

Finance & General Purposes Committee

Friday 21st November 2025 at 1130

Held at Landscope School House with some participation via Microsoft Teams

Invited: Ben Thorne (Chair) (joined online)
Rachael Sharpe (CEO)
Cheryl Mathieson
Paul Waterworth

In attendance: Matt Matthew (DCEO)
Louisa Taylor (Finance Manager)
Charlotte Roe (Governance Professional)

Minutes: Charlotte Roe (Governance Professional)

Papers will be circulated to all members of the Committee and will be confidential

No	Item	Action
1.	Welcome and Apologies The Chair opened the meeting with a welcome. There were no apologies.	
2.	Declarations of Business Interests No additional business interests were reported.	
3.	Any Other Business No additional any other business was brought forward.	
4.	Minutes of the previous meeting The Part I minutes of the meeting held on 26 th September 2025 were approved by the meeting. The Part II minutes from 26 th September 2025 were approved by the meeting.	
5.	Matters Arising (not on the agenda) 5.1 GP to confirm discussion on Sustainability Lead role with LAC Governors. The GP confirmed that in the last Clerks' meeting she had requested for Clerks to ask for governor volunteers – the LAC meetings were scheduled for the week beginning 24 th November 2025. 5.2 DCEO to confirm the review of the Travel and Expenses policy with Bishop Fleming. The DCEO reported that an additional paragraph had been included in the policy outlining mileage to be paid, with a limit if a member of staff was asked to move from their original place of work. Bishop Fleming had no opinion on this addition and noted that while it was helpful, it could set a precedent. The Trustees asked whether there were any tax implications, and it was confirmed that there were none. Trustees stated that if a staff member were moved permanently, additional mileage should not be paid. The CEO advised that this point should be reviewed against staff contracts, particularly in relation to what constitutes 'reasonable'. The Chair expressed surprise that there were no tax implications. The meeting discussed the matter further and agreed that expenses should not be paid where the location was the member of staff's normal place of work, but that expenses would be paid for temporary changes in work location. It was therefore agreed that the additional paragraph should be removed from the policy. The Travel and Expenses Policy was approved .	
6.	Risk Register The Committee reviewed the risk categories assigned to the F&GP Committee. It was noted that the SLT had worked on the risk register to improve its clarity, and make it more strategic, align it with the TEF and ensure that it more effectively highlighted the key risks to the Trust and what is being done to mitigate the risks. The CEO added that over time the Trustees and SLT would need to develop a more consistent 'appetite to risk' which	

	<p>would be done through open conversations. The Chair asked for clarification on the columns in the risk register and how changes in the number rating affected the RAG rating. The DCEO went into EVERY to illustrate how the column countermeasures reflected the level risks. The Chair felt that this should support by reducing the subjectivity of individuals. Following a further question from the Trustees, the DCEO illustrated how the RAG rating was affected when the countermeasures number rating was changed. It was agreed that the following risks were related to F&GP.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finance • Financial Management System • Pupil Recruitment • Capital Strategy • Estate • H&S • Operational • Data Protection <p>The meeting discussed the RAG rating particularly noting the 2 red ratings – Finance and Pupil Recruitment and noted that these would be reviewed at the end of the meeting to agree if the rating was still pertinent.</p>	
7.	<p>Finance 7.1 Initial feedback for year-end audit 24/25 7.2 Financial Performance to 31st October 2025 7.3 Financial Recovery Plan</p> <p>The Finance Officer and DCEO were invited to address the meeting. The following was reported:</p> <p>7.1 The meeting noted the Trust had received two documents from Bishop Fleming as part of the audit clearance process and asked whether they should review the pickups or the overview first. The DCEO suggested starting with the pickups, noting it would provide a comfortable starting point. The DCEO explained that, as every year, Bishop Fleming had completed a thorough audit and had provided two reports for review. The auditors did not find any material concerns, confirming that the financial information shared by the finance team was accurate. This gave the Trustees reassurance and confidence that decisions were being made based on reliable information. No issues had been identified by the auditors. The going concern was noted as a heightened risk, which was discussed at length with the auditors. It was felt that the steps the Trust was taking addressed this risk, and the Trust remained a going concern.</p> <p>The meeting reviewed the minor discrepancies and the associated actions. The meeting also reviewed the Financial Overview prepared by the auditors. The DCEO and Chair commented that, in summary, the audit had been successful, and the Trustees congratulated the finance team.</p> <p>The DCEO highlighted historical audit findings: there had been no “Red” ratings previously; the previous year had no “Amber” ratings, with three “Green” ratings for regularity and three for financial; the current year showed three regularity and two financial, with resolved items noted.</p> <p>7.2 The Finance Officer provided an update on the budget and financial position. Column E showed the budget originally approved in the BFR, while column F showed the current Master budget. She proposed that, in future, if Trustees agreed, the budget should reflect significant changes and cost savings made in recent months. The Trust had improved the deficit position from £601k per the BFR to £337k per the Master budget, a saving of £265k. The main changes included an additional £124k in EHCP income and £146k in staff cost reductions. As of 31st October, the Trust’s year-end forecast showed a deficit of just under £200k.</p> <p>Following receipt of the triennial LGPS valuation report, it was noted that the Trust would see % reduction in employer contributions from April 2027 (17.2%). The Trustees asked how this would impact employees. The Chair confirmed that employees’ pensions would not be affected, and the Finance Officer noted that this would bring significant savings for the Trust.</p>	

The Finance Officer reminded the meeting that the forecasting system worked on the assumption that if the budget stated a certain amount, it would be spent for example, £1,000 a month on curriculum resources, then if that amount was not spent in each month, the system assumed it would not be spent going forward. This assumption was not entirely realistic because the budgets, including the sports grant, which would eventually be spent. She added that, at this time of year, the numbers would generally appear slightly more favourable than the year-end position. As the year progressed, the forecast would become tighter and more accurate. The Trustees noted that while the current information suggested a certain position, it might not be entirely likely, but it provided a useful guide at the present time.

The Chair reported that, even if the Trust had a deficit of £336k, the reserves would cover this. He confirmed that the figures supported the previous going concern assessment and reinforced that the Trust would remain a going concern.

The Finance Officer explained that columns K to T were included to show the main changes between the BFR budget and the Master budget and that these columns would not regularly appear on the data dashboard. They were included to explain the changes, which included increased EHCP income, nursery income fluctuations, and staff changes. The Chair noted that this information was useful to see where changes had occurred. From a Trustee perspective, it provided insight into the accuracy of the original budgeting process. The Chair highlighted that some changes, such as leadership and staff reductions, were decisions made after the budget, while other columns reflected more minor adjustments.

The Finance Officer explained that EHCP funding was allocated when cases were put forward for support. She noted that additional hours were not generally allowed beyond funding, making it net zero for income purposes. The Finance Officer added that in some cases, if a school was in deficit but had existing support staff, they could repurpose those hours to support the funding, ensuring children still received necessary one-to-one support. The Trustees acknowledged that this allowed for more income without additional costs but noted that it would not occur in every case.

The DCEO reported that the aim was to ensure that each nursery's main staffing structure was financially sustainable. This would ensure any additional funding for individual children could be dedicated directly to their needs. He noted that some nurseries were currently in deficit, which complicated allocating incoming funding effectively. The Trustees noted that balancing funding and staffing often required careful adjustments.

The Trustees reviewed the data dashboard, noting which nurseries were currently high-risk financially and how some had improved since the previous review. The DCEO emphasised that the process took time, and Trustees would need to continue monitoring to see the impact of adjustments. The DCEO confirmed that some nurseries that had historically been high-risk had reduced their deficits, showing positive movement in financial sustainability. *The Chair asked whether it would be possible to have indicative pupil numbers forecast for the next year, noting that it could help with longer-term planning?* The Finance Officer confirmed that a forecast was currently being run on a separate spreadsheet. The Chair suggested that having next year's pupil numbers might help identify whether a small deficit was likely to be offset by increased funding from additional pupils. The DCEO agreed and noted that understanding local demographics and competition was important. He highlighted that birth rate trends and nursery provision trials needed further review, as some trial arrangements were not working as planned. The DCEO explained that the figures reported on the data dashboard emphasised the importance of reviewing preschool and nursery provision and noted that this could represent a risk going forward.

The Chair asked why certain nurseries had so little income compared with their costs, noting that if they broke even, the overall nursery provision would be sustainable? The DCEO responded that some nurseries had very low or no pupils while still having staff allocated. He confirmed that conversations had taken place about whether preschool provision could be paused, but this was not straightforward due to the nature of the schools. *The Trustees asked whether staff were being redeployed efficiently?* The DCEO reported wherever possible this was being done and provided an example in one school, where the preschool lead was being used effectively as a support assistant in the main classes.

	<p><i>The Trustees asked whether this caused a classification issue in the accounts, with costs still recorded under nursery provision even though staff were supporting main school activities?</i> The DCEO agreed and added that the staff contracts were for preschool roles, highlighting that a wider review and potential future decisions about individual nursery viability would be required.</p> <p><i>The Trustees asked how recruitment (of pupils) at the beginning of the financial year compared with the previous year?</i> The DCEO responded that they were holding the line quite well, despite natural reductions, and noted that other trusts had experienced significant declines in pupil numbers. He added that, overall, there had not been any mass withdrawals and that performance remained stable, although steps to improve recruitment were still important. <i>The Trustees asked what the Trust was doing to address this?</i> The DCEO explained that recruitment successes were largely due to by word of mouth, supported by local visibility and reputation. The Trustees acknowledged this and noted the importance of monitoring recruitment closely.</p> <p>7.3 The meeting considered and robustly discussed the Financial Recovery Plan (PART II). It was noted that the Financial Recovery Plan would be presented formally at an Extraordinary Meeting of the Board of Trustees on 25th November 2025 for approval.</p>	
8.	<p>Estates</p> <p>The Estates report had been circulated prior to the meeting. The DCEO reported that the H&S Officer continued to perform exceptionally in coordinating and liaising across the Trust.</p> <p>It was reported that recent audits had achieved high scores, with most areas scoring 100%. minor accidents and trips had been recorded and were available on SharePoint. Trustees requested baseline comparisons with previous periods to assess trends, which would be provided.</p> <p>The DCEO noted a spot visit from the Health and Safety Executive in the previous summer term. The HSE had identified that the asbestos register was outdated due to prior building works. Following guidance, a new asbestos register had been created, and one unencapsulated piece of asbestos had been safely addressed.</p> <p>A minor electrical incident had prompted a fire brigade visit; the matter had been resolved with new light fittings. The DCEO emphasised careful management of expectations and reminded staff of the broader estate responsibilities across the Trust.</p> <p>Ongoing works included electrical safety testing as part of the five-year schedule, and a property issue reported to local building control had been addressed, with repairs underway.</p> <p>The Wolborough nursery project was progressing as expected, with completion anticipated in February 2026. Recruitment for the preschool lead role was ongoing, with planning to complete by February.</p> <p>3 CIF applications had been submitted, and it was noted that a small fee had been paid to the external partnership to support one application, which would be the final attempt in that process.</p>	
9.	<p>Sustainability</p> <p>The DCEO reported that there had been a leadership development day focused on flourishing, sustainability, and finance. Academy Heads had been tasked to produce draft climate action plans, which would be reviewed and incorporated into local advisory committee visits.</p>	
10.	<p>Health & Safety</p> <p>Reported in item 8</p>	
11.	<p>Data Protection</p> <p>The DPO report from the Trust's Data Protection Officer was circulated before the meeting. The CEO reported a new data breach at one of the schools today which would need to be reported.</p>	
12.	<p>Safeguarding</p> <p>None</p>	
13.	<p>Finance Bulletins</p> <p>Nothing</p>	
14	<p>Policies</p>	

	<p>14.1 Accounting Policy – clarification was sought around investments. - The meeting agreed to approve this policy.</p> <p>14.2 Charging and Remission – there was a small change suggested and agreed. The meeting agreed to approve this policy.</p>	
15.	<p>Risk Register Reflection</p> <p>Trustees reflected on the risk register RAG rating and discussed the language under the treatment of the risks. The Trustee discussed the Data Protection risk at length and changed the wording however this made no difference to the RAG rating. <i>Following a question from the Trustees</i>, the CEO said that the recent breach had been classified as moderate due to the nature of the data involved. It was acknowledged that the likelihood of recurrence was low, making the overall risk moderate and rare.</p> <p>The Trustees noted that while a significant fine could occur in principle, the probability of a major incident remained unlikely. It was agreed that learning from the incident would involve training and investigation into system limitations that allowed the breach. Consideration was also given to potential migration to a new MIS system in the future to mitigate such risks.</p>	
16.	<p>Evaluation of governance impact</p> <p>The Trustees reflected that the meeting had been highly effective in reviewing key risk areas, financial performance, and operational matters, providing assurance that robust governance was in place. By addressing issues such as audit findings, nursery provision, data protection, and health and safety, the Trustees confirmed that decisions were informed, proactive, and focused on maintaining high standards. This oversight directly benefits the pupils by ensuring their education, welfare, and safety are prioritised, resources are allocated efficiently, and continuous improvement is embedded across the Trust.</p>	