

The Link Academy Trust

## Finance & General Purposes Committee Extraordinary Meeting

**Minutes 29 April 2022**  
**1.00pm**

*Held online using MS Teams*

**Present** Ben Thorne – Chair  
Nicola Dunford – Chief Executive Officer (CEO)  
Cheryl Mathieson (CM)  
Christopher Norman (CN) (in part)

**In attendance** Matt Matthew – Deputy Chief Executive Officer (DCEO)  
Elaine Clarke (Clerk)

1. **Welcome and Apologies**

The Chair welcomed the trustees and those in attendance to the meeting.

The Chair accepted apologies from Paul Waterworth – sanctioned.  
Christopher Norman had sent apologies ahead for a late arrival – sanctioned.

2. **Declaration of Business Interests**

The CEO is a trustee for the Bearnas Educational Foundation. Christopher Norman is a director and shareholder of CANE Properties Ltd. Ben Thorne is a trustee of Tor Bridge High Academy Trust. Cheryl Mathieson is parent to two children who attend a Link MAT academy.

3. **Proposals for capital, staffing and environmental projects to spend surplus reserves to be discussed**

A paper prepared by the CEO and DCEO and titled 'Consideration of Reserves' had been circulated to the committee prior to the meeting for consideration and was shared on screen by the Chair.

The Chair briefly talked through the paper which included the following:

- The summary forecast budget position for the next three years showing the forecast carry forward/reserve position as £1.75 million.
- Notes on considerations for the budget including future teachers' pay awards.
- A list of capital and other possible projects for spending of the reserves. Projects individually costed and scored by the DCEO on aspects of feasibility, likelihood of government/ other funding, cost, deliverability, need and pupil impact.
- Graphs comparing score and cost of proposed projects.

The Chair suggested that the list of projects be used as a starting point for discussion. He felt it also brought into focus the limited amount of money there was to spend and emphasised that the priority was to use the money to make the most impact and best use pupils. It was commented that the scoring was subjective but the Chair felt it comparable to his own assessment and gave an indication.

At the direction of the Chair the trustees discussed the potential projects for spend as follows:

(Both CN and PW had sent emails ahead of the meeting, being unable to attend in person, which were read to the committee by the Chair. CN joined the meeting at 13.13, shortly after the Chair had read out CN's email, so was able to take part in decision making during the latter part of the meeting.)

- **CIF 2022-23**

Trustees agreed that making annual applications for CIF funding should continue for as long as the scheme was available as a valuable source of funding when bids were successful. It was also agreed that the £370K for the CIF bid contributions should be ringfenced pending the results of the bids which the DCEO advised should be within four to six weeks. However, following the outcome of CIF bids, opinions varied; some trustees felt that the ringfenced amount – or what was left after any contributions were made – should be carried forward to add to future CIF bids as a whole, while some felt quite strongly that any remaining CIF contribution from this year, at least in part, should be used to fund repairs to the Estate generally, informed by the Asset Management Plan (AMP) surveys commissioned this year

- **Replacement Classrooms at Diptford Primary School – Options 1, 2 and 3**

Trustees agreed that this project was a high priority as the classrooms in question were deemed not fit for purpose. In the interim classes were taking place in the Village Hall.

Although recently RPA insurance had been agreed to carry out repair work on the roof and resulting water damage caused by recent storms to one of the classrooms, it was felt that it was uneconomic and a poor use of public money to continue to maintain and repair these buildings.

Option 1 was ruled out by trustees as too high a cost.

Of the remaining options, Option 3 was preferred by the trustees. The DCEO advised that a bid for funding this option had been made to the Schools Rebuilding Programme (SRP) from which the first tranche of successful projects would be announced in June with further results in November. Although the local MP had taken up the matter on behalf of the Trust, there was no indication yet of whether the bid would be successful. On the basis that the SRP bid may not be successful, the majority of the trustees felt that funds should therefore be put aside for Option 2. A counter suggestion was made however that funds should not be allocated to Diptford, the argument being that as this project was such a big issue that the DfE should be pushed to fund this project through the SRP or otherwise with reserves allocated to other urgent projects such as the Broadhempston.

- **Provision of a FSU at Tedburn St Mary Primary School Options 1 and 2**

Neither option was considered to be a priority over other projects at this time by trustees.

- **Provision of additional classroom space at Broadhempston Primary School**

Trustees agreed that after Diptford, Broadhempston was the next priority for funding. The CEO reported that the lack of space and often unusable outdoor covered area was resulting in pupils constantly having to use the Village Hall during lesson time.

- **ICT**

It was generally agreed that ICT merited some funding as a vitally important aspect for pupils learning and operating in the wider world. The CEO advised that recently the majority of hardware had been replaced but there may be the requirement to top up new schools. The DCEO reported that there had not been much expression of need coming back from schools and hardware might start being addressed on a staggered basis anyway over the next few years through the annual budget.

Trustees felt that funding of connectivity, infrastructure and updating curriculum software across the Trust should be a priority for reserves spending. Opinions varied as to the level of funding that should be allocated, with other projects such as Diptford and Broadhempston being of higher priority.

- **The Estate**

Trustees generally agreed that some additional funds should be allocated to repairs and refurbishment informed by the AMPs. As previously mentioned trustees felt this could come from unused CIF contributions at least in part. In terms of what might benefit the Trust the most, the CEO suggested that work on the 'external view' of the schools' buildings might be a priority to attract pupils and families, alternatively looking at a priority list for each school once it was established how much funding was available. Some of the newer schools to the Trust particularly need refurbishment having had low levels of investment from the local authority.

- **The Environment**

Although gaining a low score, in light of the recent release of the DfE Environmental Education Strategy and the Trust's Environmental Sustainability Strategy, all trustees agreed that environmental projects should be allocated some reserves funding.

- **Other Considerations**

In addition to the considerations listed on the paper, the CEO asked that trustees consider expansion of the Trust for reserves spending. It is hoped to appoint additional central staff in the areas of business operations, inclusion – there is a particular need for a speech and language specialist – and two further floating teachers. An application for TCAF is being made to support these appointments at the outset however an additional allocation would demonstrate a commitment to the expansion in the longer term.

The question was also asked whether any important educational areas were missing at present that could be made possible through reserves spending, for example art, live music or poetry? The CEO responded that individual schools have an annual budget to cover enhanced learning or 'hooks to learning' which is where these type of activities sit. She advised that other revenue type projects such as purchase of reading books were addressed in other ways if necessary, for example through PTFA fundraising. Trustees agreed that spending of the reserves needed to be focussed on the 'big spends'.

Once discussions had concluded, the trustees agreed the following recommendations to take to the Full Board:

- Total forecast reserves £1.75 million
- **CIF bids** - £370K to be ringfenced for CIF bid contributions for the 2021/22 CIF bids. It is expected however that few if any bids will be successful and if this proves to be the case, £200K of the £370K to be allocated to the Estate for repairs and refurbishments informed by the AMPs and £170K (or the balance should any CIF bids prove successful) to be carried forward and ringfenced towards CIF bids for 2022/23.
- **Diptford Primary School** - The preferred option for Diptford is Option 3 and it is hoped this will be funded by a successful SRP bid. In the event this the bid fails £450K to be allocated towards funding Option 2.
- **Broadhempston Primary School** – Initially it was agreed that should the SRP bid for Diptford prove successful, then the funding earmarked for Diptford could be diverted to Broadhempston. Although acknowledging that the CEO and DCEO would push

hard for Diptford SRP funding, trustees were concerned that Broadhempston may miss out and the Chair proposed therefore that £350K be allocated to Broadhempston in addition to the £450K allocated to Diptford. He advised this would leave less than the £850K free reserves stated in the Trust policy, however free reserves would still fall within the ESFA recommended reserves of 4 – 8% of the General Annual Grant (GAG) for next year. The Chair advised trustees that the lower level of reserves posed some risk – however trustees felt this could be managed.

- **ICT** - £30K allocated across the Trust this year
- **The Environment** - £30K allocated across the Trust
- **Trust Expansion** - £50k allocated to support expansion
- Once the above have been allocated, remaining forecast reserves are £470K which sits within the ESFA recommended reserve level of between 4 – 8% of GAG. With GAG at approximately £8 million, 4 – 8% equates to £320K - £640K.

The Chair compiled a spreadsheet (see Table 1. below) of spending recommendations/decisions and advised that this, alongside the minutes would provide adequate evidence of trustees' decisions and intentions to spend the excess reserves should this be queried by outside agencies. Notes will also be made within the year end accounts regarding these designated funds.

Table 1.

Total forecast reserves		1,750
CIF		(370)
Dipt		(450)
Broad		(350)
Green agenda		(30)
ICT		(30)
Expansion		(50)
Free reserves		470
Total income		Target
8,000	4%	320
	8%	640

The meeting closed at 14.03

