

THURROCK SCHOOLS' FORUM
Draft Minutes

12 March 2026 at 10:00 - 12:00
Virtual Meeting - Microsoft Teams

Multi Academy Trusts

The Gateway Learning Community Trust (GLC)
Catalyst Academies Trust
South West Essex Community Education Trust
Osborne Co-operative Academy Trust

Name

Mrs V Reid (Chair)
Mr T Parfett (Vice Chair)
Mr S Munday
Ms S Jenner

Secondary Voluntary Aided School

Grays Convent High School

Name

Mrs P Johnson

Standalone Academy Trusts

Woodside Academy
Giffards Primary

Name

Mr S Proctor
Mrs N Haslam-Davis

Infrastructure Groups

TPHA

Name

Mrs J Sawtell-Haynes

Special Schools

Treetops Academy
Beacon Hill Academy

Name

Mr J Brewer
Mrs Sue Hewitt

Alternative Provision Name

Olive AP Academy

Name

Mr S Bell

Non-school members

0-11 Representative
11-19 Representative
0-5 EYFS Representative
Diocese of Chelmsford

Name

Ms A Jones
Mr S Bowak
Mr A Melbourne
Mrs D Bradley

Also in attendance

Assistant Director, Education & Commissioning
Head of Strategic Finance
Head of Service, Education Support Services
Head of Service, Specialist Provision & Principal
Educational Psychologist
School Effectiveness & SEND
Minutes

Name

Mrs M Lucas
Mr D May
Ms S Williams
Mr M W Taylor

Mrs A Winstone
Ms S Hardy

1. Welcome from Chair

The Chair opened the meeting

2. Apologies for Absence

Apologies received from: Mr M Vickers (*Mr S Bell representing going forward*), George McMillan, Ms G Corry, Mr P Griffiths (*represented by Ms S Jenner*) and Ms D McManus.

3. Introductions

Introductions were made.

4. For information – presented by Mr D May

Thurrock Budget – Children's Services - Presentation

Mr D May advised that the LA has just approved the budget at the Cabinet meeting and the Full Council meeting in February. This presentation shows the context of the budget and the context of children's services, and where in the past that may have had an implication on the schools and the support provided by the LA.

Read from presentation slides.

Mr A Melbourne asked Mr D May to explain the pay award again please?

Mr D May advised that the local government pay award has not yet been decided, and once that is agreed nationally, the LA are legally bound to implement it. The sum mentioned in the slide is just the contingency sum that the LA are holding for an assumed pay award.

Mrs S Hewitt asked what happens with devolution (re the 6-7 year long plan mentioned)?

Mr D May advised that, as part of devolution, the historic deficit that the LA has will be considered as part of that proposal. The LA will still need to recover or repay back some of that funding, however it will be part of the local government reorganisation discussion to allow the new unitary to be on a firm financial footing as it sets up.

Mrs S Hewitt asked will it be written off then?

Mr D May said, no it is subject to discussions. There will be exceptional financial support to work towards a more sustainable financial conclusion, however we do not yet know what that means as it is part of the discussion with LGR.

5. For note only – presented by Mr D May

Dedicated Schools Grant – Finance Report

Mr D May shared report.

For Schools' Forum to note:

2.1 The Schools Forum is sighted on the:

- a) Current DSG projected outturn 2025/26 position, the significant areas of demand and impact on future years.
- b) Impact of the significant increase in the Accumulated DSG Management Plan deficit.
- c) Key areas and long-term solutions to the current position that can be considered by the Schools Forum sub group.

Mrs J Sawtell-Haynes asked how much money is moving from school's block to offset the high needs block deficit?

Mr D May advised that nothing is moving from the school's block to offset the HNB deficit. Because there is a deficit in the HNB, all the DSG and all the individual blocks get put into a general reserve and, therefore, is then used to reduce the overall deficit.

Mrs J Sawtell-Haynes asked how much money it is?

Mr D May advised £0.766m is the total.

Mr A Melbourne said, having made decisions about funding rates, is there a way to put back in? Mr D May said no, as the DSG has a deficit of £5-6m, and once there is a deficit we cannot distribute to individual funding blocks. Re Early Years, only clarity we have at the moment is the summer 2025 funding, no clarity yet on the autumn budget figures we will receive, and the census has just gone in for the January one, and we won't have any information about that until July.

Mr S Proctor asked if it is just the schools fund feeding the surplus at the end? Also, what steps are being taken to ensure it is as accurate as possible, so we do not have that *amount* scooped back up?

Mr D May advised that the surplus in the school's block has only been achieved through savings in the growth fund, where additional places have not been possible. Additional costs have been incurred within home tuition. In the January 2025 meeting Mr D May and Ms S Williams looked through what was required, what was perceived as growth and what growth was coming through, and then to have funds where Ms S Williams then to have discussions with schools re where to increase capacity as and when needed. Have significantly reduced that for next year, it is at the bare minimum that we can have. No underspend in EYs currently, won't know until July, every assumption we have looked at looks like we are there/thereabouts. Last year was about £300,000 to £400,000 underspend. Have increased the rates for EYs. There is a risk within EYs next year as everyone will be going to a termly census which is a change from how we have previously been funded. Hope it minimises that risk, and we have increased those hourly rates for next years. It is only the growth fund that can influence the schools block, everything else is distributed to schools. This year the maximum increase has been passported to schools, next year's growth is minimum.

Mr A Melbourne asked if the growth funds impacts on EYs?

Mr D May advised, no the growth fund is purely for schools and school place placements.

Mr A Melbourne asked were there any discussions with the DfE re why there is not anything parallel for EYs?

Mr D May advised that it comes through the hourly rate. EYs settings receive the funding direct. Schools receive it based on the annual census the autumn before, and it is only if we require capacity in schools to fulfil our statutory obligations, then we need to provide funding to schools to increase their staffing complement.

6. *Standing item: for information - presented by Mr D May & Mr T Parfett*
School Forum Subgroup verbal feedback

Mr D May shared the DSG 2026/27 ppt (agenda item 7 document) as part of the feedback.

School Forum Subgroup – Recommendations:

- Band Values in Special, Resource Bases, AP to increase top up funding by 2.11%. This being consistent with the per pupil increase received in the Schools Block
- Review of Band Values and costs within Resource and Special Schools in 2026.
- Hourly Rate to increase to
 - £11.75 – a 4% increase for all hours awarded
 - Or maintain £11.30 but increase the 20+ hours to £12.50.
- To develop and introduce Mainstream values from September 2027
- To keep under review the need for an Additional Targeted Support policy but not to implement in 2026/27. Cost implication but did not provide certainty to schools that an increase to hourly rate would.

Mr S Proctor thanked Mr D May for always providing information the group requested. Everyone within the group, whether it is the LA or representatives from both primary and secondary, have been trying to address the first issue. The group have made a small dent into addressing some of those concerns, however when delving into some of the figures, the disparity they were trying to resolve is wider. The whole point of the group was to address the inequality around top up

funding a child receives if they go to either Treetops, a resource base or a mainstream school (as the reality is those children move across all those areas now), so as to hopefully do something to say regardless of what setting they attend, the child has the same opportunities, same support to ensure that they can make the progress they require. The recommendations are fair for the situation we are in, however it has not addressed any of the real issues the group were trying to address. Even though it is better than it would have been, a lot more work needs to be done. The things Mr D May discussed to allow the group to have a remit of, could help to disperse some funding to make that more accurate.

Mr T Parfett said re second option discussed, did it go some way to balance it more?

Mr D May shared the School Forum Subgroup Recommendations slide again and advised it was to maintain the £11.30 and then to increase to 20 plus hourly rate to £12.50, so it will close the gap. Points made are valid, it is not the shift we wanted.

Mr T Parfett asked if there was any calculation done on the other option to maintain £11.30 and increasing the 20 hours plus to £12.50?

Mr D May said that is a 10p increase, but obviously there is still the gap.

Mr S Proctor said unless fundamental change happens around wider funding, don't think we will get anywhere close to that.

Mrs V Reid said we are probably looking at an interim solution and recognising that this part of a longer piece of work but also part of a wider piece of work that is happening nationally.

Ms S Dyer thanked Mr D May, understood fully how much work has gone into presenting this information today. We looked at Essex bands versus Thurrock hours, and so wondered if drawn any conclusions as to how that will then compare with our neighbours in terms of what that funding would look like?

Mr D May advised we looked at the comparison, but it led to more questions than answers that it was presenting, so now need to do additional work over the coming months to ensure making a like for like comparison and that there is no unintended consequences arising from that work.

Mr T Parfett said it needs to be accurate, if drawing a fair comparison between ourselves and what our closest neighbours are receiving, we need to ensure it is correct before presenting it to Mr D May. It is on the workstream for the next and probably future group meetings, to ensure that, if we are not paying the same rates what to do to ensure that we are, and if we are receiving more how to maintain it. It will take a little more time.

Mrs S Hewitt thanked Mr D May for putting all the information together and asked if information presented could, in future, be circulated in advance of the meeting to ensure they can review the information beforehand. Also asked if the Mainstream Inclusion Fund and the EYs Inclusion Fund will be in place from September 2026, and if so will it help?

Mr D May advised that nothing has been published yet, not received any figures re these and it will play out. Currently making decisions based on the facts we have; we know that the direction of travel is a change to move money from the high needs block to the schools. It will be for mainstream inclusion, however there is no clarity yet on whether that is additional to this or a one-off funding. There is money around the EYs, linked to Children's Centres, but again do not have that information yet. Awaiting specifics.

Mrs S Hewitt asked if it will be upcoming in the academic year 2026/27?

Mr D May said yes that was his understanding but not seen anything re the money to follow.

Mr A Melbourne asked re the 4% increase for all hours awarded, is that in addition to the 2.11%? Mr D May advised; re the 4% it is different to the 2.11%, there is no connection – not a combination of the two. EYs went up by 4% because the government prioritised the money within that, which we don't have yet.

Ms A Jones asked if this is specifically just for schools, or would EYs be included with the same rates and workings?

Mr D May advised that we have the SEN Inclusion Fund for EYs, so the hourly rate will change depending on what decision is made here, it may remain at £11.30. This is new and is coming forward in the academic year 2026/27, again we don't have the details or know what that will mean yet.

Ms A Jones said her concern was that, where there is a higher amount for a child attending more than 20 hours, and that is less likely in EYs to be the case, so will always be on a lower rate if that was to go forward as a plan.

Mr A Melbourne agreed, EYs are likely to do less hours therefore a higher rate for the higher hours would disadvantage those on the lower number of hours attended.

Mr D May reiterated his answer (on previous page) to Mr A Melbourne, who had earlier lost IT connection.

Mrs J Sawtell-Haynes said re the increase roughly per child, already know there is a parity between the funding that children receive in the different settings, asked if there was an opportunity to discuss increasing everyone by the same amount as opposed to percentages to reduce that inequality?

Mr D May said the sub group had considered a number of options, and it was something the group could consider further, however this is a recommendation from the sub group and will get to what the recommendation of the Schools' Forum is, as do need to set special schools and AP budgets to allow them to have their statement and budget for next year.

Mrs J Sawtell-Haynes said how many schools are winners/loser on those options?

Mr D May said that is why the recommendation is to maintain the £11.30 so that no school loses out, as that is what is being paid this year.

Mrs V Reid said we understand that it is very complex and have to make the best fit decision for the moment, however as Mr D May said, the schools, special schools and APs need to know their budgets and time is moving on quickly and they need to plan ahead. There is no ideal solution, trying to get the best fit at the moment.

Mr T Parfett advised that there will be winners and losers, and decisions made further down the line may not be popular. If we go to a banding system, it may be fairer as children will receive funding for that band value. There are children with highly complex needs, and they have to fit into all those band values and currently the hourly rate system is not working and so needs to go to that band value system where funding is allocated based on that specific need. The subgroup are still working hard on this, however it is going to take a little time.

Ms S Jenner asked if a child has a particular need and sits within a particular band and, regardless of the provision, would receive an equitable offer of money?

Mr D May advised that that would be the long-term intention. Obviously, there would be a step phase, and it would not be like for like as it would have to represent or reflect on the uniqueness of the resource bases because the setup is a separate entity and would, therefore, have to reflect their cost. However, would hope to get more comparison with the top up value within the mainstream resource bases and within the band values.

Mr S Proctor said that, from the work done so far on this, didn't know how that would ever happen without a reduction within other band values. The reality is that there is no more money, so for that to happen the funding for bandings would have to reduce as other people will be accessing the individual bandings, and the money would be divided by the total number of people.

Ms S Jenner agreed and said also a vision towards how we transition towards something similar.

Mr M W Taylor said he wanted to build on what Mr T Parfett was saying, to recognise the context of this and also the future context in terms of the SEND Reforms that are coming in. A while back there was a small number of children with very complex needs some of whom would have attended mainstream primary school, and the majority would have attended special school. Over the last 5 years or so, have seen an enormous increase in children with highly complex needs who have come up through primary schools. Some of those children, but necessarily those with the greatest needs, have gone into resource bases, however, now we have such a large number of children with high complex needs. The challenge we have is that there is a big disparity between the funding schools receive and the funding resource bases or a special school receive through the child's EHCP. This is why we have made adjustments to the plans in order to get that funding up to a higher level to provide the sort of support programmes that have taken place in primary school. However actually we are talking about the same level of need for many of

those children in primary school being funded to a plan as we are with some of the children in the resource base, there is not a clear division.

There is some disparity, however, why we need a much more accurate banding system is because we need to be able to define in detail exactly what those needs are and to recognise the level of difference in level of need. Therefore, we need to be very clear about how we allocate the resource, and the change that is coming in in the context of the White Paper, as there is a move towards reducing the total number of EHCPs and having that very targeted focus on those children with the greatest level of need. Also seeing an enormous group of children with a high level of need coming up through the preschool sector. When the changes come in, because there will be national provision guidance and national banding guidance, we will obviously have to take that into account in terms of how we do that. But we require enough detail in order to be able to differentiate fully because those children will still be supported within mainstream schools, but we require a much higher level of support obviously to do that effectively. Until that comes out, we are trying to move towards that gradually and that in many ways will resolve the LGR issue because everyone's going to be going through the same process. Mrs A Winstone and I have a meeting tomorrow with regional colleagues where again we will be discussing these sorts of issues because everyone's going through this at national level.

Mr S Bell asked if discussions had taken place with regional neighbours i.e. Havering, Essex and Southend, re the banding as he has been speaking to colleagues in Havering and there is a huge amount of work that has been done in relation to the challenges described here, and would be happy to share that information with this group.

Mr M Taylor advised that we are already looking at what Havering and others are doing regarding banding. We are also bearing in mind that we will have a national banding system coming in.

Mr T Parfett said that there is movement within a band, so when we are setting those descriptors, we need to start on it soon, as there are a lot of misconceptions around our bandings. Parents understanding is that they are entitled to a certain number of hours and support.

Mr M Taylor agreed and said we are getting a sense of greater flexibility and movement from the SEND reform. The question for us is how much we do now and how much we have to change when the national guidance comes in too.

Mr D May continued with the presentation re High Needs Block.

Recommendations

The Schools Forum is invited to:

- Note and seek clarity on the contents of the report.
- Approve, comment on, the HNB 2026/27 budget that includes:
 - Consider the Hourly rate to be paid for the academic year 2026/27
 - Maintain £11.30, but increase the hourly rate paid to 20+ hours to £12.50
 - Increase hourly rate for all to £11.75.
 - Ask SFSG to consider further options and implications
 - Increase in Top Up Band Values as outlined within the report by 2.11%.
 - Commissioned Outreach budget to be increased by 2.11%.
 - Note Identified Risks of £10.178m in the 2026/27 HNB budget.

Mr M Taylor wanted the Schools' Forum to also consider the outreach services, both the specialist outreach services and the outreach services particularly around supporting YP at risk of permanent exclusion as it has had a significant positive impact this year on both our rates of permanent exclusions and also the support has been positively noted at the inclusion panels. Therefore, if considering to not give them the increase it would mean a cut in the service.

Mr D May said that work on the outreach commissioned services had been presented to this group previously and been favourably received. The increase proposal is 2.11% to the commissioned budget so it is an increase. All these decisions are in the context that no increase has been received in the high needs block, and where we are seeing minimal increases, it is still £10.1m over the funding we are receiving.

Mr M W Taylor thanked Mr D May, advised that he had just wanted to make the point in case it was not agreed at this meeting, that in effect it would have been a cut on a service which has been positively received.

Mrs V Reid said it has been noted that clarity has been sought re the report.
For vote (16 voting members):

- Increase in Top Up Band Values as outlined within the report by 2.11%.
Agree: 13
Disagree: 3
Abstain: 0
Carried.
- Maintain £11.30, but increase the hourly rate paid to 20+ hours to £12.50
Agree: 0
- Increase hourly rate for all to £11.75.
Agree: 6
- Ask SFSG to consider further options and implications (will then come back to June Schools' Forum).
Agree: 15

Mrs J Sawtell-Haynes asked for those who voted for consider further options, if they could say what they think those options could be, as the SFSG have considered what they thought to be the options?

Mrs V Reid advised that, due to circumstances out of the SFSG control, it has not always been a consistent group and, therefore, some key decisions were made only this week, and maybe those discussions over time may not have been reflected in those options potentially or that they are not ready to present those options?

Mr T Parfett advised that he was not at the last SFSG and so was not aware of how the options would affect other schools/bases and how the funding options compared. Therefore, could not vote on either of the options without further discussions at the SFSG to see how it affected people.

Mrs V Reid said the theme is around implications on schools, so may be all schools need to know of those implications – something to consider.

Mrs S Hewitt said that, as this information had only been presented today and this group is voting on behalf of other schools who are not in attendance and so not aware of it, suggested it be taken to TASS and TPHA which are both meeting next week so that schools have had the chance to see it. Their response can then be sent to the SFSG to be considered, and then to be brought back to this meeting next time.

Mr D May suggested it could go to summer term TASS/TPHA and may need further SFSG meetings in before then to allow for more clarity of information and then can be shared with the wider groups as suggested, prior to the next Schools Forum meeting.

Next SFSG 10 June. Schools Forum: 18 June. Next TASS 12 May, TPHA 19 May.

- **Action:** Mr D May to look into adding additional SFSG meeting before 10 June and before the TASS and TPHA May meetings, to enable further discussion re options to be considered, and shared at TASS and TPHA for discussion.
Update after meeting: an additional SFSG meeting was arranged for 22 April.
Action closed.

- Commissioned Outreach budget to be increased by 2.11%.
Agree: 12
Disagree: 2

For note:

- Note Identified Risks of £10.178m in the 2026/27 HNB budget.

Mr D May continued sharing presentation – Next Steps slide onwards.
No questions/comments.

7. *Standing item: for Information – presented by Mr D May*

DfE Consultations

Nothing to report.

8. *Standing item - for information – presented by Mrs M Lucas*

Greater Essex Devolution/Local Government Reorganisation (LGR)

Mrs M Lucas advised awaiting announcement from the Government, may be imminent. Once we know more, will share with colleagues.

9. *Standing item: for information – presented by Ms S Williams*

Review of Forward Plan 2025/26

No further items advised.

10. **Minutes of the previous meeting held on 15 January 2026**

Reviewed and agreed as an accurate record.

11. **Action Log Review**

No open actions.

12. **Any Other Business**

Mr S Proctor asked what information had been gathered from the analytics company the LA commissioned last year, and how it is being used to inform future decisions?

Mrs A Winstone advised that Mastodon C contract have completed that work and are doing a further piece of work for the LA as part of the same contract. We have their recommendations from the first 2 workstreams and can share that and the data, happy to present it at next meeting. Mrs V Reid agreed for 10-minute agenda time for the update at the next meeting.

- **Action:** Mrs A Winstone will provide an update on Mastodon C information at next meeting.

Date of next meeting

18 June 2026