

ESSEX PRIMARY HEADTEACHERS' ASSOCIATION

MINUTES OF THE EPHA EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON THURSDAY 30 SEPTEMBER 2021 at 10.30 am – 12.30 pm at The Lion Inn, Boreham

Distribution

Lois Ashforth	Dengie
George Athanasiou	West Vice-Chair
*Dawn Baker	Chelmsford West/Mid Treasurer
*Sue Bardetti	Tendring South
*Nicky Barrand	South Chair/Basildon East & Pitsea
*Isobel Barron	West Chair
*Liz Bartholomew	Harwich and Dovercourt
*Dale Bateman	Epping Forest Rural
*Liz Benjeddi	Billericay
*Heidi Blakeley	Wickford
*Amanda Buckland-Garnett	South Woodham Ferrers
*Dida Burrell	Braintree
*Anna Conley	Witham
*Matt Curzon	Uttlesford South
*Dawn Dack	Mid Chair/Maldon
*Ceri Daniels	Colchester South (Tiptree & Stanway)
Emma Dawson	Castle Point and Benfleet
*Paula Derwin	Colchester East
*Richard Green	South Vice-Chair
Mary Jo Hall	West Treasurer/Uttlesford North
*Nick Hutchings	EPHA Vice-Chair/North East Chair/ Colchester West
*Pam Langmead	EPHA Professional Officer/County Treasurer
Ian MacDonald	Tendring Mid
Richard McIntosh	Chelmsford South
*Jinnie Nichols	Halstead
*Hayley O'Dea	Rochford
*Matt O'Grady	Brentwood
*Donna Parker	Tendring North
*Richard Potter	North East Vice-Chair
*Harriet Phelps-Knights	EPHA Chair
*Amanda Reid	Mid Vice-Chair/Chelmsford North
Angela Russell	Basildon West
*Gary Soars	Rayleigh
Karen Tucker	Canvey Island
*Jonathan Tye	Harlow
*Joanne Willcox	Epping Forest South

Also in attendance

Darren Smith	Brinkley Grove Primary School
Shamsun Noor	ECC
Gavin Freed	Juniper Education
Helen Dooley	CR Payroll Systems
Karima Chandler	CR Payroll Systems

1. WELCOME AND APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Action

Harriet Phelps-Knights, the EPHA Chair, welcomed everyone to the first face to face meeting of the Executive since January 2020. New colleagues on the EPHA Executive include:

- Matt Curzon representing headteachers in Uttlesford South
- Dale Bateman representing headteachers in Epping Forest Rural
- Dida Burrell representing headteachers in Braintree

Richard McIntosh has been elected as the new representative for Chelmsford South (but was unable to attend this meeting).

Apologies were received from:

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|---------------------|---------------------------------|
| • Lois Ashforth | Dengie |
| • George Athanasiou | West Vice-Chair |
| • Emma Dawson | Castle Point and Benfleet |
| • Mary Jo Hall | West Treasurer/Uttlesford North |
| • Ian MacDonald | Tendring Mid |
| • Richard McIntosh | Chelmsford South |
| • Angela Russell | Basildon West |
| • Karen Tucker | Canvey Island |

2. BUSINESS INTERESTS REGISTER

All Executive members in attendance completed a business interests' form. It was **AGREED** that Executive members who were not at the meeting should be asked to complete a form at the earliest opportunity.

Executive
members
not in
attendance

3. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the Executive meeting held on 29 April 2021 were confirmed as an accurate record. It was noted that all matters arising had been completed.

4. PRIORITIES FOR EPHA FOR THE 2021/21 YEAR

The Chair of EPHA suggested the following priorities a focus for the EPHA Executive in the coming year.

- a) **The Task Force priorities, particularly the “year of reading”**
- b) **Continuation of the EPHA briefings delivered by the Professional Officer**
- c) **Headteacher wellbeing**

The Chair noted that the EPHA Vice-Chair had suggested that the main priorities for EPHA this year should be to support heads by telling them to look after each other, be kind to yourself and remember to have fun. She endorsed these, but suggested other priorities as well, as above.

A number of EPHA Executive members have been taking part in a pilot with Maria Brosnan, Pursuit Learning, based on HeartHealth science. There are two pilot projects running, one a group of 7 headteachers, alongside 5 individual one-to-one projects.

A number of participants gave their feedback: one or two found it rather unfocused (one headteacher was expecting counselling, rather than a focus on breathing and controlling stress reactions), and a number found the requirement to do at least 10 minutes “homework” a day (linked up to the heart rate monitor) an additional stressor in their busy lives. However, others said that they had benefited in particular from the group and the honesty and reassurance of colleagues. Some also found it helpful to have dedicated time spent focused on their own issues, rather than attending to everyone else. For some the focus on controlled breathing had helped them react and change their behaviour in stressful situations.

It was agreed that one of EPHA’s important functions must be to recognise and support headteachers who are experiencing a crisis, and one Executive member suggested the Association should be funding formal mental health support where needed. There is certainly a real concern about vulnerable headteachers, and wellbeing is not supported by the apparent perception from some working outside schools that life is back to normal.

Reference was made to a recent survey conducted by the Brentwood heads’ partnership about wellbeing, and it was suggested that this survey could be replicated to all headteachers as a way of assessing current wellbeing and the support that might be needed.

The Executive discussed a recent letter about SEP support, which is being determined by their assessment of whether a school is likely to be inspected by Ofsted; ironically, this emphasis on the “risk” of Ofsted is adding to the stress and pressure on headteachers, rather than alleviating it.

5. EPHA REPRESENTATION ON GROUPS AND COMMITTEES

i) Professional Officer report

The report gave details of the meetings attended by Pam Langmead on behalf of EPHA. In addition to the attendance at meetings (and writing follow up reports), her work for EPHA has included:

- Information, emails and communications with all headteachers, including in response to the Covid-19 pandemic;
- Responding to queries and actions from the Executive, ECC, other association officers, interested companies;
- Individual support for headteachers when issues arise;
- Identifying and supporting new headteachers;
- Managing the Colleague Supporter programme;
- Briefings to headteacher groups – 28 partnerships/clusters are now holding termly briefings – researching and writing briefing notes and presentations –and keeping them up to date as new directives, guidance and documents are introduced;

- Writing 7 minute staff meetings, including updating all KCSiE presentations, and bringing all in line with 2021 guidance;
- Updating support materials for schools, including statutory policy lists, website checklists, and the Support Directory;
- Organisation and management of the area meetings in the summer and autumn term;
- Organising and running webcasts with Clare Kershaw, Michelle Winter, Andrew Hemmings;
- Managing the EPHA finances: paying claims and invoices (including from Colleague Supporters), supporting area treasurers, producing reports, paying in cheques;
- Managing the bookings, organising the Deputy Headteacher conference, future planning for Heads' conference;
- Updating EPHA records and website;
- Other tasks as required.

ii) Schools Forum report

The Chair of EPHA is a representative on the School Forum; other EPHA Executive members on the Forum include Richard Green, Sue Bardetti and the EPHA Professional Officer. Jinnie Nichols is about to start as the newly appointed representative for primary maintained school headteachers. There has been little to report this term (the next meeting is on 6th October), though heads were reminded of the availability of compensatory funding for good or outstanding schools whose pupil numbers are reducing, through the Falling Rolls fund. However, it was noted that this fund is tightly regulated with limited application criteria.

6. MID YEAR ADMISSIONS CONSULTATION

Shamsun Noor, ECC Head of Statutory and Regulated Customer Services, was welcomed to the meeting. He reminded the Executive that a consultation was running until 1st October. An email was sent to schools on 13th September explaining the following:

In-year (mid-year) admissions applications for academies, voluntary aided and foundation schools i.e. own admission authority schools from 1 April 2022

As you will be aware, currently, Essex County Council (ECC) handles all in-year (mid-year) applications for all infant, junior and primary schools in Essex, regardless of whether the school is a community, voluntary controlled, academy, foundation or voluntary aided school.

The situation in Essex now is that more than two thirds of primary phase schools are now their 'own admission authority' i.e. academy, foundation or voluntary aided. Such schools are permitted, by the national School Admissions Code, to handle their own in-year (mid-year) applications.

*Essex County Council has continued to co-ordinate all in-year primary applications for several years, despite there being no legal obligation to do so. We now consider it appropriate to consult with you on changing this process, **so that with effect from 1 April 2022**, own admission authority schools would handle their own in-year applications. This is already the case in Essex for all secondary schools which are their own admission authority. The Council would continue to handle in-year applications for*

community and voluntary controlled schools as ECC is the admission authority for these schools.

We believe that the current system leads to unnecessary delays for parents and children, schools and the Council. Rather than a parent being able to approach and apply directly to a school which is its own admission authority (and receive a quick decision within a day or two, or even hours), they have to send a form to ECC for often multiple schools, ECC then has to write to schools, schools have to write back to ECC and then ECC to the parents. This can sometimes take weeks to conclude, as opposed to a child starting at a school with a space much more quickly.

The situation is now even more stark with the requirements of the revised School Admissions Code which took effect from 1 September 2021, about which I wrote to you at the end of the summer term. This imposes a mandatory timescale of **15 schools days** for parents to receive the outcome of an in-year application and a **2 school day response time for schools to respond to the LA** about an application made to the Council.

With all applications being made to the Council, the ability to meet these timescales can become very stretched and the reality is that, in many cases, schools could respond much quicker to the parent directly, rather than having to respond to the Council on multiple occasions and await news of whether an offer is made. As own admission authority schools have to prepare and present any subsequent appeals, there are also unnecessary delays for schools in this part of the process, because the information e.g. application form and refusal letters are held at the Council and schools have to request these from the admissions team. If own admission authority schools handled their own in-year applications, these delays would be avoided as schools would have all the paperwork readily to hand.

We are therefore consulting with you to seek your views on the proposal that **all own admission authority infant, junior and primary schools in Essex handle their own in-year applications with effect from 1 April 2022. The consultation period starts today, 13th September 2021 and closes on 11 October 2021.** Any comments should be sent to me by email at shamsun.noor@essex.gov.uk

The Council will then consider any comments and make a decision which will be communicated in good time before implementing any change. If the proposed change is implemented, detailed guidance will be provided, including template application forms and offer/refusal letters to make any transition as smooth as possible. We will also, through the Essex Primary Heads Association (EPHA) arrange briefing sessions to provide advice and support for any transition.

To be clear, this proposed change **has no bearing** on applications in the normal admission rounds or late applications for admission into Reception or Year 3 in a junior school for a forthcoming September. These will all continue to be made to and co-ordinated by the Council, as the law requires. Nor does this proposed change have any effect on the admission of children with an EHCP.

One of the headteachers noted that she is an academy, and therefore their own Admissions Authority. She asked what would stop schools picking and choosing which children they wanted to admit. Shamsun replied that there is nothing to prevent schools doing that now, if they choose to, but they expose themselves to a risk of being challenged by the school admissions ombudsman or the ESFA.

A question was asked about safeguarding, and how the LA will know which schools

have admitted a child. Shamsun explained that the Admissions Code builds in a safeguard, requiring all schools to send a copy of a decision on an admission to the Local Authority within two days.

In response to a question, Shamsun confirmed that the LA would continue to manage the protocols and arrangements for displaced children.

There was a discussion about how schools and the LA determine distance criteria, which may be different from each other and therefore not understood by parents. Shamsun noted that a school's distance criteria must be stated in its admission arrangements, and that 99% of schools use the Essex criteria. However, one headteacher objected to this, saying that schools have to pay to access the criteria and it is not possible to align with the Essex approach.

Shamsun stressed that an individual school cannot be challenged on its admissions arrangements as long as they are lawful and it applies them consistently.

One headteacher suggested that the change would give schools an increased workload, with the onus on parents to make contact with schools and that they likely to choose more "successful" schools. Shamsun accepted this could be an issue, but noted that parents do this already.

It was suggested that the Local Authority currently acts as a "clearing house" and asked if there would be ongoing advice and support from the team. Another headteacher asked if schools could have the option of buying into a mid-year admissions service, paying the LA to continue to manage the process. Shamsun said that this has been considered, but there are concerns that this could be confusing for parents. However, it was argued that as there is a different system for community and VC schools, and others, it should be possible to create a system of support that schools could buy in to.

The EPHA Vice-Chair asked if a short video could be filmed for parents about admissions, as was done previously, to explain the system and to discourage applications that were unlikely to succeed (which result in disappointment and, potentially, a costly appeals process). Shamsun agreed to this idea.

Finally he confirmed that this is definitely a consultation and a final decision has not been made on the proposal. Schools are encouraged to respond to the consultation before 11th October.

Contact details

Shamsun Noor

Head of Statutory and Regulated Customer Services

Essex County Council

Tel: 033301 32246 | Ext: 32246

Email: shamsun.noor@essex.gov.uk

7. JUNIPER PAYROLL

Gavin Freed was welcomed to the meeting. Gavin is the Executive Chairman of Juniper Education, who took over payroll from Essex County Council in April. He was accompanied by Helen Dooley and Coreen ? from CR Payroll Solutions.

Gavin stressed that relationships with Essex schools are incredibly important for Juniper Education, but acknowledged that they are currently under strain due to the ongoing problems with the payroll system. He assured the Executive that Juniper manages payroll effectively in other parts of the country and agreed that payroll should be a “sideshow, not a main event” in the life of an organisation.

Juniper participated in a bidding process last November, and he suggested that ECC was keen to come to a swift conclusion when deciding a new provider. Juniper is keen to support Essex schools and many have bought into both HR and finance for years, which should provide continuity for schools. He noted that, as a provider, ECC was quite unique: historically there were numerous systems in place to support schools, including a central bank account system, pension management and payroll. In the last year there has been a separation of the three (including closing the central bank account system entirely) and this has caused huge change. However, there continues to be three partners in the system: schools, Juniper and ECC (who continue to manage pensions).

There was a slow contractual conclusion and ECC decided not run a parallel system with the new payroll system as would normally happen, instead choosing to transfer 260+ schools in one “big bang”, which required a huge data migration of 17,000 employees. This transfer was patently unsuccessful. Juniper had to create a uniquely new operating model for Essex schools, which has caused multiple problems.

Gavin reminded the Executive that the transition took place at the same time as lockdowns and the pandemic, causing unique staffing problems in their own team. Staff were required to work from home which had a negative impact on training, team working and communication, as well as the recruitment of staff. He noted that the relentless month-on-month pressure of managing a payroll system creates very few, if any, opportunities to create change and repair systems.

Gavin accepted that communication has been appalling, and Juniper has now introduced a new system of regular weekly slots for schools, so that queries and problems can be addressed in a timely and guaranteed way.

In order to address the problems that have arisen since April, Juniper has engaged outside support and expertise, and the collaboration with ECC has improved.

CR Payroll Solutions has been engaged for four months to address the current problems and to ensure that the payroll service is fit for purpose. Helen Dooley and Karima Chandler were welcomed to the meeting.

Helen and Karima explained their company’s objectives, noting that CR Payroll has a reliable, long-term record of leading the successful delivery of payroll services and emergency cover to clients in the UK and Ireland. All of their payroll specialists are CIPP

(UK) / IPASS (ROI) qualified, and they only recruit staff with 5+ years of payroll experience. Their aim is to take a payroll from failure to delivery, participating as a payroll expert on the project.

Initially they learn the client's system and hear both sides of the project from the client (Juniper) and their customers (Essex schools). They agreed that communication and consistent contact is key.

Darren Smith, headteacher at Brinkley Grove Primary, gave an impassioned account of the problems and challenges that his staff have faced over the last few months: he asserted that, for example, the previously 5 minute task of reconciling payroll now took 5 hours, and what used to be a 1 day a month job now takes five – payroll now takes up a quarter of his School Business Manager's time, resulting in massive stress and a negative impact on school improvement. He gave a long list of problems, including unmanageable and inconsistent deadlines, failures of the portal, poor or non-existent communication and numerous payroll mistakes. He recognises the stress and challenges for the Juniper workforce, noting that at times they have spoken to team members on the verge of tears. The online training for schools has been poor, as the sessions have been delivered by a trainer who does not know the systems and therefore cannot answer any but the most basic queries.

Gavin Freed stressed that, supported by CR Payroll, the immediate plan is to create a knowledgeable team that can offer guidance and support. The EPHA Executive stressed its willingness to work with Juniper to get this right, acknowledging that the failure of the payroll system is not in anyone's interests; however, the Professional Officer warned that she has heard from a number of schools that they are planning to move payroll providers.

Gavin expressed his confidence that, with the support of CR Payroll and other experts, the problems with the current payroll system can be fixed relatively soon, and the problems should become a thing of the past.

It was suggested that it would be helpful for Juniper to write a delivery plan, setting out the operational stages in the next few weeks/months, to offer reassurance and information to schools. EPHA is also keen to host a webcast, or to invite Gavin and other colleagues to meetings, to explain the ongoing situation to headteachers and school staff and to rebuild trust.

Contact details

Gavin Freed gavin.freed@junipereducation.org

<https://crpayrollsolutions.com/>
helen.dooley@crpayrollsolutions.com

8. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

There was no further business discussed.

9. DATES AND TIMES OF MEETINGS FOR THE 2021/22 SCHOOL YEAR

Executive meetings (The Lion Inn, Boreham)

Thursday 20 January 2022

Thursday 19 May 2022

Area Heads Meetings

Autumn term 2021

N-EAST	Wednesday 10 November	Colchester Community Stadium
MID	Thursday 11 November	The Lion Inn, Boreham
WEST	Wednesday 17 November	online
SOUTH	Thursday 18 November	Holiday Inn, Basildon

Spring term 2022

N-EAST	Wednesday 2 March	Colchester Community Stadium
SOUTH	Thursday 3 March	Holiday Inn, Basildon
WEST	Wednesday 9 March	Manor of Groves, Sawbridgeworth
MID	Thursday 10 March	The Lion Inn, Boreham

Summer term 2022

N-EAST	Wednesday 15 June	Colchester Community Stadium
MID	Thursday 16 June	The Lion Inn, Boreham
WEST	Wednesday 22 June	Manor of Groves, Sawbridgeworth
SOUTH	Thursday 23 June	Holiday Inn, Basildon

Conferences

Headteachers' Conference

Friday 18 March 2022 Stock Brook Country Club, Nr. Billericay

Deputy Headteachers' Conference

Friday 8 October 2021 Weston Community Homes Stadium
Friday 7 October 2022 Weston Community Homes Stadium

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Harriet Phelps-Knights
Chair of EPHA

Pam Langmead
EPHA Professional Officer