

## Finance & General Purposes Committee

Minutes

21<sup>st</sup> March 2025

At 9.30am

*Held at Landscope House and online via TEAMS.*

**Attended:** Ben Thorne (Chair)  
Nicola Dunford (CEO)  
Cheryl Mathieson (CM)  
Paul Waterworth (PW)

**In attendance:** Matt Matthew (DCEO)  
Louise Taylor (Finance Manager)  
Charlotte Roe (Governance Professional)  
Julia Simpson (Westcott's auditors)

**Minutes:** Nicol Bush- Clerk to the Trust

No	Item	Actions
1.	<b>Welcome and Apologies</b> The Chair opened the meeting with a welcome. It was noted that Chris Norman had resigned with immediate effect for personal reasons.	
2.	<b>Declarations of Business Interests</b> There were no new declarations brought forward.	
3.	<b>Any Other Business</b> No other business was brought forward	
4.	<b>Minutes of the previous meeting</b> The minutes of the meeting were reviewed and the meeting <b>approved</b> them as a true record. The Chair signed the Minutes accordingly.	CLERK
5.	<b>Matters Arising from the meeting held on 31<sup>st</sup> January 2025 (not included in the agenda)</b> 5.1 Guidance on Government funded National Insurance increase – The conversation focused on the National Insurance increase and its impact on recovery budgets. The DCEO expressed disappointment over the slow release of information. He mentioned that the government had adhered to its deadlines for announcements, with the formal allocation expected in May. The next anticipated announcement was the Teachers Pay Awards, due on April 1st, which was an improvement from previous years. The CEO noted that statements in Devon were delayed due to Devon (and some other local authorities) requesting a 0.5% transfer from everyone's budget to fund the high needs block, which the government approved despite initial rejections. The CEO mentioned that the CEO of Ted Wragg had written a letter on behalf of the Trusts in the South West against the transfer. The DCEO also highlighted that 20 out of 23 schools had received their GAG statements, with three still pending. He expressed frustration over the lack of clarity and the seemingly arbitrary order of statement distribution.	
6.	<b>Risk Register</b> 6.1 Trustees to review report on the following risk register categories: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pupil numbers</li> <li>• Financial management</li> <li>• Estates</li> </ul> <p>The CEO and DCEO said that a meeting was planned to review the risk register in more detail. In the meantime, the CEO had partially reviewed the register. The</p>	

	meeting agreed that the 3 risks on the current register were the main ones for the Committee, and the Chair directed the meeting to have these risks in mind when discussing the agenda.	
7.	<p><b>Strategy Plan</b></p> <p>Trustees to update on their designated areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Financial strategy and control</b> – Ben Thorne</li> <li>• <b>Estate management</b> – Chris Norman</li> </ul> <p>The Chair informed the meeting that he was in the process of reviewing the financial strategy plan in light of the ever-changing financial landscape and that Trustees would need to consider the Estate Management aspect, following CN's resignation. The Chair highlighted the importance of addressing the key agenda items and reviewing current results, the deficit recovery plan, and ongoing discussions. She added it was essential to set the scene with an update on the Trust's current status, ensuring everyone was informed.</p>	
8.	<p><b>Finance</b></p> <p>8.1 Financial performance to 28<sup>th</sup> February 2025 – month 6 to include: -</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Progress on 25/26 Budget and 3-year forecast</li> <li>• Teachers/Support Staff Pay</li> <li>• NI increase - National headroom</li> </ul> <p>The Finance Manager (FM) presented the budget explaining that there was a possible clawback on some of the nursery funding to be included, due to a shorter term basis for the funding. This may result in a further £17,000 reduction. However, despite this the overall Trust deficit was reducing. There were still some schools of concern, and this was shared with the meeting. The FM stated that there was nothing new of significance to report and that purchase order by schools will close at the end of May to prepare for the financial year end.</p> <p><i>The Trustees asked about how the financial picture was showing an improvement?</i> The FM explained that some nurseries had performed better and extra EHCP funding had been received. <i>The CEO asked if there was a way of getting a more precise forecasting of the income especially in light of the staffing restructuring.</i> The FM said that she had been through all the costs to try to get a more precise picture. The FM said that the nursery numbers fluctuated month on month so getting a precise forecasting was problematic even using historical data. The FM added that certain lines were difficult to budget for. The CEO said that if the current improvement in the deficit was in part due to the nurseries, was this a trend and could the forecasting be less conservative. The DCEO said that it was better to be realistic about the numbers and added that there were some schools who were not doing as well. The meeting discussed this further.</p> <p><i>The Trustees asked about the staff restructuring.</i> The CEO said that the Deficit Recovery Plan had considered all schools. 6 in particular were vulnerable and some changes had started. The FM said that the updated 2025/2026 deficit was expected to be £1,217,428. This figure reflected the reduced admin hours and some of the staff movement however the proposed class reduction savings were not included. This also included the shortfall in the NI grant of £90,000 but there were a number of other proposed changes not in the budget which needed to be discussed. <i>Following a question from the Trustees,</i> the DCEO confirmed the pay rise (unfunded) was also included in the budget. The Chair commented that he thought that this would have to eventually be partially funded. It was noted that trusts nationwide were struggling. The Bishop Fleming report also backed up that there was not enough funding for the education sector. The CEO said that the Trust was being proactive to try to bring more pupils into school. The DCEO said that at this point the Trust remained a going concern for 25/26 (taking account of reserves) but we would have to consider the following year. The CEO commented that to reduce it further we would be cutting to the bone. The DCEO commented that if no action was taken, it would trigger a visit from the DfE and they would then likely impose cuts.</p> <p>There was a discussion about the impact on staff wellbeing. The CEO said that it was difficult for the staff, but this had to be done. The FM said that every budget line had been scrutinised to find ways to save money. <i>The Chair said that if the risk was</i></p>	

	<p><i>to close schools, then asked whether the Trust should look at ways of combining the schools.</i> The CEO confirmed that leaderships in East Devon had been combined to reduce staffing costs and other options were being considered. <i>The Chair asked if there was more that the Trust could do. Could minibuses be used across schools?</i> The CEO said that this had been considered but it would be difficult at this stage. It was something that could be considered further in the future. However, closing schools should not be an option for several reasons. The CEO agreed that the best way forward was shared headships. The CEO shared the likely changes within the EIT and discussed possible options. The meeting recognised that actions were needed. The CEO discussed the individual school issues. <i>The Trustees asked whether the reduction in pupil numbers was because the schools were rural?</i> The CEO said that overall the Trust was holding comparatively well however this was a nationwide issue and not exclusive to rural settings. However, because the Trust's schools were small it was having a bigger impact as it was harder to reduce classes and teaching numbers in smaller schools. It was added that staffing costs continued to increase. The DCEO added that historically the Trust was picking up 75% of the cohort (as advised by DCC data) available but added that there was a national reduction so naturally this meant it affected the Trust. The Trustees discussed further staff changes that could be done in the future as Academy Heads became more experienced.</p> <p>It was noted that the financial picture was fluid and there were still some changes that could be made. The Trustees acknowledged that the picture was bleak, and the issue was what the Trust could do. Some of the options were out of the Trust's control. The CEO said that the next stage would be to look at the current structure to ensure it fitted the Trust better. A clear plan was needed to consider what action should be taken. The DCEO said that in the next few weeks each school would be given their budget, staffing structure and a deep dive analysis of strategies of how to improve the financial picture – primarily to increase pupil numbers, this included targeting home schooled pupils. <i>The Trustees asked whether there was any merit in setting targets for schools to increase their PAN?</i> It was decided that for some schools this would be untenable simply due to location and a lack of children residing in the village. It was noted that the Academy Heads were educators not marketing experts. The CEO added that more training was needed to support the Academy Heads to be effective leaders. The Trustees discussed whether other village schools (out of the Trust) would also be struggling that might need to close and then the Trust may benefit from those children coming into their schools. The CEO felt that this was not a viable or reliable route, and home-schooled pupils should be a targeted area.</p> <p><i>The Trustees asked what was needed from the meeting.</i> The DCEO said that a structured plan outlining where reductions would come from, needed to be agreed and moved forward with. The CEO commented that all spending needed to be scrutinised, staffing, pupil numbers etc, as well as possible areas of savings. The CEO considered the long-term plan should be for the schools to be partnered up with one AH. This could be done either through looking at the strongest people to drive the schools or through the geographical location of schools. The Trustees said that they felt that utilising strong existing staff would be more beneficial to the Trust- staff would need to be upskilled. The Chair said that actions and direction needed to be agreed, and a plan was needed, which it was acknowledged would take time to formulate. If there was a plan in place, this would help staff understand better what was happening and why. The CEO said that she was having another meeting shortly with the AHs to keep them informed. However, she commented that every day there were changes which meant that plans needed to be adapted daily. The Trustees said that communication and consultation was imperative to support the staff. The CEO said that she was keeping people informed.</p> <p>The Trustees <b>accepted</b> the period 6 year to date forecast.</p> <p>The DCEO mentioned that for the 2025/26 budget, there had been more discussion about central charges. As a result, the catering element would be reintegrated into</p>	CEO
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	<p>the school budget to reflect the direct costs. It was noted that this adjustment would not affect the overall cost.</p> <p>The meeting discussed other ways in which each school could contribute to the central costs. Currently contributions were calculated based on number of pupils per school. The larger schools' costs were higher as a result. The CEO wondered if the number of pupils should be capped over a certain level to address this. The Chair said that he thought this was irrelevant as the practice was to pool all the income across the Trust as effectively the Trust was practising zero based budgeting. However, the Chair suggested that rather than provide schools with budgets to balance perhaps each school should instead be given their approved costs for the year. The school would then be expected to remain within this amount. If a school's pupil numbers increased, then their approved costs would also increase which would be an incentive to get more pupils in.</p> <p>It was <b>agreed</b> that the Finance Team would look at how they could provide the schools with their approved costs rather than a budget. They would also look at whether the central costs could be kept centrally.</p> <p>8.2 Update on Deficit Recovery Plan</p> <p>The updated deficit recovery plan was circulated before the meeting by the CEO which outlined the impact. Admin hours had been restructured which had made savings. The CEO said that TA hours would be reviewed next. The CEO said that each school would be looked at individually to see where the savings could be made. <i>The Trustees asked whether the Trust would need to look at redundancies.</i> The DCEO said that the current model would be looking at a reduction of 402 hours which would result in circa £300,000 savings. The CEO said that in the first instance the staff would be asked to consider how the reductions could be achieved to encourage a more collaborative approach and added that in the past this had worked well. Where TA hours were over and above the EHCP funding these would need to be pared back too. The unions would need to be consulted. The Chair said that from looking at the numbers the Trust had no choice but to proceed with this.</p> <p>The DCEO commented that there were two actions – to move forward on the class sizes and to move forward with the TA structures. The Chair acknowledged this and agreed that the actions needed to be taken. Further discussion continued.</p> <p>The Trustees discussed further the individual schools and possible savings, and the CEO confirmed that she would look at which schools could be paired going forward. The DCEO said that they were continuing to scrutinise each school's spending to identify areas of savings and unauthorised spending. Additional hours and supply were an area that was being scrutinised.</p> <p>The Trustees <b>agreed</b> that actions needed to be taken and <b>agreed</b> that cost savings needed to be identified and a structured plan with comprehensive actions of how they would be implemented should be produced as soon as possible. Meeting with the Unions would be the first step, afterwards setting in motion the plan's actions.</p> <p>The CEO mentioned that she had a union meeting on 1<sup>st</sup> April where she planned to outline the necessary actions.</p> <p>The Trustees said that the staff need to understand that the Trust had been well led and that the current situation was due to external influence.</p> <p><i>The Trustees asked about the Unions and whether they were being realistic.</i> The CEO said they were not really engaging at the moment.</p>	
9.	<p><b>Benchmarking</b></p> <p>Trustees to consider the Bishop Fleming's Kreston Academies Benchmarking Report 2025</p> <p>The meeting reviewed the benchmarking and recognised that the Trust fell around the middle point and that there was nothing significant that could help the Trust to consider savings. It was however noted that the Trust's average staff salary was at</p>	

	the higher end which was due to a number of teaching staff being at either the top end of the Main Pay Scale or on the Upper Pay Scale.	
9.	<b>Property</b> 9.1 DCEO to raise any issues for discussion The DCEO said that was no issues. <i>The CEO asked about the CIF bids.</i> It was noted that results were expected in May. It was also noted that the Trust's capital reserves were circa £300,000. 9.2 Update on the LBCT submission – this was submitted in time 9.3 Sustainability Update – Landscope's Let's Go Zero report was expected soon, from which a Climate Action Plan would be produced. The other two schools that had been part of the pilot would receive theirs soon. These plans would then be shared across the Trust.	
10.	<b>Human Resources</b> It was noted that this item would be discussed within the Remuneration committee meeting.	
11.	<b>Health &amp; Safety</b> During the meeting, the DCEO was contacted about an accident that had occurred at Harbertonford. Precise details were unknown but related to the ground's maintenance contractor. The Trustees asked the DCEO to keep them informed once further details were known.	
12.	<b>Due Diligence</b> The CEO updated the Trustees regarding Woodbury CofE Primary School who had expressed an interest in joining the Trust. The Regions group had expressed concern about the Trust taking on the school at this time, just after taking on the East Devon schools. This has been challenged by the CEO as the school was in a good position and a good fit with the Trust. It was also supported by the Diocese. The Regions group had suggested instead to move forward with a management partnership agreement in the meantime. Due diligence would therefore be carried out during this period. The CEO stated that she was meeting with Head of the school to agree a plan and how they might work together with Woodbury Salterton. The Trustees <b>recommended</b> that approval of the management partnership would need to be discussed at the Board of Trustees on 31 <sup>st</sup> March 2025.	
13.	<b>Safeguarding</b> The CEO said that there was nothing new to bring forward.	
14.	<b>ESFA Bulletins</b> A recent announcement by the DfE regarding sustainability funding was to be investigated.	
15.	<b>Pupil Premium and Sports Grant</b> The DCEO said that this funding stream was being spent on track within the terms. It was noted that the FM was working with the Head of PE to consider a more equitable spread across the schools.  The DCEO reminded the group about the Trust's setup for pupil premium income, which was allocated to cover the cost of the ITH provision, with a balancing percentage going towards staffing costs. He noted that a small budget was given to the school's resource line, varying from £400 to £1000 depending on the school's size. The DCEO raised concerns about conversations regarding the allocation of pupil premium by Local Advisory Committees and that some schools felt the distribution was not fair and equitable. The CEO mentioned that all schools had initially agreed on the setup, praising its benefits. However, some schools later expressed reluctance to contribute, preferring to use their sports grants in particular independently.	
15.	<b>Policies</b> 15.1 CCTV Camera Policy 2025 – The Trustees raised a comment – and it was <b>agreed</b> for the DCEO to be responsible for the overall responsibility for ensuring compliance. <i>The Trustees asked for clarification of how many schools had CCTV.</i> The DCEO listed a small number of schools and confirmed that the right signage was in place at all those schools.	

	15.2 Discretions Policy 2025 – The Trustees confirmed that this had been reviewed and <b>agreed</b> that as it was a model policy to recommend for it to go to Board of Trustees for approval.	
16.	<p><b>Evaluation of governance impact</b></p> <p>One sentence from the Committee to encapsulate the effectiveness of the meeting and the impact on the pupils, staff and other stakeholders.</p> <p>The Chair said that from a personal and Chair of Committee perspective, he had a lot of sympathy for the SLT and the staff. It was recognised that it was challenging times, and that progress was being made.</p>	

**The meeting ended at 11.30am**

**Signed by the Chair of the Committee..... on 16<sup>th</sup> May 2025**