Minutes of a meeting of the Leicestershire Schools Forum held via Teams Monday 24th June 2026.

Chair/Vice-Chair

Martin Towers	Academy Secondary Governor
Suzanne Uprichard	PRU Representative & Maintained Primary School Governor

Members Attendance

Dominic Lane	Academy Secondary Headteacher
David Warwick	DNCC Representative
Kate Nicholson	Academy Secondary Headteacher
Rebecca Jones	Maintained Primary Governor
Phil Lewin	Maintained Primary Headteacher
Dr Jude Mellor	Academy Secondary Headteacher
Beverley Coltman	PVI Early Years Provider
Pete Letherland	Academy Secondary Headteacher
Carolyn Shoyer	Diocese of Leicester - Director

In Attendance

Alex Clarke	Maintained Primary Headteacher
Elaine Hart	Chief Financial and Operations Officer The Futures Trust
Salik Khan	LCC Education Finance Manager
Tim Browne	LCC Director for Education, SEND & Inclusion
Victoria Edwards	LCC Executive Head of County Primary and Secondary Short-Stay Provision
Lisa Turland	LCC Education Effectiveness Team Manager
Renata Chantrill	LCC Head of Service Education Sufficiency
Nerinder Samaria	LCC Strategic Finance Manager
Sarah Davis	Chief Finance Officer Oak MAT
Foongyee Cheung	LCC Clerk for Leicestershire Schools' Forum
Faye Smith	LCC Clerk for Leicestershire Schools' Forum
Christopher Harper	Local democracy reporter with Leicester Mercury in partnership with the BBC

Apologies for absence

Martin Tower	Academy Secondary Governor (Chair)
Rosie Browne	Headteacher Old Dalby C of E Primary School
Felicity Clarke	Academy Primary Headteacher
Ed Petrie	Academy Primary Headteacher
Michelle White	LCC Head of Service SEND & Children with Disabilities
Rebecca Wakeley	LCC Senior Education Effectiveness Partner

1. **Apologies for absence/Substitutions.**

Apologies were received from Martin Towers, Rosie Browne, Felicity Clarke, Ed Petrie and Michelle White. A substitution of Lisa Turland in place of Rebecca Wakely was noted.

2. **Minutes of the Meeting held on 23/02/2026 (previously circulated) and matters arising.**

No amendments were requested and the minutes of the meeting held on Monday 23rd February 2026. Minutes were agreed as a correct record. However, the action of ‘Obtain analysis on the potential impact of the expansion for the free school meals entitlement’ was discussed, where Salik provided an update.

Eligibility for free school meals in England will be expanded to all children in households receiving Universal Credit, with the Department for Education confirming the methodology for additional funding for 2026-27.

Mainstream schools will receive £295 for each additional eligible pupil, based on the increase between the October 2025 and October 2026 census. This shall cover the period of September 2026 to March 2027.

Further to this, for academies, they shall also be receiving an additional payment for April to August 2027. The funding will be rolled into the national funding formula.

It was highlighted that this is a significant change in policy where more pupils will become eligible for free school meals. Therefore, schools shall need to ensure census information is accurate, families are aware of the changes and catering and administrative arrangements are made for September 2026. Allocations are expected to be published in February 2027, where this shall continue to be monitored and further guidance on the matter shall be shared.

Jude Mellor question whether there was clarity on an estimated percentage increase in free school meals to support in the organisation of arrangements and in mitigating the potential challenges that may arise, such as cost and workforce changes.

Action: Salik Khan to collect estimated data in relation to the potential increase of free school meals and feedback to colleagues over the summer.

Kate Nicholson asked where there is differential data to support the statement that ‘without TSIL programme demand and placement cost would have been significantly higher’, which was noted in the previous minutes. Tim Browne replied that there had been a detailed report that went to Cabinet and Overview and Scrutiny Committee, which outlined these figures. Nerinder Samaria referenced that within the DSG outturn paper, in paragraph 9, it quantifies the impact of the TSIL Programme. This has avoided costs up £34 million by March 29, which exceeds cost of the investment of the programme.

Pete Leatherland questioned the link between the £4.6 million reduction in the school’s block funding settlement and falling pupil numbers. Salik confirmed the reduction is due to a decline in primary enrolment caused by lower birth rates.

School Forum in Operation

As per the constitution, an election of Chair and Vice-Chair was held. There had been no nominations for Chair or Vice-Chair, so Martin Towers and Suzanne Uprichard stood again.

A vote was taken for Martin to be Chair of Leicestershire Schools' Forum:

Yes: 8 No: 0 Abstained: 1

A vote was taken for Suzanne to be Vice Chair of Leicestershire Schools' Forum

Yes: 8 No: 0 Abstained: 1

Martin and Suzanne were re-elected, unopposed following a formal vote from Schools Forum.

Rebecca Jones wished to express thanks to Martin for his efforts on chairing Leicestershire Schools' Forum.

3. **School Budgets and Sustainability**

The report was for noting and required no decision to be made. The report highlighted the financial position of maintain schools across the sector. The balance position was reported to have moved sharply from a small over surplus in 24-25 into a net deficit at the end 25-26.

61 out of 65 budgets were submitted on the 2nd June, with further school budgets having been submitted. Salik wished to thank maintained schools’ colleagues for their efforts. The subsequent outcome of the budget submission was 45/61 maintained schools were projecting a deficit in 2026 – 2027, were aggregate deficit from £9.83 million to £28 million by 2029-30. The forecast from July 2025 noted a £17m deficit, which Salik highlighted was an improvement and as a result of a number of factors, including the LLC intervention programme. He further added that the deficit can be attributed to a number of structural causes, which included falling pupil rolls, fixed leadership and premises costs, pay inflation, and costs related to emerging needs not yet covered by EHCP funding.

The report also highlights the formal intervention framework, including the school sustainability work stream, the introduction of the budget policy, the licence deficit panels, financial planning assumptions, training, monitoring and external specialist review and the School Place Planning Strategy 2026 – 2031. The Strategy also notes that due to uneven distribution, the pressure on some schools remains more acute when compared to others.

Kate Nicholson questioned how many maintained schools are currently at capacity and how that correlates with those perceived as not being sustainable. Salik replied that understanding the financial position of these schools is in preliminary stages, where capacity against the rolls, currently data is being worked through.

Action: Salik to check with service whether data regarding capacity against the rolls can be shared with Forum members.

In response to Peter Leatherland’s question, Salik noted the current balance as of the 31st of March was £9.7m

Dominic Lane noted there has been a £17mn saving and also £28m deficits, he questioned how much of the amount encompasses savings to pension and not efficiency. In addition, what corrective plan of action there were in reducing the debt further.

Tim wished to highlight that they are not saving and it is cost avoidance. He further explained that work continues to be undertaken, which looks at refining the forecasting arrangements, which differs from school to school. Oversight of this is through Schools Suitability Programme, where the Schools Sustainability Board oversees the work with actions to put in place to address the accumulated deficits, which by in larger are being caused by falling rolls.

It was noted that some schools struggle within certain areas of the County due to viability and sustainability. Academies have been reluctant to take on schools with deficits. Financial experts are currently reviewing the budget reports submitted, where feedback shall be expected in due course. The School Organisation Programme shall be prioritised around the growing deficit.

Tim outlined possible solutions for schools with persistent deficits, such as combining infant and junior schools, amalgamations, academisation, or, as a last resort, closure. The Board will prioritise actions based on detailed budget reviews and local needs, with regular updates to the Forum.

Further to this, Dominic wished to clarify whether there is confidence in the reason for these deficits are due to falling rolls. Tim expressed that there shall be high support and high challenge, where leadership and governance, school structures, school standards expenditure (accumulative and projected debt) shall be reviewed, where corrective action shall be taken should there be any other issues. Tim wished to highlight that Leicestershire is a low funded Local Authority. Though there are falling rolls in rural areas, there is also expansion and development of new schools (around 45 new schools over the next 10 years).

Tim highlighted the wellbeing and support offers for headteachers facing challenging financial situations, including contingency planning, training, and responsive support from Lisa Turland's team, with escalation procedures for urgent concerns.

Jude wished to add, seemingly there will be a build-up of stock and whether this would be a solution to the challenges that SEND currently face and whether the Local Authority were open to repurposing these provisions. Tim noted that they are exploring all opportunities and are open to repurposing, however mindful that it shall be based on individual circumstances. He further added that consideration shall include looking at existing provision in the area, viability of transport and challenges around building restrictions and ownership as well as building quality. All options will be considered, should a school currently cease to be viable then alternative provisions shall be sought.

Alex Clarke wanted to understand how the Housing Strategy would impact and affect school place planning. He also highlighted that the low pupil numbers currently being experienced in primary schools shall, in a few years, become a challenge for secondary schools. Tim acknowledged the point raised and added that the developments shall compensate this, where there is a projected number of secondary schools to be built over the next 10 years. The team shall ensure they are not undermining existing provision and look to expand existing schools (both primary and secondary), which will support in increasing viability and build stock. Any opening of schools shall be done so in a phased way so not to destabilise the system. Currently, the district approves plans, but due to the Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) there are some unknown implications which may arise. Further details on this shall be known in due course. This may affect catchment areas.

Pete questioned whether the plan would come to Leicestershire Schools Forum to be reassure that money is being saved and for Forum member's visibility. Tim shared that Salik continues to work on policy framework. Should a school not be able to set a balanced budget, then the school must apply for a license deficit from the Local Authority. They must also have a debt recovery plan, this will be scrutinised and overseen by the Schools Sustainability Board. Priority actions to return to a balanced budget position will be agreed with each school. A meeting with all maintained primary heads will be scheduled in the autumn term to set out the next steps in supporting a programme of School Sustainability.

Phil Lewin questioned how much of information in the report has been shared more widely and what mechanisms the Local Authority were using to manage maintained schools and academies. Tim noted that the report is in the public domain and the public are welcome to join the Forum. Tim shared that not all schools wish to become an academy as they wish to retain their autonomy. Some schools may not be able to become an academy or join an academy trust, due to deficits and falling pupil rolls. Open and honest discussion shall be had in conjunctions to work with schools.

Jude wished to raise and understand what support there was for headteachers in these challenging circumstances. Tim noted that he is in attendance at Leicestershire school meetings to raise concerns and have discussions. Communications have been published to offer reassurance. Contingency measures such as a budget line of 5% will be discussed. The team have been responsive to the changing patterns of identified needs. It was noted that there are wellbeing offers of support to headteachers. It was shared that The Education Effectiveness

Partners work very closely with maintained heads and offer significant support in a timely manner.

Dominic sought clarity on the Local Authority planning assumptions and whether this was a first-time model that had been implemented. Salik noted there had been a change in the methodology. He added thorough guidance had been written, which also included narratives and questions. There has been improved governor training, workbooks and model scenarios given to support schools. There has been training and workshop with DfE and guidance package given to schools within the last 6 months. Further training is being provided during the Autumn Term.

Salik explained the 2025-2026 budget submission consisted of two submissions, one which was based on financial assumptions, which were consistent and comparative locally. The second budget submission was based on 0% inflationary assumptions. In April, budget guidance and workshops were issued and offered. A new software ‘Accessing Local Authority’ was also used, where training was provided for schools. Salik noted that the £17m encompasses the ICFP and restructures. He also shared there are recovery plans for individual schools, where there has been commissioning of a consultant firm, who are robustly reviewing all school budgets.

4. **<u>DSG Outturn</u>**

Nerinder Samaria spoke to the report and wished to highlight a £30.9m overspend for 2025-26, primarily due to High Needs Block overspend, pressures from rising SEND demands, significant growth in EHCP demand (23% increase in EHCPs in one year), increase placement and service costs.

Nerinder highlighted paragraph 4 of the report, which further details the High Needs Block spend. He noted that independent specialist school’s provider spend account for 24% of the total High Needs Block spend, which equates to 67% of total EHCPs.

The cumulative DSG deficit reaching £79.2m is likely to trend upwards during the MTFS period. There is potential for government support to fund up to 90% of DSG deficits as of March 2026, but this is contingent on approval of the SEND Reform plan and subject to ongoing review

Mitigation efforts, including the TISIL programme, have delivered significant cost avoidance (£34m). However, despite this, the overall, financial position is still unsustainable without further actions. It was noted that there is underspend in Early Years spend and Schools Block.

Action: In year budget monitoring updates to be bought to future Schools Forum meeting.
Action: Salik to send Foongyee questions received from members.
Action: Foongyee to disseminate questions and answers to Forum colleagues.

Tim added he has expressed his concerns to the DfE about the lead in times around the Reforms.

Pete referred to page 20 and questioned whether special units were running at capacity, whether they were in the correct specialism and could there be more done. Tim shared, there is ongoing work to review the funding arrangements of the units, that will have different needs. It was noted that such questions were also asked in the Q&A document received, which shall be addressed.

Renata added that majority of unit bases are full, with a few which are being reviewed, where SLAs are not aligned with the cohort of children that need to be placed. From September, there are tentative or finalised allocations against all units. Though there is a significant waiting list, there will be new enhanced resource bases opening from September onwards, which will bring additional space for Early Years children who are moving up to primary school. Work is ongoing with the opening of Harborough Special School scheduled to open in 2028. Renata noted that the DfE gives capital on an annual basis, which can be a challenge as this impacts the amount of funding that would support in bringing forward specialist places. This information becomes available in Apil where forward planning of specialist placements can be a challenge. Despite this, review of the Capital Programme shall be undertaken over the next few years. Renata noted that they continue to evaluate and be mindful of spending but are adopting an invest to save approach as they continue to go forward.

Pete noted that whilst work is ongoing and spaces become available, there are existing opportunities which could be readily available and questioned where these may be within the plan. Renata voiced that they are working with schools which have additional capacity to support enhanced resource bases.

Tim noted for each business case around potential closure, there will be review of possible future use of the site. There is also a formal deposition process. He also shared that decision making will also encompass the need and demand of particular areas in Leicestershire.

5. **<u>SEND Reform Approach and Experts At Hand Model</u>**

Liv Dale spoke to the report and provided an overview of the SEND Reform plan, including the submission of the final plan for DfE approval, the introduction of the Experts at Hand model to enhance mainstream inclusion, and the challenges of workforce recruitment and sustainability.

Liv noted the rising EHCP demand and cost, increased reliance on specialist provisions and the movement towards mainstream inclusion. The focus of work includes early intervention in mainstream, clearer national expectations and standards to allow equity across mainstream schools where possible and improvement of outcomes and value for money. The SEND Reforms aims to reduce costs.

Liv explained that the SEND Reform plan was submitted with cross-sector sign-off and is a precondition for accessing the High Needs Stability Grant, which could write off up to 90% of historic DSG deficits. Approval is expected by mid-September.

The SEND Reform plan focusses on two main areas, which are SEND sufficiency expansion and the Experts at Hand Model.

The Experts at Hand model aims to provide multidisciplinary support in mainstream settings, focusing on early intervention and inclusion. The model was developed in lieu of the national guidance, consequently, there may be iterations made as more information and guidance is released. Some indicative funding brackets for the budget to deliver the Experts at Hand has been given. The model prioritises direct delivery, with an aim of 90% of funding allocated to frontline support and is structured around seven localities to ensure responsiveness to local needs. Experts at Hand grant funding will likely be given to Local Authority to deliver the Experts at Hand model until the 31st of March 202. This is in line with the statutory legal changes coming in in 2029/2030.

David Warick questioned the premises sold by Leicestershire County Council. Tim stated, the standards by which councils and the building bulletins have to adhere to for schools are different for maintained schools and for independent schools. A survey was undertaken for suitability of the site for a school and cost of equipment for a special school. The conclusion was that the site was not suitable for a school. However, better use of the money was to build a brand new 252 place special school on a different site.

David Warrick wished to share on behalf of the NEU:

“The proposals in relation to the Experts at Hand offer appear to be contradictory to the guidance provided by the Government which explicitly states that the funding is to develop and deliver a new Experts at Hand offer. The proposal is to use this funding to replace existing funding. This is, therefore, not a new offer. The Government guidance states explicitly that they do not expect the EaH grant to be substituted for existing spend. The guidance goes on to say it should be used to build on and enhance existing local capacity and good practice.

Schools’ Forum should seek further clarification from the Council on these proposals and also be aware that the Council are also removing Qualified Teaching Status from their Early Years offer.

Rather than building and enhancing good practice, the Council is dismantling in one area and substituting in another.”

Action: Foongyee to include David’s comment in Q&A and circulate feedback to Forum members.

Gratitude to working group members and engagement of colleagues was noted and thanked. Liv highlighted the iterative process that the model and work would continue to be over the next 2 years.

Suzanne questioned, that within the Expert at Hands Model, would there be difficulty in sourcing professionals and how the management of this for Leicestershire would look. Liv acknowledged that though this is a significant risk and has been highlighted to DfE. Liv noted the mixed economy which will include assistant EPs and also main pay scale EPs. There is a drive nationally to increase training, though it was identified that this would not be a quick solution. Within the next few weeks, there will be a recruitment drive and LCC are working closely with other Local Authorities to see how recruitment is managed. This is a risk that has been flagged with Department of Education. The model looks at experts in provision, providing expertise and support in a modelling approach with one-to-one children. The idea is that the skillset will then increase to support a wider cohort. The plan includes upskilling existing support staff and developing training programmes for LSAs.

Beth noted locality meetings with school and SEND leaders are happening all week to share details of the plan and take feedback that can be worked into the model.

Jude raised concerns about the sustainability of the Experts at Hand model beyond March 2029, given the lack of guaranteed future funding. Liv noted that work is currently aligned with the DfE plan, which they have alluded to that there may be no funding past March 2029. Within that time, there shall be large amount of change, which includes LGR, where frequent discussions shall be had to review the sustainability of the programme of work. Wherever possible, sustainability is being built in and being a part of the National Change Programme offers valuable insight.

National band and tariffs shall have to be in place by 2029/2030. Further details of this have been sought, but will be raised again, so that an update to Forum can be given.

Liv noted that as part of the Expert at Hands Model, there will be 7 localities, which will have a collection of professionals and address locality needs. Vicky also noted that best learning, along with DfE guidance, has been taken forward to developed that offer to create more capacity within the system.

6. **Early Years Budget 2026/27**

For Information only. The report outlies the Early Years Block Budget 26/27, which confirms that Leicestershire County Council has met the minimum pass-through rate of 97%. The report captures four different funding streams. Salik confirmed that the council achieved a 97.2% pass-through rate for three- and four-year-olds and nine months to two-year-olds, with the only supplement applied being deprivation. The centrally retained amount covers quality improvement, advisory, and administrative costs.

7. **Any other business**

There were no items raised under any other business.

8. **Date of next meeting.**

The next meeting is due to take place on Tuesday 22nd September 1:30pm – 3:30pm

- Tuesday 22nd September 1:30pm – 3:30pm
- Thursday 5th November 2pm – 4pm
- Thursday 11th Feb 2027 2pm – 4pm
- Thursday 24th June 2027 1:30pm – 3:30pm

9. **Actions**

Action	Responsible
Salik to collect estimated data in relation to the potential increase of free school	Salik Kahn

meals and feedback to colleagues over the summer.	
Salik to check with service whether data regarding capacity against the rolls can be shared with Forum members.	Salik Kahn
In year budget monitoring updates to be bought to future Schools Forum meeting.	Nerinder Samaria
Salik to send Foongyee questions received. Foongyee to disseminate questions and answers to Forum colleagues.	Salik Kahn Foongyee Cheung
Send 2026/2027 Schools Forum invites to colleagues.	Secretariat