

**ROTHERHAM SCHOOLS' FORUM
FRIDAY 18 SEPTEMBER 2026**

Present:-

Mark Windle – Badsley Primary (Primary Maintained) (in the Chair)
Kate Blythe – Rawmarsh Ryecroft Infant (Primary Maintained)
Carol Brookes – Wales High School (Academy)
Dr Sipra Deb – Wickersley Nursery (PVI Nursery)
Lynsey Hadfield - Executive Head, Arnold Nursery (Maintained)
David Horrigan – Principal, Maltby Lilly Hall Academy, Place Partnership (Primary Academy)
Lee Morritt – Rotherham Aspire (PRU)
Sacha Schofield – Special Academy Governor, Nexus Multi Academy Trust (Academy Governor)
Karen Smith - Nexus MAT (Special Academy)
Joel Wirth – Principal TRC and Deputy CEO Inspire Trust (Secondary Academy)

Joshua Amahwe – Head of Finance (CYPS)
Mark Cummins – Transformation Lead
Niall Devlin – Service Director, Education and Inclusion
Sarah Whitby – Head of Service – Access to Education
Kristianne Thorogood – Governance Advisor / Clerk to the Schools Forum

12. WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

The outgoing Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and introductions were made.

Liam Beardsley from Wales High School was in attendance, accompanying Carol Brookes as an observer.

13. APPOINTMENT OF CHAIR

Nominations were sought by the Clerk for the position of Chair of the Rotherham Schools Forum for the next two years.

Mark Windle was proposed and seconded and duly appointed to the position of Chair of Rotherham Schools' Forum with immediate effect.

Resolved:

That Mark Windle be appointed Chair of the Rotherham Schools Forum for the next two years (2026/27 and 2027/28 academic years).

14. APPOINTMENT OF VICE CHAIR

Nominations were sought for the position of Vice-Chair of the Rotherham

Schools Forum for the next two years.

Lynsey Hadfield was proposed and seconded and duly appointed to the position of Vice-Chair of Rotherham Schools' Forum with immediate effect.

Resolved:

That Lynsey Hadfield be appointed Vice-Chair of the Rotherham Schools Forum for the next two years (2026/27 and 2027/28 academic years).

15. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from the following:

John Barnett – Thorogate Junior and Infant (Primary Maintained)
Councillor Simon Currie - Primary Governor (Primary Maintained)
Paul Higginbottom – Swinton Queen Primary (Primary Academy)
Colin Price - NEU Representative
Mark Ryan – RNN Group
Steve Scott - Happy Kids (PVI Nursery)
Cary-Ann Sykes – Head of SEND
Nevine Towers - Head of Business and Operations (Primary Academy)

16. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were made.

17. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

Consideration was given to the minutes of the previous meeting held on Friday 12th June 2026.

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 12th June 2026 be approved as a correct record for signature by the Chair.

18. MATTERS ARISING FROM PREVIOUS MINUTES

There were no matter arising from the minutes of the previous meeting.

19. MEMBERSHIP AND CONSTITUTION OF THE ROTHERHAM SCHOOLS FORUM

Consideration was given to the membership and constitution of the Schools' Forum. The proposed updates and amendments to membership set out in the report at pages 11 - 15 of the Agenda Pack were put forward for the Forum's approval.

Resolved:

- That the renewal of Lynsey Hadfield's term of office as a Nursery School Head Teacher for a further four-year period be agreed.
- That the renewal of Mark Windles's term of office as a Primary School Head Teacher for a further four-year period be agreed.
- That the renewal of Lee Morritt's term of office as a Pupil Referral Unit Head Teacher for a further four-year period be agreed.
- That the renewal of David Horrigan's term of office as a Primary Academy representative for a further four-year period be agreed.
- That the renewal of Nevine Tower's term of office as a Primary Academy representative for a further four-year period be agreed.
- That the renewal of Joel Wirth's term of office as a Secondary Academy representative for a further four-year period be agreed.
- That the renewal of Lisa McCall's term of office as a substitute attendee for Carol Brookes, Academy representative, be agreed.
- That the appointment of Karen Smith as a Special Academy representative for a term of four years be agreed.
- That the appointment of Joel Hardwick as a substitute attendee for Karen Smith, Special Academy representative, for a term of four years be agreed.
- That the appointment of Sacha Schofield as an Academy Governor representative, replacing Paula Williams, until December 2028 be agreed.
- That the renewal of Steve Scott's term of office as a Private, Voluntary and Independent Sector Nursery representative for a further four-year period be agreed.
- That the renewal of Mark Ryan's term of office as a 16-19 Provider representative for a further four-year period be agreed.

- That the renewal of Lewis Moat's term of office as a Trades Union representative for a further four-year period be agreed.

20. SCHOOLS BUDGETS 2026-27 - LATEST POSITION

Consideration was given to the Report presented by the Head of Finance (CYPS) which provided Forum Members with an update on the schools funding for 2026/27 and the latest monitoring position for the Local Authority maintained schools budgets and centrally retained Dedicated Schools Grants (DSG) budgets.

The Head of Finance (CYPS) drew Forum Members' attention to the following points:

- The latest confirmed DSG funding allocation for Rotherham for 2026/27 in July was £127.69m, which included a total of £24.60m in Schools Block funding for the LA maintained schools. The July DSG allocation reflected a recoupment adjustment of £24.60m relating to academies, which was a cost neutral adjustment.
- There was an overall reduction of £1.16m in High Needs block funding allocations. This had been driven by import/export funding adjustments for pupils placed in other local authority areas and a reduction relating to the recoupment for high needs places in academy trusts funded directly by the Department for Education (DfE).
- The latest forecasted position across all centrally retained DSG budgets highlighted a forecasted deficit position for the High Needs Block budgets of £6.41m. This represented an increase compared to the planned approved deficit for 2026/27 of £5.5m. The forecast deficit was mainly due to the following: inflationary costs; increase in EHCP pupils in mainstream and special schools; and continuing placements in out of authority independent settings.
- The financial support previously provided through the government's Safety Valve Agreement ended in 2025/26. This support had been replaced with a High Needs Stability Grant, which would fund 90% of DSG deficits accrued by local authorities up to 31 March 2026. Access to this grant would be conditional on approval of Rotherham's Local SEND Reform Plan. The amount of this funding was therefore yet to be confirmed but it was anticipated that the DfE would provide financial support to local authorities for the current financial year, potentially through an extension of the High Needs Stability Grant.
- Without Government funding or support, it was reported that the DSG reserve was forecasted to reach a cumulative deficit of £9.3m by the end of 2026/27.

- The latest forecasted position of the 20 local authority maintained delegated school budgets indicated a decrease in surplus balances of £0.46m compared to the 2025/26 final outturn position. There was a net decrease of reported balances of £0.14m compared to the original budget.
- The latest position of a school operating with a licensed deficit continued to be closely monitored and the school was reported to be projecting a slight surplus for 2026/27.
- The pay award had been confirmed at 3.3% for non-teaching staff, which was higher than the 2% that schools had been advised to set in their budgets. Work was being done with schools to mitigate the impact of this increase.
- The expansion of Free School Meals (FSM) eligibility had been introduced, which created two new categories of benefits-based FSM - targeted and expanded.
- The government was offering an Expansion Grant to meet the increased costs of providing FSM. This amounted to £505 per pupil per annum but would be calculated again at the 2026 census date, which had been extended to 1 November 2026.

Forum Members commented that the expansion of eligibility for Free School Meals, whilst a welcome development, had pushed a significant amount of work back to schools. Forum Members commented that the funding formulas were unclear and the messages delivered to parents via the media had been inaccurate and unhelpful. It was also felt that the level of funding at £505 per pupil per year would not cover the cost of providing a meal each day, which would lead to significant uncovered costs for schools.

Forum Members commented that it would be helpful if the Revenue & Benefits department at the council could share information with schools to assist with identifying families who could benefit from FSM. It was confirmed that work was being done with the relevant council departments and the Department for Work & Pensions to better share information. It was acknowledged that this was more challenging for nursery settings where auto-enrolment was not compulsory prior to 5 years old. These settings therefore relied more on parents coming forward for FSM funding.

Forum Members sought reassurance regarding the potential cumulative deficit of £9.3m, if no further government funding was made available. It was explained that most local authorities were feeling anxious around their current deficit position and were waiting for confirmation from the DfE regarding future funding support. It was anticipated that extra funding granted via the Local SEND Reform Plan would ease the pressure in the medium-term. The council was anticipating a response from the DfE on the submitted Local SEND Reform Plan imminently. Forum Members

were informed that Rotherham's deficit was currently the lowest reported in South Yorkshire.

Resolved:

That the Schools' Forum:

- 1) Noted the latest DSG funding for schools for the 2026/27 financial year.
- 2) Noted the forecast positions of Rotherham's maintained schools and the centrally retained DSG budgets for the year.
- 3) Noted the government changes to Free School Meals from September 2026.

21. DFE CONSULTATION ON VOLUNTARY UPFRONT FUNDING FOR MAINSTREAM SCHOOL SEND PROVISION - ROTHERHAM'S POSITION

The Head of Finance (CYPS) presented a report informing Forum Members of the DfE consultation - Upfront funding for mainstream schools: creating a "local SEND inclusion formula" - which proposed to enable local authorities to voluntarily transfer funding from the High Needs Block to the Schools Block in order to increase the level of SEND funding mainstream schools received upfront in their core budgets.

It was explained to Forum Members that the driver behind this proposal was to improve parental confidence, reduce pressures on specialist provision and ensure that more pupils with SEND remained within mainstream settings.

The proposal formed part of the wider SEND reform programme and the DfE was seeking local authorities that would be willing to take part in a pilot of the scheme as part of a "test and learn" phase before any wider roll out.

The Head of Finance highlighted to Forum Members the concerns that the Local Authority had with taking part in the first, voluntary phase of this scheme, namely:

- The proposal would not address underlying SEND demand pressures but would merely have the effect of redistributing a fixed pot of existing high needs funding more broadly. There would be no new money brought into the system and the allocation of funds would be driven by national rather than local considerations.
- Statutory accountability and responsibility to secure the SEND provision required by every child with an Education, Health and Care plan (EHCP) would remain with the Local Authority and

therefore, the Local Authority would also carry the financial and operation risks associated with the proposed funding transfer.

- There would be no accountability by schools as to how the funding should be used beyond the general requirement to publish an annual inclusion strategy.
- The funding would not be directly linked to pupils with EHCPs. The funding would not be ring-fenced and as a result, could not be accurately tracked to demonstrate how it had benefited the cohort it was intended for.
- Given the continuing financial pressures faced by schools, there could be a risk that the funding was used to manage wider school budget pressures rather than the additional SEND support it was intended for.

The Head of Finance explained that for the reasons set out above, the council's position was not to submit an expression of interest to the DfE to participate in the first phase of the scheme for the 2027/28 financial year.

Forum Members discussed the highlighted concerns with the proposals and agreed with the council's approach. Forum Members commented that it was difficult to see how schools would be able to use the funding in any meaningful way when there would be no increase in funding, just a different application of it. The ongoing fundamental challenge of meeting increasing need with a diminishing amount of funding was unchanged by the proposal.

Forum Members also expressed concern around the potential for additional work for schools and teachers, with no additional support. Forum Members acknowledged that there were some potentially positive aspects to the plan but agreed that the best position would be to "sit and watch" for the first phase and see how things developed. It was commented that it could be something that the Local Authority wished to participate in if offered again in the 2028/29 financial year.

Resolved:

That the Schools' Forum:

- 1) Noted the content of the DfE consultation - Upfront funding for mainstream schools: creating a "local SEND inclusion formula" - which closed on 18th September 2026.
- 2) Noted Rotherham's position not to submit an expression of interest to participate in the first phase of this approach for the 2027/28 financial year, for the reasons set out in section 6 of the report.

22. LOCAL AREA REFORM SEND PLAN UPDATE

Consideration was given to an update on the Local Area SEND Reform Plan (Plan) presented by the Transformation Lead.

The Transformation Lead confirmed that the Plan had been submitted at the end of June and that feedback from the DfE was expected imminently.

It was explained that there was an expectation from the DfE that local councils would take steps to implement their Plans prior to final feedback and approval. As part of this planning stage, work had been carried out to set out four Strategic Goals under the Plan (with accompanying Workstreams), supported by six Plan Priorities. This clearly set out what would be delivered, how it would be delivered and what the anticipated outcomes would be.

The following areas of planned key activity for the next period were noted:

- The Experts at Hand offer would be established, with recruitment to specialist teaching posts.
- New inclusion bases within mainstream schools would be explored, with capital support available to establish specialist SEND units to increase capacity for early intervention. Two pilot schools had been identified to develop and test the model before it was rolled out more widely.

It was confirmed that the Plan was ready to be fully mobilised as soon as formal DfE approval had been granted. The key risks to the success of the Plan were highlighted to be recruitment of workforce and increased demand for EHCPs.

Forum Members sought reassurance around the recruitment processes for the Experts at Hand specialist teaching staff and enquired whether any additional training for SENDCOs would be made available. The Service Director for Education and Inclusion confirmed that the usual robust RMBC recruitment processes had been followed to ensure that candidates had been thoroughly tested. It was also confirmed that there were plans in place to provide additional training and to identify which schools would require Experts at Hand funding.

The Service Director for Education and Inclusion explained that the Local Authority had secured funds to engage more agency workers to carry out educational psychology work with schools. It was felt that this would free up capacity for schools to concentrate on the Experts at Hand work without having to cut down on crucial educational psychology support.

Forum Members queried whether there was a framework in place which set out what was expected to be provided at the proposed inclusion

bases. Concerns were expressed that these provisions could be challenged on a school inspection if expectations were not clear. The Transformation Lead confirmed that the DfE had now issued guidance on inclusion bases.

Resolved:

That the Schools' Forum noted the update.

23. SPECIAL SCHOOL PLACEMENT & CAPACITY

In the absence of the Head of Service – SEND, the Service Director for Education and Inclusion introduced the report on Special School Placement and Capacity.

It was reported that Rotherham continued to experience significant growth in demand for SEND provision. The number of pupils with EHCPs in place had continued to increase and this had created sustained pressure on specialist school settings and High Needs Block expenditure.

The regional benchmarking set out in the report was discussed, and the Service Director for Education and Inclusion commented that whilst the percentage of EHCP pupils in Rotherham educated in special schools was higher (32.8%) than all of the neighbouring local authorities, this did not reflect the fact that significant numbers of pupils attended specialist settings within Rotherham who did not live in the borough.

Forum Members commented that independent settings had also experienced an increase in pupils with EHCPs, with many parents seeking to obtain EHCPs privately due to the time pressure of the impending SEND reforms.

The Service Director for Education and Inclusion agreed that a larger number of parents were placing their children with EHCPs in independent settings due to a perceived lack of reasonable alternatives. Work continued to be done to understand the ongoing pressures within the system and to manage the demand for specialist provision. It was hoped that more local, bespoke adaptations and expansion could be carried out at mainstream schools to keep more pupils within mainstream settings.

Resolved:

That the Schools' Forum:

- 1) Noted the current sufficiency position.
- 2) Noted the regional and national benchmarking information.
- 3) Supported ongoing SEND Sufficiency planning to meet projected EHCP growth and future placement demand.

24. EDUCATION HEALTH AND CARE PLANS (EHCPs) ANNUAL UPDATE

Consideration was given to the Report provided in the Agenda Pack on the Education and Health Care Plans Service (EHCP) by the EHCP Team Manager.

No comments or questions were raised by Forum Members at the meeting and the Chair requested that if Forum Members had any questions on the Report, they should email them to the Clerk who would forward them on to service.

Resolved:

That the Schools' Forum noted the update.

25. PART-TIME TIMETABLES 2025 - 2026

Consideration was given to a briefing paper presented by the Head of Service – Access to Education on the current use of part-time timetables for pupils in Rotherham schools.

It was explained to Forum Members that online reporting of the use of part-time timetables into the Council's information systems had been launched in September 2024. This had led to increased reporting which in turn, had enabled detailed analysis and better understanding of trends within the data, for example: year groups; reasons for the part-time timetable; hours used; and number of SEND pupils on a part-time timetable.

The reports received via the Local Authority's portal were routinely analysed to support best practice locally and were shared across services to identify areas where further support for pupils could be needed.

The Head of Service – Access to Education reported that the number of pupils currently on a part-time timetable in Rotherham (0.336%) was higher than the national average (0.220%), with the most significant differences occurring at secondary level and at specialist settings. Forum Members were informed that service was already engaged in work to better understand the numbers of SEND children with severe levels of absence.

In the ensuing discussion, Forum Members commented that it would be helpful in future updates, to be provided with comparative data with Rotherham's statistical neighbours, as well as neighbouring local authorities. Forum Members felt that this would provide valuable context and comparison. The Head of Service – Access to Education noted this request and commented that providing this comparative data was

something that service had already been considering.

Resolved:

That the Schools' Forum noted the update.

26. PLACEMENTS AT ASPIRE

Consideration was given to an update on the 3-Tier model of support in place for alternative provision presented by the Service Director for Education and Inclusion.

It was reported that at Tier 2 of the current model, pupils who were experiencing Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) challenges in school were offered a 12-week intervention placement at Aspire Pupil Referral Unit (PRU). The intended outcome of this placement would be transition back to the pupils' "home" school. Data demonstrated that pupils that had completed this programme showed significant improvement in educational outcomes and that in certain cases, there were benefits in increasing the placement period from 12 to 16 weeks.

It was explained to Forum Members that in order to build on the success of the trial period of this provision and ensure its long-term viability, it was proposed to make a nominal charge of £50.00 per day for these placements to Aspire PRU. This would make a contribution towards the financial impact on Aspire PRU in providing the staffing and resources required to facilitate the placements. It would be intended that this new funding arrangement would come into effect from April 2027.

Forum Members were supportive of the proposed recharge of £50.00 per day to the "home school" from April 2027.

Resolved:

That the Schools' Forum noted that the Council's preferred option with regard to Placements at Aspire PRU was Option 1 - a recharge of £50.00 per day to be made to the "home" school by Aspire PRU for students accessing the provision.

27. SCHOOLS FORUM FORWARD PLAN

The Forward Plan was reviewed by the Forum and Members were invited to suggest any relevant issues they considered appropriate for inclusion in future reports.

Resolved:

- 1) That the Schools' Forum noted the Forward Plan.

- 2) That any proposed additions to the Forward Plan be submitted to the Clerk of the Forum for consideration and inclusion.

28. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

There were no other urgent business items raised.

The Chair of the Forum concluded business and thanked everyone for their attendance and contributions.