

MINUTES OF SCHOOLS FORUM HELD ON 21 MAY 2026 – HELD VIA MS TEAMS

NOTES WERE PRODUCED USING AI VIA COPILOT AS AGREED BY FORUM AT THE BEGINNING OF THE MEETING

CHAIR: WILLIAM DOWELL

KEY LA LEAD: JOHN ROWE

1	Apologies	
	William Dowell opened the meeting, welcoming members and noting apologies. Carla Whelan and Beck Preece from Empower Trust both sent apologies. Gemma Martin from Hereford Diocese sent apologies and advised that Sarah Beard would replace her from June 2026. James Staniforth from Shrewsbury College advised he would be 15 minutes late. Multiple attendees left early for other meetings (recorded in chat.) Several attendees indicated they might need to step in/out due to operational pressures in their settings. Acknowledgement of contributions and thank you to departing members - Marilyn Hunt and Mark Rogers. Recognition of their influence and representation of wider sector views.	WD
2	Minutes and Matters Arising	WD
	The minutes from 22 January 2026 were accepted as a true reflection of the meeting.	WD
	Matters Arising: High Needs Monitoring Group - Did not meet due to urgent DfE demands relating to SEND reforms. DSG Data and Submissions - significant workload pressures due to tight DfE deadlines for submission of documentation. Growth Funding (2027) - Not yet available; further internal modelling to be undertaken based on projected spend. Other items covered within main papers.	JR JR JM
3	Local Authority Update (John Rowe / David Shaw) Financial Context (Council-wide) Position remains serious but improving. Shift from crisis response to financial sustainability planning. Medium-term financial plan includes: £121m exceptional financial support (loan)	JR/DS

	8.99% council tax increase. Continued focus on: Cost control, Statutory services, financial governance improvements. Ofsted/CQC Thematic Review (April–May) Strengths identified: Improved SEND partnership working Stronger governance and leadership grip Better use of data and outreach Positive evidence of inclusive practice (e.g. Outshine). Areas for development: Inconsistent impact felt by families Navigation of local offer remains challenging Capacity issues (EHCPs, ND assessments) Need for stronger voice of children and young people Further development of AP and EBSA support.	
4	Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) Monitoring – Paper B Overall Position In-year deficit (2025–26): £28.09m Cumulative deficit: £45.655m Key Pressures High Needs Block overspend: ~£29.8m Main drivers: Top-up funding to mainstream schools (increasing EHCP demand) Top-up funding to special schools Independent special school placements (largest cost pressure). Additional Pressures Post-16 placements (significant increase) SEND staffing and support service costs. Early Years Block Underspend (~£1.39m), driven by lower take-up and support costs.	SW
5	High Needs Block & High Needs Stability Grant Government intervention to address DSG crisis: 90% deficit write-off via grant (Autumn 2026). Risks remain: Unknown future funding (2026–28) Statutory override ends March 2028 LA will be responsible for residual deficits thereafter Strategic Discussion Highlights System Challenges Demand for EHCPs rising rapidly. Significant reliance on expensive independent provision. Workforce pressures increasing in schools.	SW



	Strategic Direction Expansion of inclusive mainstream capacity. Reduction in reliance on independent placements. Development of SEND sufficiency strategy (including new provision needs). Government to write off 90% of high needs deficits up to 2025–26. For Shropshire: Approx. £41m grant expected Remaining ~£4.5m to be funded by the council. Funding conditional on submission of SEND reform/DSG management plan by 19 June.	
6	“Experts at Hand” Programme (SEND Reform) Overview New national initiative to build early intervention capacity. Funding: ~£1.9m in year 1 (increasing in later years). Key Components Increased workforce: Educational Psychologists Speech & Language Therapists Occupational Therapists Inclusion advisory support for all settings. Locality-based model of delivery. Focus on: Early identification Targeted support Whole-school inclusion improvement. Risks Workforce recruitment challenges Funding uncertainty beyond 3 years Need for system-wide coordination (LA, trusts, partners). Governance & System Leadership Cabinet paper (June) to set out: Whole-system SEND strategy Locality-based operating model Integrated approach across education, health, and care.	SC
7	Primary and Secondary Development Grant Outcomes Significant reduction in permanent exclusions: Secondary exclusions reduced from 61 to 14 (comparable period). Suspension levels remain high. Future Funding confirmed to continue for 2026–27. Beyond that subject to DSG review. Key Issue Raised	JR



	Impact on staff wellbeing and workload. Need to balance inclusion with workforce sustainability.																									
8	Premises Costs Proposal (Paper D) Proposal - Transfer responsibility for certain premises-related costs from DSG to schools. Decision - Agreement in principle, subject to: Review of lease/rent arrangements and assurance that schools are not exposed to disproportionate cost increases.	JM/RW																								
9	Work Program and Actions – work program reviewed Actions <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Action</th><th>Owner</th><th>Deadline</th></tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Submit SEND reform / DSG management plan to DfE</td><td>LA (John Rowe / team)</td><td>19 June</td></tr> <tr> <td>Develop detailed SEND data/dashboard linkage for Forum</td><td>John Rowe</td><td>Next meeting</td></tr> <tr> <td>Provide context on placement data vs cost (numbers/location)</td><td>LA</td><td>Next meeting</td></tr> <tr> <td>Further analyse suspension data (including days lost)</td><td>LA / Education Access</td><td>Next meeting</td></tr> <tr> <td>Review premises lease/rent risks before cost transfer</td><td>LA (Estates)</td><td>Before implementation</td></tr> <tr> <td>Share SEND governance structure (ToR) with Forum</td><td>LA</td><td>Next meeting</td></tr> <tr> <td>Continue stakeholder engagement on Experts at Hand model</td><td>LA</td><td>Ongoing</td></tr> </tbody> </table>	Action	Owner	Deadline	Submit SEND reform / DSG management plan to DfE	LA (John Rowe / team)	19 June	Develop detailed SEND data/dashboard linkage for Forum	John Rowe	Next meeting	Provide context on placement data vs cost (numbers/location)	LA	Next meeting	Further analyse suspension data (including days lost)	LA / Education Access	Next meeting	Review premises lease/rent risks before cost transfer	LA (Estates)	Before implementation	Share SEND governance structure (ToR) with Forum	LA	Next meeting	Continue stakeholder engagement on Experts at Hand model	LA	Ongoing	JR/WD
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10	Communications Next Meeting Scheduled for 18 June Standard timings clarified - generally 08:30–10:30 unless face to face – then 09.00-11.00. The meeting closed at 10:37.	JR/WD																								
	Future Meeting Dates Thursday 18 June 2026 08.30-10.30 (tbc) MS Teams Thursday 10 September 2026 08.30-10.30 (tbc) MS Teams Thursday 12 November 2026 09.00-11.00 (tbc) Face to Face																									

