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SCHOOLS' FORUM MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON FRIDAY 7 NOVEMBER 2025

ATTENDANCE RECORD

			26 Sep	7 Nov	16 Jan	27 Feb	27 Mar	3 Jul
MEMBERS								
Secondary Maintained	Phil Jones (Chair)	Head Teacher - Ferndown Upper School	P	P				
	Keith Hales (Vice Chair)	Head Teacher - Beaminster School	P	P				
	Luana Girling	Governor - Lytchett Minster School	P	P				
Primary Maintained	Simon Smith	Head Teacher - Parrett & Axe Primary School	A	P				
	Andrew Johnson	Head Teacher - Conifers Primary School	P	A				
	Barbara Southcott	Governor - Cerne Abbas First School	P	P				
Special Maintained	Clive Padgett	Head Teacher - Yewstock School & College	A	P				
Learning Centre Maintained	David Dinsmore	Head Teacher - Dorchester Learning Centre	P	P				
Secondary Academy	Brian Boyes	Director of Secondary Education - Initio Learning Trust	P	A				
	Nick Rutherford	Head Teacher - Thomas Hardy School, Wessex MAT	P	P				
	Vacancy							
	Vacancy							
Primary Academy	Adam Gough	Head Teacher - Burton Bradstock Primary, Initio	P	P				
	Paul Lavis	Interim Director of Education - SAST	P	P				
	Giles Pugh	Deputy Director of Education and Finance Director - Salisbury Diocesan Board of Education	P	P				
	Debbie Shutts	Chief Financial Officer - Wessex MAT	P	P				
Special Academy	Katherine Seymour	Head Teacher - Wyvern Academy	P	P				
Learning Centre Academy	Kelly Knight	Head Teacher - Harbour Vale School, SAST	P	P				
Early years	Lorraine Clark	Proprietor - Hopscotch Pre-school	P	A				
	Dani Mark	Director - Muddy Monkeys Ltd	A	P				
Post-16	Kate Wills	Principal - Coastland College	P	A				
Trade Unions	Sarah Randell	NASUWT - Dorset Teachers' & Support Staff Council	P	P				
NAMED OBSERVERS								
Maintained Learning Centres	Kieren Hasler	Governor - Forum Centre	P	P				
Maintained Special Schools	Bruce Bonwell	Governor- Westfield Arts College	P	A				
Local Authority	Clare Sutton	Portfolio Holder for Children's Services	P	P				
Church Schools	Giles Pugh	Deputy Director of Education and Finance Director - Salisbury Diocesan Board of Education	P	P				
Local Authority	Bridget Bolwell	Elected Member	-	P				
OTHERS IN ATTENDANCE								
Local Authority	Tom Easterbrook	Schools' Forum Officer, (Clerk)	P	P				
Key								
P	Present							
A	Apologies							
-	Absent without apologies							
n/a	Not applicable							

11. **Apologies for Absence and Vacancies**

Apologies for absence were received from:

- Andrew Johnson
- Brian Boyes
- Lorraine Clark

The vacancies were noted in accordance with the attendance record. In addition, Adam Gough reminded the Forum that he will be moving to a maintained school from the New Year and will therefore no longer be eligible to sit as an Academy representative after this meeting.

12. **Declarations of Interest**

None

13. **Minutes and Actions from the Previous Meeting**

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 26 September 2025 were agreed as a true and accurate record.

Actions

- **Actions 85 and 108** have been on the action log for some time, and the situation has moved on significantly since they were first envisaged. The Forum agreed to close these actions.
- **Actions 220 and 221** relate to information required about Combe House and other independent specialist providers. This will be completed directly after the meeting; therefore, these actions are now closed.
- **Action 2025/02**, concerning the timing of permanent exclusion funding adjustments, has been reviewed. The process is set out in school finance regulations, so this action is closed.
- **Action 2025/03**: As there were no significant changes from the Forum to the policy, it was agreed this action could be removed.
- **Action 2025/04**: Discussed as part of the monitoring report on today's agenda – closed.
- **Action 2025/05**: Discussed today as part of the paper dealing with the de-delegation which funds the service – closed.
- **Action 2025/06**: An update on the RE Advisor is provided as a written appendix to these minutes, as this was missed on the day – action closed.

Any remaining actions will be carried forward to the next meeting in January.

14. **Correspondence**

Forum noted receipt of a letter from the f40 group to the Secretary of State regarding delays to SEND reforms. Members welcomed the continued national lobbying and agreed to receive updates on any response.

15. **Dedicated Schools' Grant (DSG) Outturn For 2024-25 Q2**

Forum received an update on the Q2 outturn for the Dedicated Schools Grant, covering the period to the end of September 2025. Officers reported that the financial position had worsened slightly since the last meeting, with the projected overspend now standing at £52.79 million compared to £52.5 million at Q1. This continues to be driven primarily by pressures within the High Needs Block.

It was noted that issues with the SEND Case Management System remain unresolved and have been escalated to the Council's corporate risk register. While the report does not yet include the full suite of analysis, work is continuing to improve data quality.

Officers outlined the main drivers of the overspend, drawing on findings from the [National Audit Office report](#) published in October 2024. These include the rapid growth in Education, Health and Care Plans, which have increased by 140% since 2015, alongside a 35% reduction in funding per plan over the same period. Other pressures include the high cost of independent special school placements, increased reliance on bespoke packages and individual top-up funding, administrative burdens, and shortages of specialist staff. Members noted that misaligned incentives across health and education, and the lack of funding for early intervention, further compound these challenges.

In addition, it was noted that many of the key players in the independent special school space also operate children's social care provision which also continues to be a challenged market. A [recent article](#) advocated that the overall market needs significant structural change

Forum acknowledged that Dorset's position reflects these national trends but welcomed the proactive steps taken locally. These include the creation of 323 new special school and alternative provision places, alongside 180 mainstream inclusion places, and investment in early intervention programmes such as the Value in SEND initiative. Despite these efforts, the scale of demand continues to outstrip available resources.

Safety Valve payments from the Department for Education remain paused. Officers confirmed that engagement with the DfE is ongoing, supported by lobbying through the LGA and local MPs. Members expressed concern about the impact of this pause on the Council's ability to deliver its recovery plan.

Forum also noted the significant expansion of the Early Years Block, now £45 million following the introduction of extended childcare entitlements for younger children. While this growth is positive, it adds complexity to financial planning.

During discussion, members highlighted that the lack of capacity in special schools is driving an increasing reliance on specialist-in-mainstream arrangements. While intended as a short-term measure, this approach risks becoming embedded and could lead to escalating costs, inconsistent provision, and pressure on mainstream schools. The Forum requested a review of the current cohort, including numbers, costs, and the impact on the High Needs Block, alongside an update on how sufficiency planning within the wider SEND strategy will address these pressures. Officers confirmed that this analysis will be brought to a future meeting.

Actions:

2025/07 – Provide data on specialist-in-mainstream placements, associated costs, and sufficiency planning for review

16. **Schools Block Transfer 2026-27 to Support Safety Valve**

Forum considered a report on the proposed transfer of 0.5% from the Schools Block to the High Needs Block for 2026–27. Officers outlined the background to the recommendation, noting that similar transfers had been approved in the previous two years as part of Dorset’s Safety Valve agreement with the Department for Education. The transfer, estimated at approximately £1.3 million, is intended to demonstrate partnership working and support the Council’s efforts to reduce the High Needs Block deficit.

The report highlighted that Dorset Council has invested significantly in inclusive provision during the Safety Valve period. Funding for mainstream inclusion has increased from £4.95 million in 2022–23 to £14.54 million in 2025–26, representing a rise in per-pupil support from £3,749 to £8,388 for children with Education, Health and Care Plans in mainstream settings. Officers stressed that this investment has been made alongside the creation of new specialist places and the development of inclusion hubs, reflecting a shared commitment to improving outcomes for children and young people with SEND.

However, officers also confirmed that contributions from the Department for Education under the Safety Valve programme remain paused. While Dorset Council continues to hold reserves and has committed £47 million to capital investment for new provision, the absence of DfE funding creates uncertainty for the recovery plan. Members were advised that, should the Forum reject the proposed transfer, the local authority may seek a disapplication from the Secretary of State to override the decision, although this would be considered alongside wider engagement with government on SEND funding reform.

Members acknowledged the context and the progress made in developing inclusive provision but expressed strong concerns about continuing the transfer in the current circumstances. The Forum noted that the original Safety Valve agreement was based on three-way partnership between schools, the local authority, and the Department for Education. Members felt that it was inequitable for schools to remain the only active contributor when DfE payments are paused and the Council is awaiting confirmation of future funding.

Several points were raised during debate:

- The transfer was originally intended as a temporary measure to support the Safety Valve agreement. Continuing for a third year risks creating an expectation that schools will routinely subsidise the High Needs Block.
- The scale of the deficit means that the proposed transfer would have minimal impact on the overall position. Members questioned whether £1.3 million against a £52 million overspend represents meaningful progress.
- Schools are facing significant financial pressures, and the sums involved—typically £5,000 to £30,000 per school—could be used to strengthen inclusive practice locally rather than being absorbed into the High Needs Block.
- Members emphasised that rejecting the transfer should not be interpreted as a lack of support for the Council’s SEND strategy. The Forum remains committed to partnership working but believes that the Department for Education must resume its role in deficit recovery before schools are asked to contribute further.
- It was agreed that the Forum’s position should be communicated clearly to the Secretary of State, highlighting both the rationale for the decision and the ongoing commitment of Dorset schools to inclusion.

Officers confirmed that the local authority will reflect the Forum's views in any engagement with government on a request to disapply and will continue lobbying for a sustainable national solution to SEND funding pressures.

Following discussion, the Forum voted **against** the proposed transfer of 0.5% from the Schools Block to the High Needs Block for 2026–27.

For: 0 Against:14 Abstentions: 1

Actions

- The Chair will write to the Secretary of State setting out the Forum's decision and the reasons for rejecting the transfer, including the expectation that DfE resumes its contribution to the Safety Valve programme.
- Officers to update the Forum in January on any response from the Department for Education and implications for the recovery plan.

17. Maintained School Funding Decisions 2026-27

Forum was asked to consider proposals for the de-delegation of funding from maintained schools and the retention of funding for education functions . this follows a consultation that had been undertaken with all maintained schools

De-delegation of Funding

The discussion began with the three proposed areas for de-delegation: trade union facilities, termination of employment costs, and the free school meals eligibility checking service. Officers reported that responses showed strong support for termination of employment costs and free school meals checking, but the trade union facilities proposal attracted mixed views, particularly within the secondary phase where opinions were evenly split.

Members explored the scope of the trade union facilities scheme, which currently covers the release of designated representatives for casework and training. Concerns were raised about the lack of clarity on eligibility for reimbursement and the potential inequity where long-term secondments are funded through the scheme.

Several members questioned whether unions should bear the cost of extended secondments rather than schools. There was broad agreement that clearer guidance is needed, and suggestions were made to introduce a cap on claims, with a limit of 15 days per representative per year considered reasonable to ensure the scheme supports short-term release rather than permanent arrangements.

Officers undertook to review the scheme and provide updated guidance. It was agreed that the Chair would be delegated authority to confirm the views of forum for trade union facilities once this clarification has been provided.

In relation to free school meals, members asked whether eligibility checking would remain necessary in future. Officers confirmed that current arrangements will continue but advised that the Council is exploring the potential for automatic enrolment in the longer term. This would require investment and system changes, and the earliest possible implementation would be September 2026. Officers undertook to bring updates on this work to future meetings.

Following the discussion, maintained members of forum voted for each proposition by phase. For the avoidance of doubt all outcomes were unanimous

Primary Results

- Free School Meals Eligibility Checking: **For**
- Termination of Employment Costs: **For**
- Trade Union Facilities: **For**

Secondary Results

- Free School Meals Eligibility Checking: **For**
- Termination of Employment Costs: **Against**
- Trade Union Facilities: **Against**

Retention of Funding for Education Functions

The Forum then considered the proposal to retain funding for education functions for maintained schools in 2026–27 to fund the school improvement service Offer for maintained schools.

Officers confirmed that consultation responses indicated strong support for this approach,

Maintained Members of Forum Unanimously Approved the Retention

18. Annual Review of Places to Be Commissioned By The Local Authority In Local Specialist Provision

Forum considered the annual consultation on the number of specialist places to be commissioned for September 2026. Officers explained that the Department for Education requires confirmation of commissioned places in academies and colleges by early December, and Dorset Council aims to provide all schools with their commissioned places at the same time for consistency and planning purposes.

The report included a summary table of proposed places across special schools, resource bases, learning centres, and FE colleges. Officers noted that most special schools remain at or near capacity and that resource provision bases are broadly aligned with agreed sizes, though newer hubs are still building towards full occupancy. The Forum acknowledged that these figures are critical for the budget build, the Safety Valve model, and the capital programme.

Members highlighted the strategic importance of place management given the capacity pressures discussed earlier under the DSG item. Concerns were raised about deferred referrals and the risk of a growing backlog of pupils awaiting specialist placements. It was noted that some pupils suitable for specialist provision are currently placed in mainstream settings under specialist arrangements, which may have significant financial and operational implications if prolonged. Members stressed the need for sufficiency planning to ensure that every child is in the right provision at the right time and requested clarity on how upcoming projects will address these gaps.

Specific points were raised regarding the Forum Centre and Woodlands School, with clarification sought on how current Orchard provision is reflected in the commissioning figures. Officers confirmed that these places are included within the Forum Centre total and that Woodlands would represent additional capacity once operational. A correction was noted for the Hardyes CCN base, which should show 10 places rather than 12.

Actions:

2025/08 – Provide detailed update on sufficiency planning and capacity projects, including timelines for new provision.

19. **Any other business**

Forum wished Adam Gough well as he starts a new position as headteacher in a maintained school in Weymouth and thanked him for his work as Academy Member of Schools Forum.

Appendix A: Action Log

APPENDIX B: RE ADVISOR UPDATE

RE Professional Advisor

There were 4 applicants, two were interviewed. David Rees was successfully appointed and his contract is for three years on a self-employed basis. Currently, work is being undertaken looking at an offer of support for all settings around implementation of the 5 year syllabus. In addition, planning for the RE conference has started. It is estimated that David will work approximately 40 hrs p/half term

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Title	Meeting Date	Action	Officer	Expected Completion Date
206	05/07/24	Provide an update on short breaks and post 19 provision for those with complex SEND needs	Paula Golding;#37	16/01/26
214	27/09/24	Rework inclusion incentives paper	Ellen Eager;#22	16/01/26
2025/01	26/09/25	Review and circulate guidance relating to hospitality and gifts	Vanessa Eddey;#23;#Vikki Murphy;#53	16/01/26
2025/07	07/11/25	Provide data on specialist-in-mainstream placements, associated costs, and sufficiency planning for re	Ellen Eager;#22;#Hannah Davis;#59	16/01/26
2025/08	07/11/25	Provide detailed update on sufficiency planning and capacity projects, including timelines for new provis	Sean Cremer;#56;#Jen Furnell;#135	16/01/26

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