

Minutes

CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND EDUCATION SELECT COMMITTEE

30 July 2025



Meeting held at Committee Room 6 - Civic Centre,
High Street, Uxbridge UB8 1UW

	Committee Members Present: Councillor Heena Makwana (Chair), Councillor Ekta Gohil (Vice-Chair), Councillor Peter Smallwood OBE, Councillor Kishan Bhatt, Councillor Jan Sweeting (Opposition Lead), Councillor Raju Sansarpuri, and Councillor Narinder Garg Co-Opted Member Present: Mr Tony Little Officers Present: Abi Preston (Director of Education & SEND), Dominika Michalik (Assistant Director for SEND & Inclusion), Kathryn Angelini (Assistant Director for Education), Gary Binstead (Senior SEND & Inclusion Commissioner), Michael Hawkins (Head of Education & Lifelong Learning), Ryan Dell (Democratic Services Officer) Naveed Ali (Democratic Services Apprentice)
15.	APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (<i>Agenda Item 1</i>) Apologies had been received from Councillor Tony Gill with Councillor Raju Sansarpuri substituting.
16.	DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST IN MATTERS COMING BEFORE THIS MEETING (<i>Agenda Item 2</i>) None.
17.	MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (<i>Agenda Item 3</i>) RESOLVED: That the minutes of the previous meeting be agreed
18.	TO CONFIRM THAT THE ITEMS OF BUSINESS MARKED AS PART I WILL BE CONSIDERED IN PUBLIC AND THAT THE ITEMS MARKED AS PART II WILL BE CONSIDERED IN PRIVATE (<i>Agenda Item 4</i>)
19.	THE PROPOSAL TO AMALGAMATE HAREFIELD INFANT SCHOOL AND HAREFIELD JUNIOR SCHOOL (<i>Agenda Item 5</i>)

Officers presented the report on the proposal to amalgamate Harefield Infant School and Harefield Junior School, from April 2026, in line with the new financial year.

This matter had first been considered in 2009, when a consultation took place and it was decided that this should be considered at a later date.

In 2022, an amalgamation policy was created and approved. This was important at the moment with falling school rolls and it was also important for schools to be more sustainable.

Officers had met with the Heads of the Infant and Junior Schools in summer 2024 to discuss the proposal.

Each school currently received a £159,662 lump sum. Amalgamation would lead to the loss of one of these sums. It was noted that where there were two head teachers, often the loss of funding coincided with the new school needing one head teacher rather than two. This case was slightly different. However, the funding drop would be gradual over a number of years, and not all in one go. The amalgamated school would also be in line with the same funding formula as all the other primary schools in the borough.

It was noted that there had been a reduction in pupil numbers over recent years. It was difficult for schools to be sustainable with small numbers. Looking at projections, this trend was not likely to change.

It was noted that efficiencies could be made elsewhere, such as through shared contracts, staffing and resources. School outturn positions suggest primary schools were more sustainable than separate infant and junior schools.

Members highlighted the large size of the SLT, compared to other schools. (Councillor Smallwood noted that he was a governor at another Infant School in the borough). There was currently an Executive Headteacher and a Head of School. This structure was more common in academy trusts. The financial benchmarking tool suggested Harefield had a relatively large SLT compared to similar schools. It was noted that decisions on SLT structure were for the school to decide. Harefield Infant School had 46.71 pupils per senior leadership role while other schools had up to 324 pupils per senior leadership role, according to the national benchmarking data.

Members asked about the impact on funding for children with SEND, noting some concerns from parents. Officers clarified that the direct funding change would be the removal of one lump sum only. Funding such as EHCP and pupil premium were linked to individual pupils and would not change as a result of an amalgamation. Any changes to funding would generally be as a result of changes to pupil numbers, which would also not be affected by the amalgamation.

Members asked for further information on funding and efficiencies. Officers noted that operating as one school can lead to more efficiencies than operating as two schools, such as one Ofsted registration and one inspection, one set of contracts (e.g. maintenance), and one officer manager, for example. Primary schools were generally more financially stable than infant and junior schools.

Members asked about amalgamations in Hillingdon compared to other authorities. Officers noted that many other authorities had moved the amalgamation policy forward, sometimes with forced amalgamations in other boroughs, and there were benefits to

young people such as having a consistent journey from reception/ nursery to Year Six. Officers were of the view that now was the right time to take this forward.

Members asked why the Council was pursuing an unpopular proposal, noting that 97% of 552 responses to the informal consultation were in opposition. Officers responded noting that it was the role of Cabinet to make a decision on the proposal, and there would be improved financial sustainability and benefits to pupils. Amalgamation was expected to provide a consistent educational journey from Reception to Year Six. While the schools had made efficiencies, more could be made as one school. There were also benefits for young people including not having to transition from one school to the other and having consistent staffing and curriculum.

It was acknowledged that there had been concerns over selling buildings/ land or reductions to SEND funding. These were not part of the proposals.

Members asked about the timing of implementation. Officers noted that it was planned to implement in line with the financial year. Maintained schools work on a financial year from April to March and so it would be more challenging financially to convert in September. As the schools were already federated, the changes for pupils and families in becoming one primary school would be comparatively minimal for Harefield schools compared to others.

Members asked about pupil numbers and financial sustainability. Officers confirmed that amalgamation did not increase pupil numbers but improved financial sustainability.

Members noted the speed of the proposal and suggested deferring the item until the results of the formal consultation were known. Officers noted that there had been discussions ongoing since 2009, at which point it was decided to reconsider at a later date. That later date was now. It was reiterated that the final decision would be made by Cabinet. It was the role of the Committee to provide comments on the proposal.

Members asked how stakeholders were engaged in the consultation process. There had been three online events for the first informal stage. The formal stage included two face-to-face events and two virtual events.

Members asked about the link to falling rolls. Officers noted that amalgamation was not seen as a fix to falling rolls and was more about financial sustainability. Smaller schools were much harder to make financially sustainable. Some families may also prefer an all through school as there was no need to reapply for the Junior age and consistency in staffing, curriculum, and policies.

Members asked if the potential for efficiencies would outweigh the loss of one of the lump sums. Officers noted that decisions on staffing were up to the school, but there were the opportunities to make savings.

Members asked about support for the school post-amalgamation. Officers confirmed ongoing support from the Council and HR providers.

It was noted that the Committee would give comments to Cabinet, and it was for Cabinet to make the decision.

RESOLVED: That the Children, Families & Education Select Committee delegated comments for inclusion in the Cabinet report to the Democratic Services Officer

	in conjunction with the Chair and in consultation with the Opposition Lead
20.	UPDATE ON THE DEDICATED SCHOOLS GRANT (<i>Agenda Item 6</i>) Officers introduced the update on the Dedicated Schools Grant, noting that this was a good news story. The DSG was aligned to the SEND & Alternative Provision Strategy 2023-28, which was the driving force for change around the SEND improvement programme. The High Needs Block finished the 2024/25 financial year with an in-year overspend of £14m, a significant improvement from the 2023/24 in-year deficit of £28.7m. This had been achieved without cutting support, and instead achieved through improving services, improving outcomes and being more financially efficient. Members commended officers for their work. Members asked about the revised banding model, and its implications on funding. Officers noted that the previous system was no longer fit for purpose and the new model had started from scratch. The previous system combined mainstream and special schools into one, and there were occasions where children in special schools were being given less funding than children in mainstream schools. The biggest focus was about having a clear, fair, transparent funding system that meant that children's needs were met with that funding appropriately. This had been independently led and co-produced by schools. It would also allow a clear profile of children's needs. It was also noted that Hillingdon was aligned to neighbouring authorities, which allowed for the same kind of support for young people if they move. Members asked about any savings made with mainstream schools and officers noted that not all children had transferred to the new system yet. This was aimed to be completed by the end of the financial year. However, officers were sharing with schools the data as plans were transitioned across to the new system. Members asked about comparisons to other London Boroughs regarding the DSG budget position. Officers noted that there was less mention of Hillingdon in articles around the high needs deficit. There were some authorities that had seen large increases to their deficit, whilst Hillingdon had halved its in-year deficit. Officers had been focusing on early intervention and giving the right support at the right time, and improving outcomes for young people. Members commended officers for their work in reducing the in-year deficit. It was noted that as the financial year was different to the academic year, some savings impacted multiple years. Officers had also completed a review of the early support funding in addition to the banding review to ensure a consistent approach. Officers highlighted Aim High – a new forum for children and young people with SEND, which will help to shape Council services. The DSG safety valve plan had been implemented into the SEND & AP Strategy.

	Members asked for an update on the safety valve programme and what would come next. It was noted new local authorities were no longer being accepted onto the safety valve programme. There were likely to be SEND reforms in autumn time and so it was not clear at this stage. Members noted that funding received from the DfE had been higher than expected, and asked how much higher it had been. Officers noted that while it had been slightly higher than expected, it was not as high as required to meet needs. Members asked if there were still some schools with high numbers of children with SEND. Inclusion was an important topic for officers and was regularly discussed with schools. Officers had reshaped support to schools that were not as inclusive to ensure the support was effective and meeting needs. Officer highlighted the PINS project and collaboration with the Centre for ADHD and Autism in secondary schools. Data was shared with schools around SEN support and EHCPs. The levels of EHCPs in mainstream schools had consistently increased term on term over the last two years. Officers also looked to consult with the nearest mainstream school where appropriate, as well as those schools chosen by parents. There was not currently a Hillingdon definition of inclusion and officers were working on an inclusion framework for all pupils, and would be working with schools on this. Members asked about adding a further update on inclusion to the work programme. Officers noted that there were yearly updates scheduled on related topics such as the SEND & AP Strategy and Education Strategy, and so there were multiple opportunities to update the Committee on this. Members suggested adding a third resolution to note the hard work of officers and the leadership of the Cabinet Member for Children, Families & Education on this topic. RESOLVED: That the Committee: 1. Noted the current improved DSG High Needs Block financial status; 2. Noted the DfE recognition of the SEND progress achieved; and 3. Noted the hard work of officers and the leadership of the Cabinet Member for Children, Families & Education on this topic
21.	CORPORATE PARENTING PANEL MINUTES (<i>Agenda Item 7</i>) RESOLVED: That the Committee noted the minutes
22.	FINANCIAL SCRUTINY TRAINING – VERBAL UPDATE (<i>Agenda Item 8</i>) Officers noted that there was an upcoming training session on financial scrutiny, due to take place on 10 September at 6pm in the Council Chamber. RESOLVED: That the Children, Families & Education Select Committee noted the update
23.	NEW REVIEW - POLICY REVIEW DISCUSSION AND GUIDANCE (<i>Agenda Item 9</i>)

The Chair referenced a recent update from officers suggesting the topic of fostering and reiterated the preference for a shorter review that could be completed in the remainder of the municipal year.

Some Members expressed that they would be happy with the topic of fostering, and that this would fit the proposed timescale.

Other Members expressed a preference for third party/ voluntary groups and opportunities in Hillingdon, but would also be happy to look at fostering, as Members were all Corporate Parents.

Members noted that it had been previously suggested that a topic on third parties/ voluntary groups would need to be narrowed down, and suggested tying this in with utilising spare capacity in schools, and how any spare capacity could be used by third parties.

Members highlighted the possibility of an information item on digital exclusion and educational disadvantage and suggested that this be taken forward. Members further noted their support for a fostering topic, as this has not been looked into recently.

Other Members expressed their preference for looking at utilising spare capacity in schools. If there were more young people requiring additional support, spare capacity could be utilised for this, and this would be beneficial to the Council and to schools. It was suggested that this topic would drive improvement, and it could potentially generate income for schools. It was suggested that there was a lot being done on fostering already. Other Members noted that spare capacity was a recurring theme.

Members reiterated the need to progress the review quickly.

Members asked and officers noted that information items could be added on topics that were not taken forward as a review item.

Members questioned if spare capacity would have enough for a suitable review topic and suggested taking this back to officers for their input.

Members were aware of the changes happening around fostering, including the Mockingbird project.

Members suggested that spare capacity would be a weighty item that could involve asking schools about their spare capacity and what it could be used for.

RESOLVED: That the Committee:

- 1. Discussed the above noted topics, with a view to deciding on a review topic; and**
- 2. Delegated to the Democratic Services Officer, in conjunction with the Chair (and in consultation with the Opposition Lead) any further agreement on review topic selection as required**

	Members considered the Forward Plan. RESOLVED: That the Committee noted the Forward Plan
25.	WORK PROGRAMME (<i>Agenda Item 11</i>) It was noted that there was a need to amend the date of the September meeting due to the change in the date of the Full Council meeting. It was proposed and agreed that the Select Committee date change from 11 September to 25 September. Members addressed the recent update on transporter buses, which had been received from officers yesterday. This issue had come up two years previously via an update on the Youth Offer. It was noted that the proposed timeline for securing new transporter buses was long and that these buses were the only venue available in some wards. It was proposed that the Committee ask if the timeline could be sped up. RESOLVED: That the Children, Families & Education Select Committee: 1. Considered the report and; 2. Agree to move the September meeting to 25 September 2025
	The meeting, which commenced at 7.00 pm, closed at 8.20 pm.

These are the minutes of the above meeting. For more information on any of the resolutions please contact Ryan Dell on democratic@hillingdon.gov.uk. Circulation of these minutes is to Councillors, Officers, the Press and Members of the Public.