Croydon Schools Forum

Minutes of Meeting held on Monday 2nd March 2026

Members Present:	Jolyon Roberts Dan Bowden Karen Steele Theresa Staunton Sue Lenihan Fiona Robinson	Julie Evans Chris Andrew Dave Harvey Markieu Hayden Maryssa Dako
Observers Present:	Cllr Amy Foster Shelley Davies Cllr Maria Gatland Priya Perera	Jenny Bartlett Yetsie Adeboye Susanna Roe Risthardh Hare

Apologies: Abioye Asimolowo, Gill Larocque, Keran Currie, Dermot Mooney, Sarah Hunter, Kate Lanning, Debbie Ryle and Cllr Joseph Lee

Elected Chair: Jolyon Roberts
Elected Vice Chair: Gill Larocque

Clerk: Mori Bates

Item	Detail	Lead/ Action
1.	**Welcome & Apologies**	JR
	Apologies received by MB from AA, GL, KC, DM, SHu, KL, DR and CllrJL	
2.	**Minutes & Actions – Meeting 19th January '26**	GL
	Minutes, actions, and matters arising from last meeting 19th January '26 Summary of comments made in reference to the previous minutes: 2.1 Continued Action Point: GL queried the figures for Croydon Pupil Referral Units (Line 9 of Appendix A), of which it was agreed a meeting would take place outside of Forum with SD and JB. **ACTION: IN PROGRESS** 2.2 Continued Action Point: The Chair queried the alarming increase in the High Needs overspend which was noted in the December minutes as now £34M overspent. Chair agreed to write to the mayor to draw attention to the dramatic increase in the High Needs Overspend. **ACTION: COMPLETED – The Chair confirmed that he had written to the mayor and received a full response.**	JB & SD

	2.3 Under 3.4: It was queried as to whether there has been a national difference in the DSG allocation between this year and last year – if these figures are available. AA agreed to investigate – **ACTION AA & JB – CARRIED** 2.4 Minutes agreed to be a true record and ready to be published on the website.	AA & JB
3.	**Growth Fund Budget Update & Proposal**	**JB**
	3.1 JB presented a paper on the Growth Fund which is a part of the Schools' Block funding. 3.2 Table 2 detailed the 25/26 Growth Fund forecast spend, which showed an underspend of £408,455 of which the paper was reviewing ways that the underspend can be utilised – Options A and B. 3.3 It was noted that the Growth Fund for 26/27 has fallen on previous years. Option A was based on the assumption that the proposal outlined in 3.4 is accepted, using the £250K under the equipment/environment fund to support the KS4 pupils in Alternative Provisions/therapies. 3.4 SD explained that there is a pressure on the Alternative Provisions for KS4 (Croydon Town School, John Ruskin and Croydon College). It is important to be mindful of the impacts of the children going into mainstream secondary schools when they may be better suited within an alternative provision, for example when English is a second language. **Q1:** MD: Is there a pot of funding for these children who are transitioning within the GCSE year? **A1:** SD: There is not a budget available within the Schools' Block budget, but it is something we can bring up with the DfE for further exploration. 3.5 The expansion and bulge noted in tables 4A and 4B in the paper are historical payments and part of honouring previous agreements. It was queried as to which schools are benefiting from the expansion and bulge budget and members asked that the beneficiaries be named. **ACTION: JB** 3.6 It was noted that not all schools were aware of the equipment and environment fund and so had not applied to received funding. SD added that there was an equipment fund through the CLSS for schools supporting additional needs for £2,000. The Chair commented that this small per school amount is probably why there was not much take up of this grant when offered. **Q2:** JR: Where will the AP task force be located? **A2:** GL: They are located at specific alternative provision sites. 3.7 **The vote**: 9 members voted in favour of Option A, with two members voting for Option B. **Forum agreed** to proceed with Option A	JB

	3.8 TM added that Saffron Valley works to ensure that pupils go to the alternative provision so that they can return to mainstream school to avoid permanent exclusions. 3.9 The Chair noted that funding this AP provision through the growth fund was a 'sticking paster' as the amount allocated to Croydon via this factor was falling year on year and thus this funding would not be available from this source next year.	
4.	**High Needs Block Forecast Expenditure & Monitoring Update**	**JB**
	4.1 JB presented a paper on the High Needs Block. It was noted that there is progress with the Safety Valve agreement, allowing for the LA to secure an additional £3.29m to be used to reduce the historic deficit. 4.2 JB added that there have been challenges to find in borough places, but there are conversations taking place in regard to opening additional provisions where possible. The LA has received the results of commissioned review from CIPFA and will share these with Forum when they can. 4.3 Table 4 showed potential ELPs and satellite special school provisions across the various regions in Croydon and the projected place numbers where available. 4.4 The Safety Valve programme has officially closed as of 1 April 2026 and will be replaced by the High Needs Stability Grant. This strategic policy shift means that local authorities are no longer bound by strict, cost-cutting Safety Valve agreements. Instead, they are transitioning to a broader national system of SEND reform. The new grant will write off up to 90% of the historic DSG deficits accumulated up to March 2026. LAs will receive this one-off payment in Autumn 2026. However, it is strictly conditional on the DfE approving a Local SEND Reform Plan, these reform plans must be built collaboratively via local area partnerships and must show how the council will make its future SEND spending sustainable without harming frontline children's services. **Q3:** TS: Has there been an update on having the LA open a new SEND provision? **A3:** SD: There should be changes in legislation with a possibility for the LA to open their own multi-academy trust. 4.5 JB explained that the £20.2m in year deficit came from the difference between the total funds budgeted for the HNB being £87.8m and then the spend for the year being £108.1m. The reasons for this were explained in the paper. **Q4:** DH: Under 4.3 and 4.4, what planning has taken place to allow for the creation of the new special school placements? **A4:** SD: There are ongoing projects that are designed to utilise the existing provision and buildings on school sites that are not being used. **Q5:** TM: What was the point of the disapplication request and the Safety	

	Valve agreement if the government is going to write off a large amount of the deficit? **A5:** JB: The contributions of £1.2m were written into the Safety Valve agreement and local contribution was outline within the formula. We would need to check with the safety valve advisor about this to answer this question and provide clarity on the situation. 4.6 Forum noted the recommendations outlined in the papers.	
5.	**Early Years Block Outturn & 25/26 Forecast Position**	**JB**
	5.1 JB presented the paper on the Early Years Block Outturn and 25/26 Forecast Position. Forum agreed in February '24 to a 24/25 EYB budget totalling £50,767,848 and in January '25 the total agreed was £72,459,812. 5.2 TS noted that SENIF and DAF is rolling over to help with Early Intervention, of which there is a paper due to go to the High Needs Working Group centring around SENIF. 5.3 Appreciation was also expressed by TS on behalf of the EYWG for the work being doing on the paper. 5.4 Given the issues being experienced with Synergy that are being investigated, TS suggested that the LA ask EY providers directly about the issues *they* are having with the systems. 5.5 The recommendations were noted by members of Forum	
6.	**Working Group Updates**	**TS/TM/ FR**
	6.1 Updates were received from the working groups as followed – minutes to be marked as read: **a)** **Early Years –** Working group met and reviewed the Early Years paper presented today and some information on the distribution of SENIF. **b)** **Schools Block** – Working group met and discussed the Growth Fund paper. Distribution list to be reviewed to reflect active working group members. **c)** **High Needs** – Working group met and reviewed the High Needs budget papers, with some queries for Finance to come back on, as outlined in the minutes.	
6.	**AOB**	**ALL**
	DB informed officers of the LA that the contracted SALT provider Better Days' were offering screening free of charge whilst 'Allen' did not. SD confirmed that the contracts would be checked and the LA would try to establish parity across the two providers.	

RH spoke about the **Families First Partnership Programme (FFPP)** which is a major government initiative designed to overhaul children's social care by shifting from crisis intervention to early, community-based prevention. The three core pillars of this broader national rollout function together to reshape local family services:

1. Multi-Agency Child Protection Teams (MACPT)
When a child faces a risk of significant harm, a specialised Multi-Agency Child Protection Team takes over. Child protection social workers, police officers, health professionals, and education staff sit and operate within a single team. The system introduces Lead Child Protection Practitioners (LCPPs) who are explicitly responsible for statutory child protection decisions and chairing child protection conferences.

2. Family Group Decision Making / Conferences (FGDM)
This centres on empowering a child's wider family network to lead the problem-solving process before statutory authority becomes necessary, before issues escalate to a court or permanent care scenario. Relatives, friends, and trusted community members meet to build a safe, practical support plan based on the family's unique strengths. The overarching objective is to safely utilise the family network to keep children at home and expand kinship care arrangements.

3. Integrated Family Help
The traditional division between "Targeted Early Help" and statutory "Child in Need" teams will change to blending them into one continuous service. A family is assigned a Family Help Lead Practitioner (FHLP) who stays with them across their entire journey. This practitioner can come from various professional disciplines. Families no longer face a handover or an entirely new assessment if their needs increase. Instead, a single, living Family Assessment and Plan adapts with them as their circumstances evolve. Multidisciplinary teams are located directly within communities to make accessing help less stigmatizing and more immediate.

Connection to Strategic Funding Reforms
The nationwide deployment of the Families First Partnership is deeply linked to how local authorities are reshaping their broader high-needs and children's services budgets. Local Area Partnerships must align these social care structures directly with their new Local SEND Reform Plans to successfully secure the upcoming High Needs Stability Grant.

MD commented that consent is difficult to navigate regarding families that need the most help, as often they will not ask for help or will not accept it. One decision a school makes can result in work, panels and complaints. Therefore, it is important to consider the many reasons as to *why* parents are not engaging.

TM added that the voices of all key players in the education sector need to be heard and highlighted when a discussion is due to take place, schools would then be able to send representatives to attend.

Date of next meeting: Monday 15th June 2026

V3