ESSEX PRIMARY HEADTEACHERS' ASSOCIATION

MEETING OF THE EPHA SMALL SCHOOLS SUPPORT GROUP
HELD ON TUESDAY 17 MARCH 2026 9.30 –11.00 am

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

1. IN ATTENDANCE

Emily Bartram	Radwinter CE Primary
Hannah Coyle	Fingringhoe CE Primary
Judith Dale	Baynards Primary
Emma Flin	St Andrew's CE Primary, Great Yeldham
Stephanie Newland	St Margaret's CE Primary, Toppesfield
Jinnie Nichols	Chorus Schools Federation – Chair
Pam Langmead	EPHA Professional Officer
Jason Buckley	The Philosophy Man

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

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Charlotte Brown	Messing Primary
Becky Keitch	St George's CE Primary, Great Bromley
Amy Reis	Great Sampford Primary
Melissa Taylor	Margaretting/Roxwell/Ford End Primaries

3. MINUTES AND MATTERS ARISING

The minutes of the meeting held on 26th November 2025 were approved as an accurate record. The following matters considered at the meeting were noted:

a) Inclusion Framework funding and criteria (Minute 3a refers)
It was agreed that it was helpful to include the information about the new Inclusion Framework funding criteria in the minutes, but it was felt that the process still seems complicated and time consuming, despite reassurance from LA officers that the process is simple. It was agreed that it is easier if the school has an effective and supportive Inclusion Partner to guide through the process.

It was noted that the LA is running a briefing on the renewed Inclusion Framework – details were published in a recent School Communications newsletter:

Inclusion Framework – Schools Briefing
Wednesday 25 March 16:00-17:00

Description
Join us for a full update on all forthcoming changes to the Inclusion Framework. This session will ensure your school is well-prepared and confident ahead of the 2026/27 implementation period.

Outline
This briefing will explore the Inclusion Framework's tiered funding model in greater depth. We will introduce the new paperwork required for panel, outline the updated approach to evaluation, and share the latest developments on the digital tool.

Booking
Please visit the Education Essex booking site to secure your place.

b) Governor network feedback (Minute 4 refers)
The Professional Officer outlined the feedback from the two previous network meetings on 30th September and 19th November 2025.

c) The renewed Ofsted inspection framework (Minute 5 refers)
It was noted that the main focus of the meeting was on the renewed Ofsted inspection framework, and Peter Stonier, Senior HMI, had attended the meeting to share his insight and understanding, particularly in relation to the inspection of small schools. It was agreed that this had been very helpful, and it was felt that Peter was reassuring and emphasised the expectation that Lead Inspectors and/or team members would understand the context and challenges of a small school, and reflect this in the inspection process.

d) Wraparound childcare – funding update (Minute 6 refers)
Emily Bartram was thanked for sharing her experience and understanding of how to access wraparound childcare funding, including OOSIF (Out of School Inclusion funding). The Professional Officer noted that she had shared this information with headteachers at the spring term briefings, and the information had been appreciated. Emily confirmed that a couple of headteachers had contacted her for more information. She noted that she has just applied for more funding and has been successful. Jinnie Nichols **AGREED** to contact Emily for more information.

e) Input from Nicky Turp, Education Access Manager (Minute 7 refers)
The Professional Officer noted that she had been asked to invite Nicky Turp to the meeting, but she was unavailable on this occasion. Nicky has agreed to attend the next meeting on the 4th June to talk about support for small schools from the Education Access Team.

4. GOVERNOR NETWORK GROUP

The Professional Officer reported that the Small Schools' Governor network had held a themed discussion group meeting on 12th January 2026. The meeting focused on discussing the new Ofsted inspection framework for small schools, with Pam providing an overview of the key changes and requirements. She explained the new inspection process, including the grades system, focus on inclusion, and increased emphasis on leadership and governance.

Pam shared resources and suggested evidence governors could use to demonstrate compliance with the new framework. Participants asked questions about how the framework might impact small schools, with particular concern about the pressure on headteachers and the challenge of meeting the new inclusion standards. The group discussed the importance of having inspectors familiar with small schools and the removal of deep dives into subjects. Pam reminded the group of an upcoming ESGA conference in February where Peter Stonier, a senior HMI, would speak about governance and inspection. The conversation ended with a reminder of the next session's focus on succession planning and governing bodies, scheduled for March 24th.

Pam noted that the network continues to be welcomed by the governors who attend, and asked headteachers to encourage their governors to engage. The meetings for the remainder of the school year are as follows:

Tuesday 24th March 2025, 8.00 – 9.00 am – succession planning on the Governing Body
https://us02web.zoom.us/j/88662307287?pwd=VKxXPUf3dE4X02p1jkpIvGT6b0o20b.1
Meeting ID: 886 6230 7287
Passcode: 433674

Tuesday 12th May 2026, 4.00 – 5.00 pm – the wider system (devolution and Local Government Reorganisation) and what it might mean for Essex schools
https://us02web.zoom.us/j/83157826086?pwd=MvUVMp92ED8kRoud7O4Q764RJPKieZ.1
Meeting ID: 831 5782 6086
Passcode: 936226

Wednesday 15th July 2026, 8.00 – 9.00 am – governor monitoring and visits/celebrating success
https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82825940783?pwd=D30869BbyxAukBNLSLiHKk05dm65pu.1
Meeting ID: 828 2594 0783
Passcode: 997178

5. SHARING EXPERIENCE OF APPRENTICESHIPS

Jinnie asked if anyone had experience of effective and manageable apprenticeship training.

Emily Bartram noted that she has accessed apprenticeships for a number of staff, including an HLTA, her office manager, and she is doing the SEN qualification. These have been run by Essex. Most have been manageable, although the SENCo qualification is huge. This view was echoed by Steph Newland. Steph noted that she currently has an LSA who is doing an apprenticeship with Chelmsford college, and that is going well. The LSA spends one day a week at college, which helps with planning and timetabling, and the college is understanding of the staffing pressures in schools if they can't spare the LSA on occasion.

Following the meeting Emma Flin noted that they have tried to use an apprenticeship scheme for LSAs but the work load was enormous and time out of class far too much.

Jason Buckley joined the meeting at 9.50 am

6. LEADING ORACY IN SMALL SCHOOLS

Jason Buckley was welcomed to the meeting. Jason will be working closely with ECC delivering oracy training as part of the Year of Opportunity.

A bit about Jason:
I am an educationalist and parallel entrepreneur specializing in philosophy for children and other pedagogies involving lively dialogue. My superpower is getting kids excited about intelligent conversation, creating physical and online spaces they want to return to. The website www.oracyforschools.co.uk is a portal to all aspects of my work and that of the very creative and committed team I've assembled. I work with schools as The Philosophy Man, training teachers, running workshops, writing resources and publishing books; through my outdoor education company Outspark offering high-quality expeditions, residentials; as philosopher-in-chief at Hidden Leaders, which specialises in whole-year group events that go beyond traditional teambuilding to develop leadership and oracy skills through a variety of challenges; and as a creative and practitioner at Debate Planet, our latest venture bringing a more informal, inclusive approach to debating.

Jason explained that he will share resources with small school headteachers, including a mini-book that he has developed, but had decided to approach this meeting with the question "What would I do if I was introducing or developing oracy in my small school?".

He stressed the importance of children developing talk that is:
Broad – as many kids as possible are talking and making use of the opportunity to talk in front of the whole class
Deep – saying stuff that is worth hearing, with sophisticated justification for their reasoning, and
Connected – not just them responding to you or the question that you have asked, but they are getting "dialogical", valuing what others are saying, listening to each other.

The approach must be school wide, and a consistent part of the educational experience, developing simple routines in every classroom that are used frequently (at least once a week) to instil habits and understanding. Jason also suggested that an obvious lever in a small school is to hold regular oracy assemblies, although he noted that it might not be appropriate to include Reception age children. He set out four routines that he suggested could become part of a regular series of assemblies, each demonstrating different strategies.

1. Sides then selves - why for some children, talking as someone else is easier than talking as themselves
Pupils are sorted quickly into pairs, labelled A and B – e.g. two long rows, opposite each other, or a big circle, every other child steps in to a smaller circle and faces the person opposite on the outer circle.
Give the children a question to debate – for example, considering the question of freedom: "Who is more free, children or adults?"

One side argues for, the other against. Remind children "It'll be noisy, so talk just so that your partner can hear." (Be kind to kids with sensory needs.)
Talk for a minute, then swap places (literally) and argue the other point. Run the debate a bit longer, then get feedback – who says yes (hands on heads), who says no (folded arms). Create yes and no groups, and get the kids to discuss their point of view and their reasoning.

Jason mentioned seesaw questions – these are live, finely balanced, ambiguous, relatable and high stakes.

2. Story and characters
Jason shared a story – in school you would grab children as volunteers to be a character, who become human signposts around the hall. Mum and Dad go to the rescue of their elderly neighbour who has tripped over her cat. They cart her off to hospital, the two kids go to Grandad's who is watching rugby. The children are sent into the garden to play football – Fred kicks the ball, Rosie is checking her phone so fails to save the ball which smashes a window.

- Who is innocent?
- Whose fault is it that the window was broken?

Jason reminded the head/teacher to pick up on discussions, if someone says something interesting or thoughtful (e.g. I blame the cat!), or if there is a nice disagreement.

3. Coaching questions
Jason suggested not introducing this too early. Can be linked with a curriculum subject, e.g. the Stone Age – what inventions were the best? E.g. the wheel, tools, weapons, clothes, language etc

Or ask a question, such as "is being a good person more about following the rules, or more about making others happy?"
Children are split into pairs; one person is the question answerer, the other is the "facilitator" but can only ask the following questions:

- Can you tell me more?
- Can you say why?
- So … *repeat the question*
- Can you give me an example?
- How do you mean?
- Why is that important?
- How could you disagree with yourself?
- What would make you change your mind?
- What else?

4 Debates
Jason recommended the website www.debateplanet.co.uk for tons of debate topics.
Children are split into groups of three, with each including one debating the question, for, against and (on the) fence. Choose one of the groups to showcase their debate.

Jason reminded heads that the beauty of small schools is that they can do collective activities with the whole school.

His contact details are jason@thephilosophyman.com
https://www.thephilosophyman.com/
stickyquestions.co.uk

Emma Flin left the meeting at 10.15 am
Jason left the meeting at 10.30 am

It was suggested that it might be beneficial for Jason to run a workshop at the Small Schools annual conference on 14th October; the Professional Officer **AGREED** to find out if he was available.

It was noted that the CVC schools have organised an oracy training programme with Lindsay Parkes with a series of 4 twilight sessions, for all of their staff. The cost of the programme for the group of schools is £2,500.

7. OFSTED SUPPORT FOR SMALL SCHOOL HEADTEACHERS

It was noted that at a recent EPHA meeting a headteacher had shared their experience of a recent Ofsted inspection. This was interesting, but somewhat negative, and perhaps didn't reflect the feedback that is following most inspections that are taking place under the renewed framework.

Judith Dale, headteacher at Baynards Primary, explained that she was inspected recently, and had been asked to share her "top tips for Ofsted" particularly as she leads a small school. The following are Judith's notes of the inspection, which she shared at the meeting.

Be prepared – The key thing is KNOW YOUR SCHOOL!

Before the call
Understand your IDSR, including the three year numbers – understand the picture for your school and ensure this links to your SIP/SDP. You're not expected to remember all data but need to make it clear you know your school and make improvement decisions based on evidence. Judith stressed that the Inspection Team recognised the challenge of data in small schools, and that numbers will go up and down.

Know your SEND, EAL, Disadvantaged and any children you identify as vulnerable (even if temporary e.g. recent bereavement, hospital stay, any upheaval)

Know your attendance

Familiarise yourself with the Inspection Toolkit and Operating Guide (top tip: use a staff meeting – all agree where they think you are as a school) – remember it is a SECURE FIT not BEST FIT. Need all aspects to achieve the standard. The bar is higher than old inspection – not

comparable between new and old – however, HMI told me the bar for 'expected' is higher than the old 'good'.

Watch Ofsted videos on You Tube and search for one on Twinkl with Sir Martyn Oliver (which was useful and reassuring).

Consider where you will put the inspectors! I gave them my office and was displaced for 2 days!

Make sure your website is up to date and contains all required information (curriculum, policies etc.) – maybe use the EPHA checklist and ask a governor to complete a website audit to identify any gaps.

Create a folder just for Ofsted and put copies of any relevant information in there so it's all in one place (saves any stress when you need to share documents on the portal)

I found it useful to include the following in my folder:

- *Copy of your IDSR*
- *Copy of your SEF*
- *Copy of your SIP/SDP*
- *Any documents from external sources e.g. School Effectiveness Partner, Attendance Support, Peer review, letters of thanks*
- *12 months Headteacher Reports and Governing Body minutes*
- *Governor visit records*
- *Attendance analysis (DfE ones are great – own half termly also good)*
- *Class timetables (not asked for but good for me to refer to)*
- *Parent / Staff / Pupils survey results*
- *Governor audit of the website*
- *Send register - numbers of children – details of need etc.*
- *Analysis of vulnerable children's attendance at clubs / sporting events etc.*
- *Own overview of vulnerable children. By Year group – vulnerabilities identified.*
- *Staffing List*
- *SEND report to governors*
- *We created case studies – used copilot – very simple but examples of support given to vulnerable children and impact. Attendance, behaviour, academic etc. Not asked for but useful for us to refer to if we needed examples. Good use of part of a staff meeting!*
- *Wi-Fi code*
- *Map of the school*

We also have displays for every subject up in the school, with work and photos from all classes. The OI commented on the displays and how it was a great way to show the children at work in different curriculum areas. We also have a folder hanging in the hall which shows

all the assembly themes for the year – great to share with the inspectors to show the topics covered. (we have a theme for the week).
NB This is just my experience – not saying this is what you need to have!

Day of the call.

- *The Lead Inspector called at 9.30 – basic information needed (NOR, COG details, any children educated offsite? Any off-rolling? contact details for me and admin, did we have a reason to defer?). This call lasted no more than 20 minutes.*
- *Discussed the mixed age classes and how they were split.*
- *Advised I would have 2 inspectors – 1 x HMI and 1 x OI.*
- *I asked if either had experience of small schools. Both had inspected small schools, and OI had taught at single form entry schools.*
- *Asked if we wanted a nominee – not relevant for our small school.*
- *Discussed time for 90-minute call – asked if there were any staff they needed to mindful of (e.g. illness, ECT, capabilities).*
- *Checked on my own wellbeing and that of my staff – this was ongoing but felt genuine throughout the inspection.*
- *They explained they would be sending information on how to access the portal and would email letters for staff and parents.*
- *Office staff emailed those out – STAFF SURVEY TO BE RETURNED ASAP!*

90-minute call (mine was done in 80 minutes)

- *Offered Team or phone. I opted for the Teams call and had my SENCO in the room for the call*
- *Team meeting – set out your stall – tell them everything about your school. Be honest. They want to know beyond the demographic.*
- *Talk about mixed ages – benefits and how you make it work. Rationale for straight reception class…*
- *What have you done since the last inspection?*
- ***What is life like for a pupil at your school?***
- *Is that the same for all pupils – what about the most vulnerable?*
- *They will want you to talk about curriculum – how you designed it and why.*
- *Looking for continual improvement – what has worked, why it worked, what still needs to happen.*
- *They are not anti published schemes – but discuss how you adapt it and personalize it. Rationalise why you designed the curriculum as you did.*
- *Talked about subject leadership – rationale needed for how you share leadership*
- *As a small school head, I focused heavily on work life balance and staff wellbeing and mixed age classes. They asked specifically about PSHE / RSE.*
- *We were asked for a subject area we were 'working on'. Think carefully. Don't choose your poorest area – select something which isn't your strongest but explain what you are doing to improve it. We chose Art and avoided Spanish or Music!*

- *The conversation was not difficult – but if you don't give them the answer they need, they will keep digging… until they get the evidence they need. I asked them to reframe questions at times if I needed clarity on exactly what they were trying to find out (Ofsted and menopause brain!)*
- *It is intense – have someone else with you who can jump in and add information.*
- *As inclusion is such a focus, your SENCO needs to be able to speak confidently.*
- *At the end of the meeting, we had a rough idea of how day 1 would look.*

Timetable for day 1 – sent through – was advised to adapt so it worked for us.
ALL STAFF LEFT SCHOOL BY 6.45 pm ON THAT DAY!

Day 1
Arrived on site @ 8.00 –

- *Straight into looking at case sampling children. We worked with the inspectors to select 6 children*
- *Once selected, you need to provide any paperwork for all case sample children e.g. PEP, EHCP, One Plan, One Page Profile. (Not every child will have paperwork e.g. HA PPG). Wanted a range of vulnerabilities.*
- *8.20 am – met all staff – explained they wanted to see what school was like through the eyes of our most vulnerable children. Told staff to deal with any behaviour etc. as they would normally.*

These were the activities for day 1 –

- *HMI came with me to the gate and OI went with SENCO. Both looking at the start of the day (how they come in – how they settle, what work is prepared etc.). Asked about how we deal with lates etc. Observing relationships with families.*
- *Learning walks KS1 / EYFS – focus on foundational knowledge – you can guide this to see best practice. Talk at the inspectors NON-STOP! Talk about the children, the adaptions etc. Sell what you do!!*
- *Discussion around case sample children – understand context and go through paperwork*
- *Learning walk in KS2 with a focus on inclusion*
- *Learning walk in EYFS/KS1 with a focus on inclusion*
- *Book looks for 4 pupils each year group including case sampling children. We had English, History, Science and Art.*
- *SCR check*
- *Visit playtime*
- *Further learning walks with a focus on inclusion*
- *Listen to children read with a familiar adult (they wanted 2 x Year 1 who were getting additional phonics support, 2 x Year 2 who had not passed phonics screening and 1 x Year 3 who would still need phonics support*
- *Visit lunchtime.*

At 12.30 we were invited to a reflection meeting – give a rough idea of how things are going and checked our wellbeing. Advised us safeguarding was met unless they saw anything contrary moving forward. Following this – the inspection continued

- *Safeguarding and behaviour focused meeting (they checked CPOMS). Asked about any allegations against staff, processes and procedures. Also, permanent exclusions – talk them through it.*
- *Learning walks across the school with a focus on curriculum and Teaching*
- *Met with groups of pupils (we could choose which pupils)*
- *Inclusion focused meeting*
- *Discussions with staff – all staff invited to attend – no senior staff – staff fed back that they were asked about assessment, workload, wellbeing, support from leaders etc.*

At 16.00 we had another reflection meeting – discussed how the day had gone – we felt reassured that the inspection was going ok. Discussion about timetable for day 2.

Inspectors were off site by 16.45 – all staff were off site at 18.00 – no one felt stressed or felt they needed to change anything for day 2.

Day 2

Arrived on site at 8.00
I shared the timetable which I had adapted to make it fit better. They were completely flexible on this – wanted it to work for us.
08.00 – reflection meeting – I think at this point we had a pretty good idea of where we were sitting on the toolkit
These were the activities for day 2 –

- *Met with governors*
- *Spoke to a member of LA*
- *Focused leadership meeting to discuss EYFS*
- *Visit EYFS*
- *Discussions with groups of pupils who hold positions of authority (head boy/girl, sports captains, Mental Health champions etc.)*
- *Discussions with more pupils – Year 3 and 4 (6 pupils)*
- *Focused meeting to discuss attendance. What do you do, why do you do it, is it having impact? Case studies came in handy. Asked about fines – I explained I have never fined – support rather than punish.*
- *Focused meeting regarding personal development*
- *Focused meeting about English and the development of writing (This is on our SIP) – at this point I had one member of staff who was feeling a bit stressed – I spoke to her and invited her to join the meeting. Wanted her to be part of the process so she could experience what it was like. She participated well and felt much more confident leaving. Great CPD which I would NEVER have considered during the previous inspections!*
- *Focused leadership meeting regarding school improvement – justify what is on your SIP and refer to IDSR!*

- *Maths learning walks.*

At 13.00 we had a reflection meeting to discuss everything. Although not a grading meeting, we had a good idea of the grade. We did not need to make use of the contingency time as no further evidence was needed.

At 15.00 we had the formal grading meeting where we were told the grades we had been given. This was not a surprise as we were made aware throughout the inspection how things were looking.

At 15.30 – final feedback to LA and governors

And then breathe! It was intense! But it felt collaborative and fair – staff were not stressed; children were not stressed. Ofsted saw the school as it always is.

Judith stressed that, although the inspection was intense and full on, it was manageable. The inspection team were very good and, she felt, really understood the challenges of a small school.

One headteacher explained that her SENCo only works one day a week and is at another school for 3 days; she had concerns that if the SENCo wasn't at the inspection they might be at a disadvantage. Judith stressed how important the SENCo is to the inspection process, and it was suggested that the headteacher should liaise with the other school and the SENCo to ensure that she can attend the inspection, when the call comes.

The Professional Officer noted that at the recent termly meetings headteachers had been asked to share what support they would find helpful from EPHA in relation to Ofsted inspection. The following has been agreed:

The Professional Officer reminded heads that EPHA is able to offer some capacity support, particularly to small schools, to release senior leaders and help them prepare for Ofsted. Anyone who feels they could benefit from this should contact Pam at pam@langmead.me.uk

It was agreed that feedback from colleagues who have experienced an Ofsted inspection since November is helpful, but with a number of caveats: heads should try to avoid being too negative, and always recognise that every inspection is different, often depending on the approach of the Lead Inspector. The Professional Officer **AGREED** to produce a framework for feedback from headteachers who have been through inspection and are happy to discuss the process.

It is clear that there are expectations about how schools should be prepared for an inspection, and it was suggested that this could be a useful focus for training. The Professional Officer reminded heads that she has already produced an Ofsted checklist, setting out information that is needed before and during inspection. This checklist can be found at https://essexprimaryheads.co.uk/files/ofsted-checklist-following-the-notification-phonecall-epha-january-2026.doc

There was a conversation about the role of governors in inspection. Feedback from one inspection described the governor interview as intense and long (90 minutes!) with the expectation from the Lead Inspector that all governors should have in depth knowledge of the school's priorities and development. It was advised that a good number of governors attend the meeting with the Lead, so that they can demonstrate their understanding of what is happening in the school. It appears that inspectors are particularly looking for examples of where governors have challenged the senior leadership, and Pam stressed the importance of including "challenge" in the minutes of meetings. The governor visit template is also a helpful way of demonstrating that governors ask challenging questions, and Pam suggested that all templates should include a question along the lines of "What are the barriers to learning and wellbeing for this child/group of children/cohort, and what is the school doing to address this?"
A headteacher asked if a template for a Governor Visit form could be developed, and the Professional Officer **AGREED** to provide this. She also committed to writing and delivering online training for governors on the new framework.

Another suggestion for a workshop or training was focused on writing an effective and accurate SEF (Schools Evaluation Form). There is some evidence that some schools are too optimistic about their SEF outcomes in some areas. Headteachers were reminded that schools have to demonstrate a secure fit in every descriptor at "expected standard" before they can be considered for "strong standard" and failing to meet every descriptor will push a school into the grade below. Judith agreed to share her SEF with small school headteachers.

8. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

There was no further business to discuss. Jinnie thanked the headteachers for attending the meeting and expressed her hope that the rest of term went well and that they then have a very good and relaxing Easter break. .

9. DATES AND TIMES OF MEETINGS FOR THE 2025/26 SCHOOL YEAR

- Small Schools Support Group online meeting – Thursday 4th June 2026, 11.00 am

The meeting ended at 11.15 am