ESSEX PRIMARY HEADTEACHERS' ASSOCIATION

MEETING OF THE EPHA SMALL SCHOOLS SUPPORT GROUP
HELD ON TUESDAY 4 JUNE 2026 11.00 am – 12.30 pm

Venue online
Clerk Pam Langmead [TEL: 01621-786359/07791 143277]

1. IN ATTENDANCE

Sarah Bailey	Debden Primary
Judith Dale	Baynards Primary
Teresa Gage	St John the Baptist CE Primary
Claire Jackman	Great Easton Primary
Lois Jarrold	Radwinter CE Primary
Jinnie Nichols	Chorus Schools Federation – Chair
Amy Reis	Great Sampford Primary
Melissa Taylor	Margaretting/Roxwell/Ford End Primaries
Pam Langmead	EPHA Professional Officer
Chris Toyne	AIR Education
Peter Stonier	Ofsted Senior HMI

Jinnie Nichols, Chair of the SSSG, welcomed headteachers to the meeting.

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Emily Bartram	Radwinter CE Primary
Charlotte Brown	Messing Primary
Joshua Chesterman	Manuden Primary
Becky Keitch	St George's CE Primary, Great Bromley

3. MINUTES AND MATTERS ARISING

The minutes of the meeting held on 17th March 2026 were approved as an accurate record. The following matters considered at the meeting were noted:

a) Inclusion framework (Minute 3a refers)
Jinnie noted the discussion about the inclusion framework.

b) Wraparound childcare update (Minute 3d refers)
Jinnie noted that she had sought advice from Emily Bartram about wrapround childcare funding and that this had proved very valuable.

c) Input from Nicky Turp, Education Access Manager (Minute 3e refers)
The Professional Officer noted that she had been asked to invite Nicky Turp to the meeting, and she had initially agreed to come, but is now unavailable as a result of sickness absence.

d) Leading oracy in small schools (Minute 6 refers)
It was noted that Jason Buckley had been well received at the meeting, and he has agreed to lead a workshop at the small schools conference in October.

e) Ofsted feedback (Minute 7 refers)
Judith Dale gave extremely useful feedback about her experience of Ofsted, including her "top tips" for inspection. The Professional Officer added her thanks to Judith's Chair of Governors who had given very helpful feedback about the governors' experience of the inspection procession, which had helped inform recent training for governors.

4. GOVERNOR NETWORK GROUP

The Professional Officer reported that the Small Schools' Governor network had held a themed discussion group meeting on 24th March 2026. The meeting focused on succession planning on governing bodies; there was a helpful discussion, but a general view that recruiting governors remained a challenge.

The group also met on Tuesday 12th May 2026 and focused on the wider system (devolution and Local Government Reorganisation) and what it might mean for Essex schools. Pam gave an update on what we know so far, and what this might mean for schools across Essex.

Pam noted that the network continues to be welcomed by the governors who attend, and asked headteachers to encourage their governors to engage.

The final meeting of the network this year is on **Wednesday 15th July 2026, 8.00 – 9.00 am** – the discussion theme is governor monitoring and visits/celebrating success
https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82825940783?pwd=D30869BbyxAukBNLSLiHKk05dm65pu.1
Meeting ID: 828 2594 0783
Passcode: 997178

It was agreed that it was important that governors understand their role in monitoring in particular. There was a discussion about the lack of available governor training for schools. The Professional Officer does offer some training for governors, including around managing complaints and exclusions, and she will deliver a session about how governors can support their headteachers, in July. She acknowledged that the demands on governors, as well as on headteachers, are more and more extensive.

The governors on the group have asked for the network to continue, and will agree dates and themes for the 2026/27 school year at the next meeting.

The headteachers at the meeting gave some suggestions for possible themes for discussion, including:

- supporting the school and headteacher, particularly when facing challenging situations such as complaints and exclusions. Governors need to be prepared to step up and play their part in the process;
- pupil numbers and falling rolls, recruitment and financial sustainability;
- health and safety, and understanding general compliance.

5. AIR EDUCATION

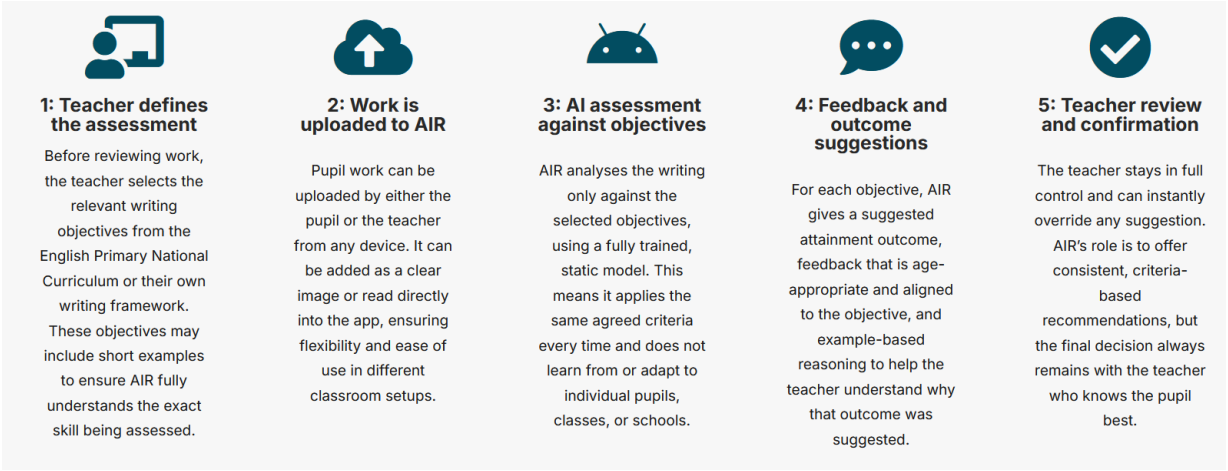
Chris Toyne, one of the founders of AIR Education was welcomed to the meeting.

He explained that Air is a web-based, AI-powered platform designed to support primary teachers with writing assessment. It helps schools assess pupils' writing more quickly, generate high-quality, personalised feedback, and make consistent, reliable judgements—while keeping teachers fully in control. By reducing the time spent marking and highlighting patterns across a class or cohort, Air gives teachers clearer insights into pupil progress and helps schools improve writing outcomes without adding to workload.

He showed the group the **Instant Writing Assessment Plan** – a simple 3-step process to reduce teacher workload and improve pupil progress today:

1. **Upload writing:** capture photos of work directly from your phone, tablet, or computer.
2. **Assess instantly:** get assessment information and actionable feedback.
3. **Improve outcomes:** see your class's strengths and areas for improvement at a glance.

He explained that, as a group of educationalists, we've seen first-hand how assessing writing can create excessive working hours. This impacts teacher well-being and pupil progress. Chris noted that they worked 20 schools as part of a pilot project to ensure this 3-step process has the teacher and pupil at the core. The teachers in the research group have helped ensure that this process is simple and effective for schools.



This process keeps assessments consistent and reliable, while allowing teachers to apply their expertise and consider the wider context of each pupil's work.

AIR's reliability is measured by comparing its suggested outcomes with the final decisions made by teachers. Between **January and July 2025**, more than **272,000 writing assessments**

were reviewed through AIR. In this period, teachers chose to override only **1.4%** of AIR's suggested outcomes, giving a measured accuracy rate of **98.6%** in real classroom use. Accuracy in this context means alignment with the teacher's professional judgement. Each suggested outcome is based solely on the selected learning objectives, ensuring a fair and consistent approach. Because AIR uses a fully trained, static model, the same criteria are applied every time, reducing variation across different classes, year groups, or schools. AIR's performance is monitored continuously. Data on overrides and outcome changes is regularly reviewed to ensure the system remains consistent and trustworthy. This commitment to ongoing measurement helps maintain high levels of reliability and gives teachers confidence that AIR will support their assessment process without replacing their expertise.

AIR is designed to provide fair, consistent assessments for all pupils, with safeguards in place to minimise bias and protect data integrity. The system uses a fully trained, static model, meaning it does not learn from or adapt to individual pupils, schools, or regions. This ensures the same criteria are applied every time, regardless of context.

Assessments are based solely on the written work provided and the learning objectives selected by the teacher. No consideration is given to handwriting style, pupil names, or any other personal information. This approach helps prevent unconscious bias and keeps the focus on the quality and content of the writing itself.

AIR also undergoes regular reviews of assessment patterns to check for unintended trends or disparities. Any findings are investigated and, where needed, adjustments are made to maintain fairness across all users. These measures, combined with teacher oversight, ensure AIR's recommendations remain transparent, consistent, and trustworthy.

Chris confirmed that the annual licence for a school with fewer than 150 pupils is £200. He was asked about the support given to subscribing schools, and he explained that when a school joins the team set up their platform within 7 days or so. They run live training sessions during the year, and the website included numerous explanatory videos outlining the various processes. They have a help desk to give advice and support. AIR was launched in 2025, and 800 schools now buy the product.

Contact details:
Dave Surfleet dave@air-ed.com
Chris Toyne chris@air-ed.com
https://air-ed.com/

The Professional Officer noted that EPHA is hosting a webinar for AIR Education on 23rd June.

6. OFSTED UPDATE

Peter Stonier was welcomed to the meeting, and thanked for joining the group once again. Jinnie noted that when he first attended the group, in November, headteachers found his advice and information very encouraging.

Peter noted the previous agenda item and said that Ofsted is starting to use AI to support the inspection process, for example when analysing parent and staff questionnaires.

Peter shared a number of slides from Ofsted produced as a summer term update, and he agreed to send these out following the meeting. He noted a number of useful web links that Ofsted has on the website, including

Ofsted - frequently asked questions

When will my school be inspected?

What is the role of the nominee?

What happens on the planning call?

How does case sampling work?

How do Ofsted take into account the context of small schools?

What is the role of governors in school inspections?

Strong foundations in the first years of school

Foundational knowledge by the end of key stage 1

Appropriate pedagogy and assessment

Ofsted YouTube channel

Report card video for parents

Various webinars to watch

Peter reminded headteachers of the importance of being able to demonstrate strong knowledge and practice in the first years of school, including in Reception and Key Stage 1.

He reiterated that Ofsted does not expect schools to produce specific or additional paperwork for inspection, but suggested that it would be helpful to have basic data and statistical information to hand for the planning call, for example about attendance, SEND, number of EHCPs and so on. He reminded heads that this is the opportunity for headteachers to talk about their own context and noted that Ofsted recognises the following about small schools:

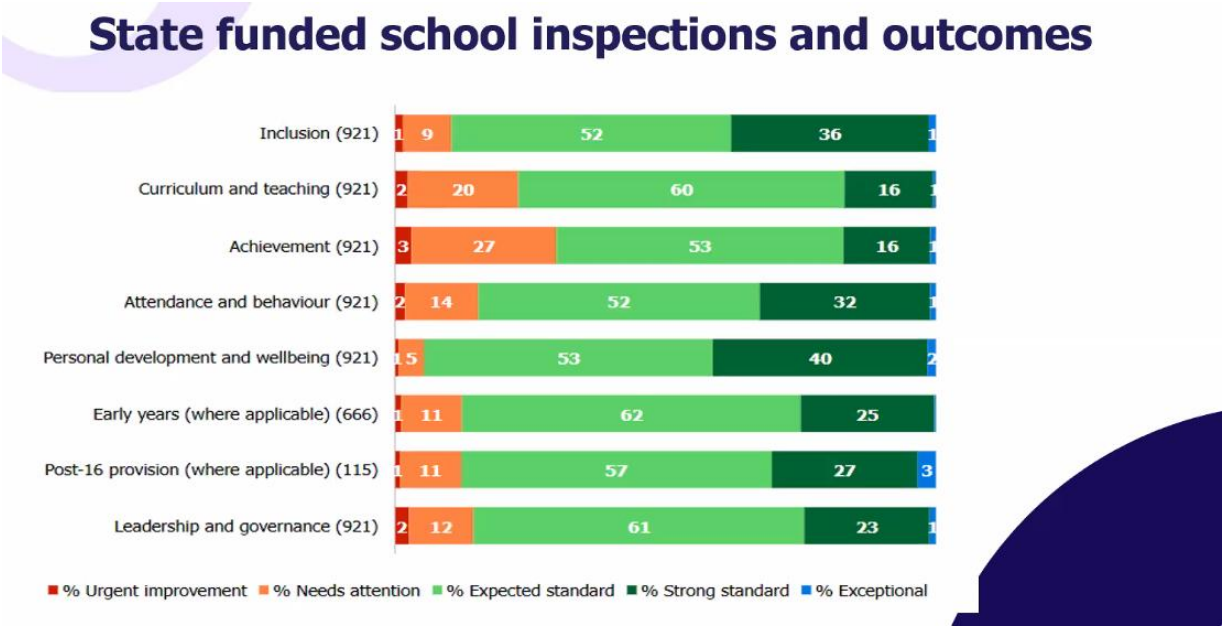
- Inspectors acknowledge the **unique context** of small schools.
- Mixed-age classes may require **adapted curriculum organisation**.
- Leaders may **share curriculum expertise and resources** across schools.
- Leadership teams may be **small**, with staff holding **multiple roles**.
- Inspectors understand that leadership capacity may be **distributed or part-time**

Ofsted recognises the limitations of small schools and that resources and training may be provided by collaboration with other schools, such as in federations or partnerships.

He noted that it is useful if a school has some website information that explains curriculum and mixed aged classes but it's helpful if this can be explained too e.g. how is the curriculum organised?

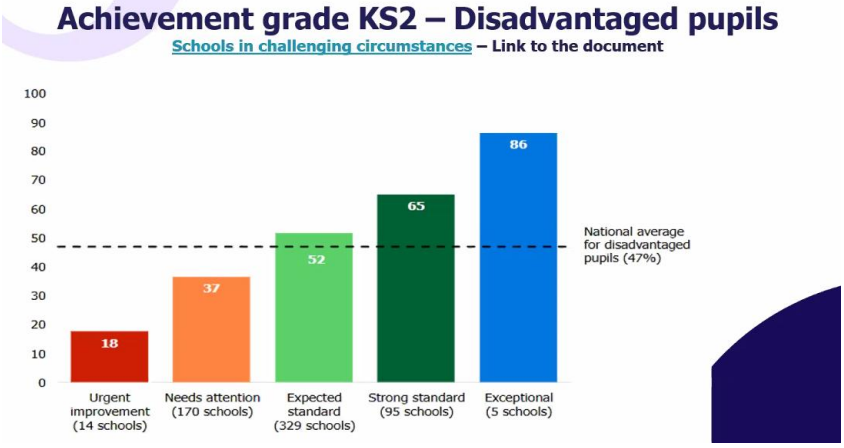
The renewed education inspection framework came into use in November 2025. Since then, Ofsted has inspected and published report cards for 921 schools. These 921 schools represent only 4% of all state-funded schools, so the grade profile is not representative of all

schools. In fact, as Ofsted inspects lower-performing schools more often than high-performing schools, the mix of schools inspected in any single year is not typically representative. The following analysis is based on inspections carried out between 10 November 2025 and 30 April 2026, where the report card was published by 30 April.



Peter noted that, as anticipated, the vast majority of schools achieved expected standard and strong standard. The headteachers asked whether there was any data yet about how small schools were performing in inspection. Peter noted that this hasn't been published, but that it should be possible to extract the data.

Peter noted that while these early inspections cannot inform firm conclusions about the sector as a whole – and may change as time goes on – they can start to look at the relationships between different aspects. For instance, Ofsted can start to see the relationship between the 'achievement' evaluation area and the performance data for schools, and how grades differ by the characteristics of the schools, such as the level of disadvantage



The table shows the correlation between evaluation grades awarded and how the attainment of a school's disadvantaged pupils compare with the national average for disadvantaged pupils.

- Schools in which disadvantaged pupils are performing broadly in line with the national average for all disadvantaged pupils tend to be graded 'expected standard'.
- Schools in which disadvantaged pupils are performing below the national average for all disadvantaged pupils are more likely to be graded 'needs attention' or 'urgent improvement'
- Schools that are closing the gap for their disadvantaged pupils are likely to be recognised for doing so and graded 'strong standard' or 'exceptional'

Peter reminded the headteachers that schools don't have to be perfect to achieve expected standard, and there is "wriggle room" in the guidance. He gave the following example of a report of "expected standard" for curriculum and teaching, and noted that there was an acknowledgment that there are areas of development in the school.

Curriculum and teaching -
Leaders accurately understand the quality of the curriculum and teaching. They check teaching regularly and use these findings to guide staff training and support. This helps teachers build the subject knowledge they need to deliver the curriculum well.
The curriculum is broad and balanced. Leaders have ensured that learning is ambitious for all pupils, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities and those who are disadvantaged. The curriculum is sequenced appropriately across all subjects. This enables pupils to build on their previous learning over time.
Leaders ensure that teachers teach pupils the core knowledge they need. For example, in phonics, teachers follow a structured phonics programme. If a pupil has gaps in their learning, staff provide extra support. This targeted support helps pupils to catch up. Teachers recognise the importance of developing pupils' language and oracy skills. Leaders have identified essential vocabulary that pupils need to learn, and teachers build this into lessons. This enables pupils to deepen their understanding over time.
However, teachers do not always adapt learning activities with enough precision to meet pupils' needs. This results in some pupils losing focus and not achieving as well as they could. Leaders are providing training and guidance, but this is not consistently embedded across all classes.

Peter gave an updated on the needs attention monitoring programme, which will start to be established as schools receive "needs attention" grades in the new framework. This is the Ofsted programme for schools with one or more NA grade.

If a school has one or more "needs attention" grades they will be assigned a nominated HMI who will provide regular contact with the school. They will initially contact the school around 3 months after the publication of the report card, and will then conduct a Teams call on a regular basis, approximately half termly or termly. This will focus on evaluating progress against key weaknesses.

The HMI tests whether leadership actions are:

- Well-targeted
- Implemented effectively
- Improving outcomes for pupils

The process ensures accountability, while offering challenge and professional dialogue. Safeguarding remains a constant priority.

Unlike in the previous framework, where a school had to wait for a full inspection for grades to be changed, "needs attention" grade(s) can be changed at the monitoring inspection.

Peter confirmed that governors may be involved in the monitoring process, to ensure their understanding of the school's improvement.

In response to a question, Peter confirmed that inspectors normally look at printed copies/files of minutes and governance paperwork. He reminded heads of the importance of the minutes reflecting questioning and challenged, and that governors should be particularly focused on the experience of pupils with SEND, and those who are vulnerable or disadvantaged.

Peter asked if any small school headteachers had been inspected under the new framework, and Judith Dale confirmed that her school was inspected in February. She noted that the inspection had been very different from her previous experience under the last framework, and that she had found the process very supportive, positive and collaborative.

The Professional Officer noted that some headteachers have fed back that they have at times felt overwhelmed and the experience is very intense particularly in a small school, but that this has got better as inspection team numbers have reduced. Judith said that she had felt in control of the inspection, and was able to direct inspectors to see the school's best practice.

It was noted that many headteachers still feel that combining the behaviour and attendance grades puts schools at a disadvantage, and the Professional Officer asked if their had been any review of this. Peter noted that behaviour and attendance are written in very distinct paragraphs, so it should be obvious in a report which area was a concern, if that is the case.

Peter reminded headteachers that they are welcome to email him with any questions, and he will attend the EPHA headteacher meetings in June. Peter was thanked for attending the meeting, as his input is very helpful.
His email address is Peter.Stonier@ofsted.gov.uk

Web links
www.gov.uk/ofsted
reports.ofsted.gov.uk
www.youtube.com/ofstednews
www.linkedin.com/company/ofsted
www.x.com/ofstednews
www.facebook.com/ChildcareRegistration

8. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

There was no additional business raised at the meeting.

9. DATES AND TIMES OF MEETINGS FOR THE 2026/27 SCHOOL YEAR

The following dates were noted for the 2026/27 school year.

Small School Headteachers' annual conference - Wednesday 14th October, Lion Inn

Small Schools Support Group online meetings

- Tuesday 24th November 2026, 3.45 pm
- Tuesday 16th March 2027 – 9.30 am
- Thursday 10th June 2027 – 11.00 am

The meeting ended at 12.30 pm