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Dorset Council

SCHOOLS' FORUM

MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON FRIDAY 27 MARCH 2026

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	P	Reserve date, meeting not required	P	
	Keith Hales (Vice Chair)	Head Teacher - Beaminster School	P	P	P		P	
	Luana Girling	Governor - Lytchett Minster School	P	P	A		P	
Primary Maintained	Simon Smith	Head Teacher - Parrett & Axe Primary School	A	P	P		P	
	Andrew Johnson	Head Teacher - Conifers Primary School	P	A	P		P	
	Barbara Southcott	Governor - Cerne Abbas First School	P	P	P		P	
Special Maintained	Clive Padgett	Head Teacher - Yewstock School & College	A	P	P		P	
Learning Centre Maintained	David Dinsmore	Head Teacher - Dorchester Learning Centre	P	P	A		A	
	Alison Glazier	Head Teacher – Compass Learning Centre	-	-	-		P	
Secondary Academy	Brian Boyes	Director of Secondary Education – Initio Learning Trust	P	A	A		A	
	Nick Rutherford	Head Teacher - Thomas Hardye School, Wessex MAT	P	P	A		P	
	Vacancy							
	Vacancy							
Primary Academy	Adam Gough	Head Teacher - Burton Bradstock Primary, Initio	P	P	-		-	-
	Paul Lavis	Interim Director of Education - SAST	P	P	P		A	
	Giles Pugh	Deputy Director of Education and Finance Director - Salisbury Diocesan Board of Education	P	P	P		A	
	Debbie Shutts	Chief Financial Officer - Wessex MAT	P	P	P		A	
Special Academy	Katherine Seymour	Head Teacher - Wyvern Academy	P	P	P		A	
Learning Centre Academy	Kelly Knight	Head Teacher - Harbour Vale School, SAST	P	P	P		P	
Early years	Lorraine Clark	Proprietor - Hopscotch Pre-school	P	A	P		P	
	Dani Mark	Director - Muddy Monkies Ltd	A	P	P		-	
Post-16	Kate Wills	Principal - Coastland College	P	A	P		P	
Trade Unions	Sarah Randell	NASUWT - Dorset Teachers' & Support Staff Council	P	P	-		P	
		NAMED OBSERVERS						
Maintained Learning Centres	Kieren Hasler	Governor - Forum Centre	P	P	P		A	
Maintained Special Schools	Bruce Bonwell	Governor- Westfield Arts College	P	A	P		P	
Local Authority	Clare Sutton	Portfolio Holder for Children's Services	P	P	A		P	
Church Schools	Giles Pugh	Deputy Director of Education and Finance Director - Salisbury Diocesan Board of Education	P	P	P		A	
Local Authority	Bridget Bolwell	Elected Member	-	P	-		-	
		OTHERS IN ATTENDANCE						
Local Authority	Tom Easterbrook	Schools' Forum Officer, (Clerk)	P	P	P	-	P	
Sector	*Name*	*Role and Establishment*	26 Sep	7 Nov	16 Jan	27 Feb	27 Mar	3 Jul
		MEMBERS						
Secondary	Phil Jones (Chair)	Head Teacher - Ferndown Upper School	P	P				

Maintained	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 Hardye 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 Monkies 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				

P	Present
A	Apologies
-	Absent without apologies
n/a	Not applicable

31. Apologies for Absence and Vacancies

The Chair opened the meeting and invited the Clerk to present any apologies received. The Forum noted apologies from Brian Boyes, Giles Pugh, and Paul Lavis.

The Clerk also informed Members that Dani Mark, Early Years representative, had formally resigned from the Forum. An election process to fill the vacancy had already been launched prior to the meeting and was due to conclude at 5:00pm later that day. At the time of the meeting, one nomination had been received.

No further apologies or membership updates were raised.

32. **Declarations of Interest**

None

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

The Chair invited Members to comment on the accuracy of the minutes from the previous meeting. No amendments were requested, and the minutes were approved as an accurate record

The Clerk then updated Members on the status of the Action Log. He apologised that an unfiltered version had been circulated in error due to last-minute changes when preparing papers. This had included a number of previously closed actions, which had understandably caused some confusion

The Clerk confirmed that the remaining open SEND-related actions were intended to be picked up through the High Needs Block workshop scheduled for late April, and that it would therefore be more practical to address them collectively rather than separately at this meeting.

He offered to circulate written updates, including on hospitality and gifts, and invited Members to contact him by email with any queries arising
Members agreed to defer discussion of remaining actions, pending the Clerk's written update and the upcoming workshop.

34. **Pupil Growth Applications For 2026-2027**

Three applications for Pupil Growth funding were considered for the 2026–27 financial year. Each proposal related either to ongoing bulge-year commitments or to capacity pressures in areas where demand continues to exceed available places.

Wimborne First School
The Forum reviewed the continuing need to support the bulge cohort created in 2022. Numbers remain above the point at which mixed-age organisation would be feasible. For April–August 2026, 11 places fall below the minimum funding threshold, with a further 8 places requiring support between September 2026–March 2027, generating a total request of £42,482 (£42,343). This represents the final full year of support for this particular cycle.

No concerns were raised.

Beaminster St Mary's Academy
Pressure across the local area continues to affect the cohorts that prompted additional capacity from 2024. Nearby schools remain full, making it necessary to retain the additional class. The school requires funding for 6 places (Apr–Aug 2026) and 9 places (Sept 2026–Mar 2027), amounting to £39,776. (£38,339)

Questions were raised about historic class configurations shown in the papers, and it was clarified that these reflected internal organisation rather than funded growth.

Ferndown First School
Demand in this part of the county continues to rise despite wider falling-roll patterns. As a result, support is required for both existing bulge cohorts and the creation of an additional Reception class from September 2026. The application included:

1 place requiring support from April–August 2026,
13 places across Years 1 and 3 from September 2026–March 2027, and
Start-up and place funding for a new Reception class, reflecting the need for extra capacity across the local area.

These elements together total £117,525 (£113,564). Without this expansion, significant numbers of children living in the locality would be unable to secure a place, as neighbouring schools are also projected to be full.
On the duration of support. It was explained that there is an incoming cohort of around 90 pupils makes a drop below viability unlikely during the primary phase.

Discussion and Decision
Across all three cases, the Forum recognised that the relevant areas—particularly Wimborne and Ferndown—continue to experience demographic patterns that differ from the wider Dorset picture. It was also confirmed that alternative schools do not have sufficient space to absorb the excess demand.
Members were advised that each request meets the criteria for Pupil Growth funding, although small administrative adjustments may be required due to recent updates to calculation tools**. (These final amounts have been calculated since this meeting; final figures are included in red above)**

Outcome:
Applications for Wimborne First, Beaminster St Mary's, and Ferndown First were approved unanimously.

35. **High Needs Block Budget Setting 2026-27**

The Forum received an update on the projected High Needs Block (HNB) position for 2026–27. The presentation highlighted that although the HNB allocation shows a headline increase of £4.7 million, this uplift is entirely the result of rolled-in grants, rather than additional funding. In practice, the expenditure requirements attached to these grants exceed the income by approximately £0.5 million, effectively creating a reduction in real terms.

Modelling for 2026–27 identifies a projected in-year deficit of around £73.3 million, largely driven by rising numbers of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), continued pressure on specialist placements, increased use of alternative provision, and inflationary impacts. Forecasts indicate that the number of EHCPs will rise to just over 5,000 next year, continuing the long-term upward trend.

Forum members queried why several new grants had been absorbed into the block and were directed to the list included in the report appendices. These relate to a range of provision types including further education and specialist academy places.

During discussion, Forum members raised several points:

Alternative Provision (AP) pressures: Concern was expressed about the 25% projected increase in AP expenditure. Members emphasised that the operational burden on schools—particularly the administrative time needed to commission and monitor AP—continues to grow without associated funding. Examples were provided of delays in securing transport, which can result in schools paying for provision that pupils are unable to attend. The Forum asked that these issues be addressed within wider planning.

Independent specialist placements: It was noted that spending in this area has risen significantly and now represents a substantial share of the overall HNB budget. Members requested a more detailed breakdown of placement numbers and costs to support future scrutiny. An updated report will be circulated outside the meeting.

Opportunities for Learning Centre-led alternatives: The Forum reiterated that there may be opportunities for locally delivered alternatives to certain AP packages if appropriate staffing models can be funded. Members noted that previous proposals had not progressed and asked that these be revisited as part of wider SEND improvement work.

The national context was also considered. The recently published SEND White Paper sets out an intention for the Department for Education to potentially fund up to 90% of local authority DSG deficits, subject to each authority submitting an approved plan. Early estimates indicate that, for Dorset, this could equate to a contribution of around £135 million, although a local contribution would still be required. The Forum noted that the forthcoming improvement plan will need to demonstrate both improved outcomes and a credible route to long-term financial sustainability.

Members also highlighted the implications for mainstream schools. It was recognised that national policy changes envisage a shift towards more children being educated locally in mainstream settings, which may in future place greater financial responsibility on school budgets. Concerns were raised about the scale of efficiencies that could be required and the importance of coordinated system-wide support.

The Forum concluded that while the financial position remains extremely challenging, further clarity is expected through the SEND reform timetable. A more detailed discussion will take place at the upcoming HNB workshop, where options for investment, commissioning, and cost management will be explored in greater depth.

36. **Update On Mainstream Schools' Funding Formula For 2026-27 In the Schools' Block**

The Forum received an update explaining the position in relation to the previously approved 0.5% transfer from the Schools Block to the High Needs Block, as reflected in the Authority Proforma Tool (APT).
Members discussed the timing and submission of the APT, noting that it had been completed and submitted before the Secretary of State’s decision on the block transfer was known. Concern was raised that this left limited practical scope to respond differently should approval not have been granted, given that the APT submission window closes before school and academy budgets are finalised.

During discussion, the Forum explored whether the inclusion of the transfer in the APT may have presented it as an assumed position rather than a decision still subject to approval. It was clarified that only one APT can be submitted, and that the authority had acted in line with expectations at the time, reflecting the safety-valve context and the requirement to submit a balanced Schools Block position.

Members fed back significant concern from the school sector about the financial impact of the transfer, particularly in light of the subsequent publication of the SEND White Paper, which has altered the national context around DSG deficit recovery. It was noted that this change in context had reignited questions about whether schools should continue to contribute to deficit mitigation in the same way.

The Forum was advised that once the APT window closes and funding allocations are issued, it is not possible to resubmit or amend the proforma for that financial year. However, work is now underway to consider how future formula decisions and funding rates might help mitigate the impact of the transfer within the constraints of national rules.

However officers recognised the Unique position these events have left schools in and will therefore work pragmatically with the forum and others to devise a mechanism which ensures schools receive appropriate levels of support by designing a formula that meets inclusive outcomes

37. **Annual Review of The Constitution, Election Procedures for Schools' Forum**

Forum considered a report reviewing the Schools Forum Constitution, presented as part of the annual update process.
It was explained that membership numbers had been reviewed against the October School Census. Although there has been a small shift towards academy representation, the Forum had previously agreed the importance of maintaining balance and ensuring that the views of small maintained schools continue to be represented. In line with the Schools Forum Good Practice Guide, it was therefore proposed that the current constitutional structure be frozen for a further year, with a full review to take place again at this point next year.
The Forum was asked to consider a proposed change to term-of-office arrangements, particularly in relation to mid-cycle appointments. Members were reminded that the current Constitution operates on a two-year term, with appointments made mid-cycle serving only the remainder of the existing term.
It was proposed that the standard term of office be extended to four years, and where a member is appointed part-way through a cycle, they would be offered a full four-year term, rather than only the remaining balance.

This proposal was put forward to support continuity and allow members sufficient time to become familiar with the increasing complexity of Forum business, particularly given forthcoming SEND reforms and the expanding scope of DSG-related decisions. It was noted that this approach aligns with wider school governance practice.

Members indicated support for the proposal, noting that a two-year term was relatively short and that longer terms would help retain expertise and provide greater stability.

Existing members could remain in place and current vacancies could be filled using election processes which would continue to operate in line with the timetable set out in Appendix C, including adherence to academy trust representation caps, which are reviewed annually in line with pupil numbers.

The Forum also noted the process for the annual election of Chair and Vice-Chair, as set out in Appendix D, which will take place at the July meeting.

The Forum agreed to freeze the current Constitution for a further year.
The Forum approved the move to four-year terms of office, including the provision that mid-cycle appointments will be offered a full four-year term.

No further questions were raised.

38. **Dedicated Schools' Grant (DSG) Outturn For 2025-26 Q3**

The Forum received a report setting out the Quarter 3 (end of December 2025) DSG outturn position.

It was reported that the DSG is forecasting an overall overspend of just under £56 million at Quarter 3. This compares with a £37.3 million overspend in 2024-25, and reflects the ongoing pattern of the deficit increasing by approximately £20 million per year. When combined with projected future deficits, the cumulative DSG position is expected to reach around £150 million.

Members were reminded that this cumulative deficit is currently being carried by the local authority as a cash-flow pressure. It was noted that the cost of borrowing associated with this position is now approximately £4.9 million per year, reducing the funding available for other council services.

The report confirmed that the High Needs Block remains the primary driver of the overspend. Key elements highlighted included:

- Specialist placements: The number of children in specialist provision was higher than modelled, with 307 full-time equivalent placements compared with a budget assumption of 261. While average placement costs were lower than anticipated, the increased volume still resulted in an additional in-year pressure of around £1.9 million.
- **Alternative Provision (AP):** Continued growth in AP placements was identified as a further significant contributor to the overspend, consistent with trends reported elsewhere in the agenda.
- **Early Years Block:** A £0.9 million overspend was reported, resulting from an over-accrual at the end of the previous year. It was emphasised that this represents a timing issue rather than a structural problem, and reflects changes to early years funding arrangements rather than underlying demand pressures.
- **Central Schools Services Block:** A small overspend of approximately £40,000 was reported, relating to centrally procured licences where national costs exceeded the amount funded through the DSG.

A long-term chart showing the growth in Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) was highlighted, illustrating a sharp upward trend since 2013. It was noted that current modelling suggests this growth is unlikely to taper off until the early 2030s, reinforcing the structural nature of the pressure on the High Needs Block.

Members requested greater granularity in future outturn reporting to support scrutiny. It was suggested that the overall DSG overspend be broken down in a similar way to the 2026–27 budget model, separating:

- specialist placements,
- independent placements,
- mainstream and specialist top-ups, and
- alternative provision and exceptional packages.

This was supported as a way of enabling the Forum to better understand where the most significant pressures are arising.

It was confirmed that a more detailed breakdown would be provided alongside the Quarter 4 outturn.

39. Any other business

Members were reminded of the High Needs Block workshop scheduled for 27th April.

Appendix A: Action Log

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Appendix H

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	27/03/26
214	27/09/24	Rework inclusion incentives paper	Ellen Eager;#22	27/03/26
220	28/03/25	Provide Combe House Student Profile	Ross Bowell;#100	07/11/25
221	28/03/25	Provide list of ISP providers	Ross Bowell;#100	07/11/25
2025/01	26/09/25	Review and circulate guidance relating to hospitality and gifts	Vanessa Eddey;#23;#Vikki Murphy;#53	27/03/26
2025/03	26/09/25	Share final section 19 policy	Miriam Leigh;#93	07/11/25
2025/04	26/09/25	Share key drivers for HNB overspend	Lee House;#20	07/11/25
2025/05	26/09/25	Share overall funding picture for school improvement service	Lisa Gray;#114;#Vanessa Eddey;#23;#Hannah Chapple;#19	
2025/06	26/09/25	Confirm outcome of RE advisor appointment	Lisa Gray;#114;#Richard Howes;#130	07/11/25
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	27/03/26
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	27/03/26

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