

**Members meeting
Held on 30th September 2025 at 4 pm via Teams
Draft Minutes**

Present: A Walmsley (Chair of trustees), C Mabin (EDEN), D Roberts (SDBE), and T Wilkes (BWDBE)

In attendance: P Walker (CEO), A Mountford-Zimdars (potential Member, up to) and I Candy (Lead governance professional)

Quorum (2): the meeting is quorate

Circulation: Directors, Members and Dioceses (through GovernorHub)

	Decision		Action due
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1. Welcome and apologies	
All Members were present. Introductions took place. It was explained that the majority of schools within the Trust were Church schools, hence the majority of Members being dioceses. A Mountford- Zimdars explained that she was new to school governance and worked at Exeter University, with a focus on HE and access to HE. She was excited about what educators can learn from the primary sector around the approach to learning and about working for the benefit of the children. She was a professor of social justice, which was why she was approached by the Trust to fill the vacancy for a Non-Foundation Member.	
2. Prayer	
Led by Christina Mabin (poem)	
3. Declaration of Business/Conflict of Interests and Code of Conduct	
Declaration of interests were invited by the chair. T Wilkes declared that she had become a trustee of Richard Huish Trust in Taunton. The code of conduct would be circulated following the meeting, for people to confirm they have read and understood it.	I Candy / Members
4. Election of chair for this meeting	
A Walmsley was appointed as chair because all other current Members were corporate Members.	
5. Minutes of the last Members meeting (AGM held on 23 Jan 2025)	
5.1. To agree the minutes of the last meeting	
The minutes of the last Members meeting were approved, subject to changing T Wilkes' role which was incorrectly listed as EDW rather than BWDBE.	
5.2. To review matters arising not otherwise on the agenda	
The only matters arising were around Membership and the uncertainty around University of St Mark and St John who had now confirmed they would no longer be Members in MATs. A Walmsley reminded all present that he would be happy to stand down from being a Member should that be their wish.	
6. Review of the last academic year and plans for the current one	
P Walker joined the meeting at this stage. Highlights for 2024-25 were summarised as follows by the CEO:	

- 2024-25 had been a complex and complicated year for the Trust.
- The Trust had had substantial grown from a medium to a larger size trust, taking on eight schools, seven of which were from Acorn and were not functioning well in terms of ambitions for pupils and standards, as evidenced by poor Ofsted and outcomes. Twelve months on, these schools had embraced being part of the FFT and risen to the challenge. The former Acorn schools that were inspected did well. Axminster in particular did really well from its starting point at the start of the year, both for Ofsted and in terms of pupil progress.
- The Trust had challenges around finances, worsened by a number of funding streams being withdrawn by the new government, and had run the year as a deficit budget. Through work done around this, the Trust was now looking at breaking even, but that included some restructuring in order to adjust to falling rolls. The Trust had reduced staff but had not had to make any teachers or TAs redundant. The reduction in staff would mean schools having to adjust and work differently. The Trust had also reviewed the central team, which was funded by a percentage of the schools' budgets. The business team was restructured. In particular six Trust business managers were reduced to four 'heads of' roles (HR, estates, procurement and school relationships). The Trust was continuing to review the central team and was likely to have some more restructuring to do.
- The Trust had focussed on its offer for pupils with SEND, teaching & learning, as well as leadership, and seen good outcomes around this.
- Raising standards was another objective. The Trust had been working on the assumptions that it would be reporting on all 29 schools and had seen a 6% improvement in the percentage of Year 6 pupils attaining expected standards in Reading, Writing and Maths but was below national average for that measure. In terms of Year 6 outcomes, there were some pleasing results and some disappointing ones. Individual subjects in Year 6 were higher than previous years but there had not been enough of an improvement in Maths, which had had an impact on combined attainment. Attainment of PP pupils had also not improved sufficiently. Other metrics were varied. Some schools had really improved although they were not at national average. For example, Bere Alston had a cohort with a lot of needs that did not reach national average, but their rate of progress was really high.
- The Trust was aiming for incremental gains.

The biggest challenges for the Trust for 2024-25 had been as follows:

- Standards.
- SEND and disadvantaged children, and children who are both: this was about making sure that barriers were understood then addressed to remove them so that these children can achieve well.
- Finances
- A busy programme of inspections: 15 Ofsted inspections and 7 SIAMS inspections.
- Having a 'newish' leadership team, with seven new members

The Trust priorities for the current year (2025-26) were as follows:

- Continuing to work on the Trust three-year strategic plan
- With no Trust growth, the Trust would be able to consolidate the impact of the work started and build on green shoots already seen. There were also some long-standing schools where low results were being looked at to understand the reasons for those to address them.
- Ensuring the Trust works on the right priorities, having analysed pupil outcome data.

- Having different programmes to address varying priorities, for example leadership, Maths and phonics.
- Making sure the right tools and assurance / accountability were in place
- Making sure the Trust kept what works well (staff pride, etc) whilst improving things.

Members queried whether estates were at risk generally, given the limited capital funding, and asked specifically about the premises issues at Mrs Ethelston's.

Estates were always a risk. The Trust had inherited schools that were in poor conditions. Newton Ferrers needed a new roof although it was a relatively new building. The issue at Mrs Ethelston's was initially the roof of a building damaged by a storm but this had then showed other issues with the building. Two classes were being educated at the local secondary school, and the roof replacement would be partly funded by insurance once the other issues with the building had been resolved.

As the Trust capital funding did not cover the work that needed to be done, the Trust was aiming to prioritise large items as well as have a programme of regular maintenance and upgrading IT infrastructure. A strategic premises management plan with key projects had started to be developed, now that the Director of Finance had been in post for over a year.

It was further reported that:

- The Trust had liaised with the Bestic Trust around Mrs Ethelston's. The FFT had recommended two trustees for Bestic to appoint, the head and a parent council member. The Bestic Trust was about to build a MUGA and may be able to fund a hall that the school could use. They had also offered to contribute to repairs needed in the building.
- Sidmouth building work had started and should be completed in June 2026.
- Newton Ferrers roof replacement would be a complex project because there was an issue with the design of the roof.
- The Trust had interviewed for the Director of Operations role on the day of this meeting.
- Finance generally was high on the Trust risk register but had been well managed this year, after the initial disappointment of TCAF being withdrawn. Fortunately, the Trust had only included part of the amount bid in the projected budget.
- The restructure within the business team had also been done with a view to improve the team efficiency.

Members asked whether small schools were a risk.

The Trust did not perceive small schools as a particular risk as it was happy to adapt and work differently around small schools, as long as there was a need for them. The Trust smallest school was Membury where pupils were succeeding when they had often struggled in previous schools and the school was financially sustainable. The head was working in partnership with other schools. The school was rated good by Ofsted in July 2025, and parents really valued the school. Therefore, there was no immediate reason to seek to close the school. The positive Ofsted should hopefully help to build pupil numbers, although it may be at the detriment of other local FFT schools.

Trustees' concerns around small schools were more around the quality of education rather than financial sustainability. Although outcomes were low, this was not linked to small schools in particular.

Members enquired whether the decision to reduce TAs was a financial decision.

TA reductions were based on funding, as many were funded by SEND/PP funding which followed pupils when they moved to secondary schools. The Trust generally had really good staff retention. Funding pressures and the rise in costs and savings in other parts of the budget having already been achieved meant that TA

reductions were necessary. The Trust was mostly managing this through temporary contracts.

Members asked about the rates of suspensions and exclusions.

The Trust had had its first permanent exclusion in seven years. The Trust had a policy of schools never suspending or excluding alone: heads had to consult with the central team before they reached their decision. The number of suspensions had decreased despite the growth of the Trust last year. Suspensions were being used as a useful, proportionate tool with the focus on what happened when pupils returned to school.

The permanent exclusion was a difficult decision, for a child with particularly complex needs with few options opened to them in the system, and the decision was made because of an increase in difficult to manage, dangerous behaviours. Trustees had reflected that it was fair and reasonable and if anything, the Trust could have excluded earlier.

Members fed back that they appreciated the opportunity to reflect on the year from CEO and chair.

Members probed around standards: there was a degree of nervousness last year around standards, how did they compare with what was anticipated? They also asked about the impact on the team of the new Ofsted framework.

The Trust was cautious about standards last year because there was a group of schools that the Trust did not know. Some schools did better than expected, some were not accurate in their ambition and predictions. The CEO was pleased with the progress that schools made last year, but very aware that there was more work to do and standards needed to be raised to national average and above. The team was expecting predictions to be more accurate this year thanks to the work done around assessments and target settings and was also expecting to see a rise in standards.

Last year, the team grew more assured as the year went on with Ofsted inspections, thanks to good relationships with the sector. The Trust was aware that the new framework would be similar to previous section 8 inspections. The CEO would be training heads once he had had his training for the new framework for this Ofsted inspector role. The Trust felt that positive Ofsted outcomes should be a natural outcome of good teaching & learning.

The chair commented that all 2024-25 inspections had been different, and the board was aware of achievement being a graded area in the new framework. In response to a question from Members, the CEO confirmed that the Trust was expecting five Ofsted inspections during 2025-26.

The Member from B&W asked whether the work of their diocese with Somerset LA around small schools was happening with other LAs.

The Trust was working with several LAs, around statutory functions and to build relationships but there were different approaches in different LAs. None of the LAs where the Trust operates were high performing in SEND.

Members queried whether the work with LAs was more around place planning.

It was mostly around place planning and SEND. Last year, the Trust opened a second SEND base in Exmouth [the other one is in Dawlish]. The CEO was due to meet with Dorset Council to discuss place planning.

The falling rolls meant that the Trust had got the capacity to host SEND bases. Both existing bases were working well, with a focus on ensuring the right pupils attend the right place. Dorset was probably more engaged with schools, but the system was not mature although there was a will from CEOs to work together on surplus places. Plymouth was working the best in the area around this.

It was further reported that the organisation Challenge Partners had undertaken a review of the Trust school improvement model at the request of the Trust. Six of their reviewers had met with all senior leaders and governance volunteer representatives and had visited nine schools. Headlines were very positive, around

Members confirmed the dioceses agreement to appoint A Mountford-Zimdars as Non-Foundation Member. The written resolutions will be signed and return to I Candy. The chair reminded Members that the next meeting would be the AGM and asked them to consider whether they would want the Trust Director of Finance at the meeting. This will be decided nearer the time.	
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Meeting start: 4.02 pm, meeting close: 5.25 pm

Dated of next meeting: 22 Jan 2026, 5 pm

These minutes are agreed by those present as being a true record.

Signed:.....
Chair

Date:.....