

**Strategic & Finance Committee meeting
Held on 8th May 2025 at 6 pm at Brixington Primary Academy
Draft Part I Minutes**

Present: A Walmsley (chair), P Walker (CEO), M Williams and I Thomas

In attendance: M Platten (DoF) and I Candy (Co Sec)

Quorum: the meeting is quorate

Circulation: Directors (through GovernorHub), FFT website

	Decision		Action due
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1. Welcome & apologies	
Apologies were received from A Denner (holiday).	
2. Declaration of Conflict of Interests	
Declarations of conflicts of interests were invited by the chair. None was made.	
3. Minutes of the last meetings of the S&F committee	
3.1. To approve the minutes of the last meeting (20 Mar 2025)	
The draft minutes of the last meeting were circulated ahead of this meeting. The amended minutes (Part I and Part II) were agreed to be an accurate record of the last meeting and signed by the chair.	
3.2. To review matters arising not otherwise on the agenda	
The list of matters arising was circulated ahead of the meeting. The following point was raised and discussed: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Website providers: S Branch is working with Juniper around developing new websites for the Trust and its schools. 	Appendix 1
4. To receive and discuss the CEO report, to include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Update of head appointments Update on structures Approval of term dates for 2026-27 	
The CEO report and proposed term dates for 2026-27 and 2027-28 were circulated ahead of the meeting. <u>Term dates:</u> P Walker explained that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Setting term dates was likely to be an ongoing challenge for the Trust because they vary across the three LAs that the Trust operates in, and are further modified by schools and Trusts. The Trust preference is to have the same term dates for all schools for CPD purposes and also so the central team has the same amount of leave as others. The proposed term dates for 2026-27 were similar to previous years. The proposed term dates for 2027-28 had one day of term less than the normal 190 to accommodate LA dates and because of Christmas falling during a weekend in 2027. The board agreed to set term dates for 2026-27 and for 2027-28 as proposed.	Appendices 2 – 3

<p>They will be communicated to schools through the leadership update.</p> <p><u>Growth:</u> The meeting went into Part II to discuss recent approaches by schools. The meeting went back into Part I.</p> <p><u>Headship appointments:</u> P Walker highlighted that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews were being held to appoint a new deputy head at Willowbank, as H Jay (the former deputy) had been appointed as head. • A new head had been appointed at Salcombe, Charlotte (Lottie) Bond, who works 0.8 in her current trust so may be able to do some days in school to help with transition. She is currently part of the central team at Learning Academies Trust and had been a deputy head before that. • A new head had been appointed at Mary Dean's, Lesa Garside, who was part of central team at Learning Academy Partnership and is committed to church school. <p><u>Other staffing matters:</u> The meeting went into Part II to discuss this item. The meeting went back into Part I.</p>	<p>I Candy</p>
<p>5. To review and discuss the Director of Finance (DoF) report, to include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feb 2025 management accounts • Indicative budget for 2025-26 	
<p>The DoF report was circulated ahead of the meeting, as were the Feb 2025 management accounts and draft 2025-26 budget.</p> <p><u>February management accounts:</u> M Platten highlighted that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6 months through the financial year (2024-25), the in-year deficit to date was £132K, which was £87K better than forecasted. • The Trust had recorded a temporary surplus because of some income catch-up but finances will deteriorate from April with the NJC (i.e. support staff) pay increases taking effect. There were also some operational costs increases e.g. the NI contribution increase which is only partly funded for school employees, and also affect the employees of companies that provide services / goods to schools and therefore the cost of these services. <p><u>Forecast for 2024-25:</u> M Platten pointed out that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This was based on January figures. The next forecast would be based on March figures. The forecasted in-year deficit was currently predicted to be £477K at the end of the year, which was less than expected at the start of the year. • NI had been included as one line because of the DfE grant. It is a £100K risk over 12 months, with about £40K this financial year being unfunded. • The figures mean that reserves would drop to £882K by the end of the current financial year, around 2.3% of income, unless the Trust can improve on current figures. • The figures shared were realistic figures (i.e. not over optimistic or pessimistic) based on the information currently available. <p>A Walmsley (chair of the committee) fed back that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The sector is being challenged to maintain reserves of 5% of income, but about half of all trusts are expected to fall below this threshold next year despite pressure from the DfE. • The FFT seemed to be hit harder than others by demographics and due to the LA based funding model, although many primary trusts were addressing the same challenges. <p><u>2025-26 budget</u> M Platten highlighted that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This was a draft budget which needed to be refined further and may change materially. 	<p>Appendices 4 - 6</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This currently showed an in-year deficit of £806K and was based on the following key assumptions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ A 2.8% pay increase as that was mooted as affordable by the DfE and therefore a recommended assumption, but the increase was likely to be above this and may or may not be funded, particularly for support staff. ◦ GAG income based on the statements received. This income showed a smaller than 0.8% increase for the Trust as a whole, partly due to Devon moving some funding from the schools block to the high needs block (approved by the Secretary of State in spite of local opposition), which was well below inflation. • This level of in-year deficit would deplete the Trust reserves almost completely by August 2026. • The Trust would look at identifying additional savings. These would partly depend on school and Trust staff structures. <p>The following points were raised and discussed by the committee:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whilst this was a draft budget, it was clear that it was a challenging situation, and the board would need to see a three-year budget to ascertain the going concern assumption and ensure decisions are made to ensure sustainability. • The removal by the DfE of additional grants such as TCAF was having an impact. • Pupil numbers reduction was a big factor, and this would be linked to a decreasing number of teachers and support staff. • Last year the Trust benefitted from having a one-off addition of reserves from joiner schools. • Inflation and staff pay increases were higher than the increase in income, especially with the level of experienced staff and where grants are based on an average salary which is below the Trust actual average. This will vary depending on staff movement. • More work was needed to achieve some of these savings already. For example, the draft budget already included a £600K decrease in support staff costs. • Another risk is the supply budget because some of it is offset by income where teachers are released to undertake specific work. <p><i>The committee asked for confirmation that the Trust capital funding was greater than first anticipated.</i></p> <p>This is the case because there is a minimum grant by school which is beneficial for some of the Trust small schools. The Trust received £600K of SCA this year and has been notified it will receive £1.3M next year. This means the Trust should be able to use more of the capital funding for eligible repairs, moving expenditure away from revenue.</p> <p>The committee thanked M Platten for his work on the budget. The information shared was really useful to understand the Trust financial situation and risks.</p>	
<p>6. To discuss and agree next steps for Sidmouth building project</p>	
<p>A recommendation, tender summary report and supplementary information were circulated ahead of the meeting.</p> <p>P Walker and M Platten reported that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the Trust was due to get a more detailed analysis of tenders, however SW Norse were able to advise who had provided the best bid in time for this meeting. Therefore, their recommendation was to agree to go ahead with this company, pending the full information and successful bidder being confirmed. • A rapid decision was needed in order not to delay the project further. • The successful bid was about £230K above the funds allocated by DfE, and this could be underwritten from SCA funding as this was higher than expected. Some value engineering work may result in the amount needing to be funded out of SCA becoming smaller 	<p>Appendices 7 – 9</p>

<p>The committee agreed the recommendation in principle, subject to further ratification by written resolution.</p>	
<p>7. To receive an update on key operations matter</p> <p>An update of key actions arising from H&S reviews was circulated ahead of the meeting. The committee noted the actions undertaken. M Platten reported that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arbor was receiving good feedback from staff. • ParentPay was charging the Trust for the move from SIMS to Arbor, at a cost of £100 per school which was negotiated down from their initial quote. • The company used to get costings for the grant for the nursery expansion at Brixington had been used to get a quote for the work but the Trust had been seeking other quotes for comparison as required by the Trust finance policy. One quote was about the same but had slightly higher project management cost. The committee agreed for the work to be awarded to the initial company as there was no significant difference in costs and they knew the project best. 	<p>Appendix 10</p>
<p>8. Policies and compliance, to include a review the Trust risk register</p> <p>The latest version of the Trust risk register was circulated ahead of the meeting. There was no policy to approve. The committee noted that finance was already rated red and therefore increasing that risk score was not needed. There is a "decreasing" arrow for the risk which needs to be removed. The committee highlighted that the owner for the cybersecurity risk is the Director of People & Operations and this needed to be allocated to another staff member until a replacement has been appointed.</p>	<p>Appendix 11</p> <p>I Candy</p> <p>P Walker</p>

Meeting times: start: 6 pm, end: 7.52 pm

Date of next meeting: 26 June 2025, 6 pm

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

Signed:.....
Chair of S&F committee

Date:.....