, which allows local authorities to ring-fence this deficit outside of their general accounts, was originally due to end 31 March 2026, but has now been extended to March 2028.
- Without reform or additional funding from central government, the reserve deficit is expected to increase year on year.
- The local authority is awaiting further guidance from central government on how they intend to support councils facing these pressures.
- Jamie Hutchinson and others highlighted systemic issues with independent providers and tribunal pressures.
- Penny Richardson raised concerns about whether increased spending at the preventative level has impacted capacity within inclusion services.
  Peter McConnochie noted a 70% uplift in front-ended funding over the past three years, supporting internal services and mainstream schools.
  In February the Schools Forum agreed to “right size” the majority of High Needs budget areas but took a strategic decision to hold the financial pressure in the area of growth in independent/non-maintained placements. This had allowed additional funding to be allocated to areas supporting inclusivity.

- Jamie Hutchinson highlighted that 300 children in Nottinghamshire are awaiting placements, with potential costs of £60,000 per pupil.
- Ben Trenowden suggested modelling the cost-effectiveness of building more special schools.
  Peter responded that the focus should shift to forward-funding SEND provision within mainstream schools, keeping children in their communities and reducing transport burdens.
- Nottinghamshire is currently reviewing its SEND Place Planning Strategy for 2026, led by Karen Hughman and her team.
  The aim is to better align provision with local needs and reduce reliance on longer distance placements. Circa £25 million per year is spent on transport for SEND pupils. While some children will always require specialist placements, many could have their needs met in mainstream settings with the right support.
- Karen Richards raised concerns about early years SEND and proposed repurposing capital grants for SEND provision in primary schools. Elizabeth Broadhurst to incorporate early years SEND into the High Needs Working Group report.
- Peter McConnochie stated that over the past year, there has been a doubling in the number of early years children receiving high needs funding. Inclusion funding has also doubled over the past three years, reflecting increased demand, investment, preventative and proactive approach.

  The aim is to leverage opportunities for early intervention, reducing long-term demand on specialist services. A shift in strategy is needed to focus earlier, rather than reacting at primary and secondary stages. Challenges in Early Years Funding Rates:
- Karen Richards highlighted that funding rates for early years provision are insufficient. Many children receive only 10–20% of the required funding, with rare cases receiving up to 80%. This leaves gaps in support, especially for children needing 1:1 care during full-day nursery hours.

  Effective early support can significantly reduce the level of need when children enter compulsory schooling.
- Steve Hawkins paragraph 9 of the financial monitoring report includes new national data to provide broader context. A recent survey by Local Authority Treasurers projects £5.9 billion in SEND-related deficits nationally by March 2026, rising to £8.2 billion by March 2027.
  This highlights that the financial pressures on SEND funding are not unique to Nottinghamshire, but part of a wider national challenge.

Early years section presented by Jason Gooch:

- The Early Years Block is forecast to underspend by £301,000 in the 2025/26 financial year.
- Funding methodology used by the Department for Education (DfE) is changing from the 2026/27 financial year. The DfE will shift to a termly headcount model for calculating funding, replacing the current method based on the average of the January census count.
  The change is part of how new entitlements (e.g. expanded childcare offers) are being rolled out nationally, it is likely to reduce funding for some local authorities.

	• Jason Gooch and Mandy Stratford are currently assessing the implications of this change, and plan to present further information at the next forum. • Laura Gapski queried whether the change applies to 2027/28, but Jason clarified it starts financial year 2026/27. • Karen Richards - The sector is under severe financial pressure. Early years funding has increased by 36% over 10 years, but national minimum wage has risen by 100%. The true cost of delivery is not met by current funding levels. Government pays £5.50/hour for 3–4-year-olds, but actual costs are closer to £9/hour. The government is the largest customer, purchasing 80% of childcare. Providers are not allowed to charge top-ups or expand private hours to cover shortfalls. Providers cannot reclaim costs like NI contributions, hospitality, or access teacher pay/pension schemes. Funding does not cover admin costs, despite rising admin burdens (especially with 9-month-olds). The 30-hour entitlement is only for 38 weeks/year, not 52, causing confusion among parents. Encourages schools/trusts to partner with local providers rather than replace them. • Section 8 of the report, in July 2025, the DfE released the final allocation, which was higher than expected. Termly Funding Breakdown 38 weeks of service delivery: Summer: 13 weeks Autumn: 14 weeks Spring: 11 weeks However, DfE split the 38 weeks differently, providing funding for: Summer: 12 weeks Autumn: 14 weeks Spring: 12 weeks This resulted in 1 extra week of funding for the under-twos entitlement. The extra week led to an additional £845,000 received. All hours delivered have been fully paid out to providers. The surplus will currently go into the non-ISB reserve. • Karen Richards Expressed concern about the surplus going to non-ISB reserves. Suggested redirecting it to SEND within early years. Peter McConnochie recommended discussing this at the next Early Years Consultation Group (scheduled for next Friday). Emphasised the importance of supporting the sector given its financial challenges, acknowledged the need to balance this with the non-ISB reserve deficit. **RECOMMENDATION/S** That the Forum: 1. Notes the content of the report; - report noted.	**JG/MS**

	3d 2026/27 National Funding Formula – verbal update Presented by Steve Hawkins: • No major changes to formula structure expected. • Schools Budget Support Grant and NI Grant to be rolled into NFF. • Local authorities may transfer up to 0.5% of Schools Block with Forum approval. <u>Consultation timeline:</u> • 13 Nov: Proposals to Forum • 19 Nov–3 Dec: Sector consultation • 10 Dec: Final recommendations James Macdonald raised a question: " Whether the DfE can force a 0.5% transfer from the Schools Block to the High Needs Block due to a growing deficit?" • Steve Hawkins - not heard of the DfE forcing a transfer. • Peter McConnochie - any transfer proposal would be discussed openly at Schools Forum. If the Forum does not support the proposal but the local authority believes it's necessary, it can be escalated to the Secretary of State. The Secretary of State would then make a determination. Emphasised that the approach would be collaborative and transparent, as always. • Steve Hawkins - the team is just beginning the modelling process for the next funding cycle. In previous years, attempts to fully mirror the National Funding Formula (NFF) led to shortfalls due to changes in pupil characteristics. Current modelling explores how to fill funding gaps, potentially by: Adjusting the Minimum Funding Guarantee (MFG) Changing factor values • Penny Richardson raised the issue of accountability: how schools use targeted funding to achieve strategic outcomes. Asked whether modelling considers how money is spent (e.g. on free school meals) and whether schools are held accountable for those choices. Steve Hawkins, current modelling is focused on affordability, not accountability. The priority is ensuring funding received can be passed on as closely as possible to schools. No formal accountability mechanisms are built into the modelling at this stage. • Penny Richardson suggested linking funding strategy to outcomes in future planning. Encouraged a more sophisticated approach to ensure funding aligns with intended impact.	
	3e HLN Working Group – verbal update Presented by Elizabeth Broadhurst • Commissioned in spring to investigate the High Needs Block, alongside Marian Cullen. • Conducted site visits to schools, held interviews and internal conversations and completed national benchmarking. • A draft report has been completed.	

- A steering group/working group meeting is planned (1October 2025, 4–5pm (hybrid).
- A presentation will be prepared for the next meeting to outline key insights and proposed actions.
- Peter McConnochie - acknowledged the value of the investigation and the need to reconvene the working group.
- Outlined Two Key Tasks for the group:
  - Review and act on recommendations from the report, focusing on strategic allocation of resources given current financial pressures.
  - Prepare for the 2026–27 High Needs Funding Formula, aligning with national funding updates and ensuring forward planning.
- Peter emphasized the importance of collaborative decision-making and strategic prioritisation during the autumn/winter period.
- All Forum members welcome to attend High Level Needs Working Group

4. Any Other Business

Presented by Toni Gardner

- December meeting: Moved to 10 Dec 2025
- March meeting: Moved to 12 Feb 2026
- November meeting: To be held online
- December meeting: In-person (venue TBC, possibly Oak House, Hucknall)
- School Holidays Consultation members encouraged to share widely.
- Briefing Paper (Karen Richards): Early years context and funding challenges shared for awareness.
- Organisational Update: Early Years team now part of Education, Learning & Inclusion division.

5. Confidentiality

- No confidential items.

6. Date and time of next meeting.

Thursday 13 November 2025	2-4pm	Microsoft Teams
Wednesday 10 December 2025	2-4pm	Venue TBC
Thursday 12 February 2026	2-4pm	Microsoft Teams
Thursday 11 June 2026	2-4pm	Microsoft Teams