

**Strategic & Finance Committee meeting  
Held on 20<sup>th</sup> March 2025 at 6 pm at Brixington Primary Academy  
Draft Part I Minutes**

**Present:** A Walmsley (chair), P Walker (CEO), A Denner, and M Williams

**In attendance:** A Gavin (DoPO), 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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<b>1. Welcome &amp; apologies</b>	
Apologies were received from I Thomas (work commitments).	
<b>2. Declaration of Conflict of Interests</b>	
Declarations of conflicts of interests were invited by the chair. None was made.	
<b>3. Minutes of the last meetings of the S&amp;F committee</b>	
<b>3.1. To approve the minutes of the last meeting (30 Jan 2025)</b>	
The draft minutes of the last meeting were circulated ahead of this meeting. A small amendment was made to the minutes circulated to clarify minute approval at the last meeting. <b>The amended minutes were agreed to be an accurate record of the last meeting and signed by the chair.</b>	
<b>3.2. To review matters arising not otherwise on the agenda</b>	
The list of matters arising was circulated ahead of the meeting, as was the consultation about Musbury. The following points were raised and discussed: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Investments: M Platten has set up an instant access tracker and this is giving returns. Once cashflow eases after April, which is the tightest month for cash flow, a longer term investment will be done as agreed with the board.</li> <li>Swimming pool at Membury: it was reviewed whether work was needed around this and it has been agreed that none is necessary as it is securely fenced off.</li> </ul>	<b>Appendices 1 - 2</b>
<b>4. To receive and discuss the CEO report, to include:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Update on structures</b></li> <li><b>Feedback from meeting with DfE RD</b></li> </ul>	
The CEO report and 19 Mar 2025 letter to accounting officers were circulated ahead of the meeting. <u>Growth:</u> P Walker reported that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A Walmsley and he had met with the DfE RD and discussed the potential joining of Exeter Road. The DfE RD confirmed that this would have to wait until 2025 outcomes are available.</li> </ul>	<b>Appendices 3 -4</b>

- The joint management partnership is successful. The report for the recent inspection of Exeter Road was positive about the impact of the Trust, and the DfE has funded TSI support through the FFT.
- Devon maintained schools have been given longer than usual to submit their budget. P Walker has made clear that the LA need to support Exeter Road. The school is likely to need one more class for one year, in order to accommodate reception numbers, which will not be helpful in terms of deficit.

Funding and school class numbers:

P Walker highlighted that:

- There is a number of schools where classes can be reduced, but there are some restrictions linked to permanent staff in a few cases where staff adjustments may need to be made over a period of time, irrelevant of the number of classes.
- There is an ongoing plan to reduce classes over time, to reflect pupil numbers.

***The committee queried whether Heads were aware of the class reductions.***

Heads are aware of the financial picture overall which was discussed at FLT. Individual heads of the affected schools will be informed of the plans for 2025-26 by the end of the term. The Trust central team will work on TA positions after Easter. There are likely to be reductions in TA numbers as there is a large group of Year 6 with a number of EHCPs leaving in July and smaller numbers due to start Reception in September.

***The committee enquired whether the demographic trend was nationwide or only in the South West, and whether other schools in the area were likely to adopt the same approach at the FFT.***

The demographic trend is nationwide, although the Trust seems to be quite affected. Other schools are likely to adopt a similar approach because they are in a similar situation. The Trust has planned ahead and recruited temporary TAs where possible, which is helpful.

The approach to the budget has been presented to heads, so they understand funding and therefore better understand funding based decisions.

The meeting went into Part II to discuss a matter related to class reductions.

The meeting went back into Part I.

The meeting went into Part II around Trust central team matters.

The meeting went back into Part I.

The committee commented that there should be representation made to the government to enable them to have a better understanding of the actual financial position of schools, which is different from the total spent on schools.

Alternative provision (AP):

P Walker reported that:

- There is a small group of pupils with extreme needs who are better served by AP, so the Trust educational SLG wanted to discuss establishing a Trust provision.
- The Trust currently uses a range of providers with different offers, so it is probably not a good solution to have a single Trust provision that would only offer one type of provision. Therefore, it may be more useful to work on a virtual model, with some flexible staff who can travel where needed. The Trust could employ therapists, outdoor specialists, etc and may be able to use existing staff who have the expertise needed as well as existing funding.
- The aim would be to prevent some children from having to access external AP in the long term.
- This may require investing in the short term to save in the longer term, although that would be difficult in the current financial context.

***The committee queried what are other trusts were doing with regards to AP.***

Some are looking at setting up a provision. Therefore the FFT may be able to set up shared provisions with other local MAT to serve a range of needs.

P Walker further highlighted that:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is also the need to monitor the quality of AP. Schools cannot use provisions which are not registered to provide full time education and many local AP providers are not registered.</li> <li>• AP providers are also using dynamic pricing based on demands. Schools have to pay for transport to the provider. This means that AP is expensive</li> <li>• It is a national issue. A DfE green paper that focusses on this is due to be published.</li> <li>• P Walker was hoping to bring a proposal around this next term.</li> </ul> <p><u>Mrs Ethelston's premises:</u> P Walker reported that the DfE RD had confirmed there was currently no source of DfE funding to provide a new building for the school. Any potential building project needs to be carefully designed, taking into account funding opportunities and possible risks. The meeting went into Part II to discuss staff and financial matters. The meeting went back into Part I.</p>	
<p><b>5. To review and discuss the Director of Finance (DoF) report</b></p>	
<p>The DoF report was circulated ahead of the meeting, as were the Dec 2024 and Jan 2025 management accounts.</p> <p><u>Management accounts:</u> M Platten highlighted that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There are two sets of account reports: one compares the current financial situation vs the budget that was agreed in July 2025 for the 21 schools that were part of the Trust at the time, and one that is the consolidated position for all the schools currently in the Trust. This second one is more useful in practice.</li> <li>• The second report shows a £139K in-year deficit in five months up to January, which is £46K better than forecasted and the forecast was linked to TCAF. M Platten was hopeful that this was a good sign.</li> <li>• The Trust is looking carefully at staffing decision linked to EHCPs.</li> <li>• There is a more focussed approach for the new joiners' budgets although some recent joiners had signed for long contracts.</li> <li>• Some savings were made because of the delay in the third SI officer starting.</li> <li>• The Trust is currently forecasting a circa £500K in-year deficit, which would leave the Trust with reserves of only about 2.5% of income by the end of the school year.</li> <li>• The appendix to the DoF report showed the breakdown by schools, with the largest variances explained. There is some central provision where the cost is allocated to schools e.g. AP</li> </ul> <p><b><i>The committee enquired about the funding added to Mrs Ethelston's and St Andrew's for ring fenced expenditures.</i></b> Reserves were brought forward because they were ring fenced for specific projects e.g. linked to STEM. So the finance team moved this funding from reserves to schools so it is identified more clearly. In addition, as donations tend to be in advance of expenditure, they need to be recorded appropriately so that the financial position does not artificially appear to be better than it is. The Trust is getting circa £50K in donations currently. The donations and expenditures linked to the external trusts linked to Bere Alston and St Budeaux are also included there. The committee was reminded that there is also the Bestic trust whose purpose is to support pupils from Mrs Ethelston's. M Platten explained that since the instant access account has been set up, there is a new code in the software and this is not aggregating cash held. This explains the difference shown as the rest is in debtors, in the balance sheet document and in management accounts.</p> <p><u>Capital planning:</u> M Platten highlighted that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Capital spend needs to be done using capital funding only, because of the pressure on revenue funding.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Appendices 5 - 7</b></p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Trust has approximately £700K of SCA in total for the 29 schools. Therefore, the Trust has been cautious around understanding needs, especially where this would incur significant spending, before spending is committed. Some requests for capital work have been agreed as part of the capital panel meetings.</li> <li>• Schools have been asked to provide information about works that may need to be done over the next one to two years. The fire alarm system at Chickerell and boilers at several schools are the most expensive works required, excluding roofs.</li> <li>• The team is also mindful of the Sidmouth project where the Trust may need to commit spending not covered by the DfE.</li> </ul> <p><b><i>In response to a question around cyber security being a known issue for the public sector and Microsoft stopping security updates for Windows 10 later on this year</i></b>, M Platten confirmed that the Trust was aware of the need to upgrade devices and there are about 200 devices that cannot be used with Windows 11.</p> <p><b><i>The committee asked whether there was a long term capital development plan setting out what needs to be done in order of priority, so that what can be afforded gets done.</i></b></p> <p>This is not available yet but is something that the Trust would like to do, to be clear about the gap between funding and the amount of spending required. The Trust is more reactive than proactive at the moment. The Trust has recent conditions surveys for some schools and is currently focussing on what schools are aware of in the short term. That includes IT as well as boilers and kitchen equipment. Chickerell fire system was a failed CIF bid.</p> <p>P Walker explained that the Trust had started several operational panels this year where requests for various areas of spending are reviewed (around standards, premises and AP) to help manage spending.</p> <p><u>GAG statements for 2025-26:</u></p> <p>M Platten reported that these showed an average increase for Devon schools of about 0.5%, 2.1% for Dorset schools and 1.36% for Plymouth schools. These are small increases which means that the 2025-26 budget position is more challenging than expected. The finance team and Trust SLG will start looking at structures and how the spend for the planned structures compare to the funding.</p> <p>The committee was reminded that all primary MATs are in a similar, challenging situation and having to cut back.</p> <p><b><i>The committee queried whether there was any school that is particularly causing concern in terms of budget.</i></b></p> <p>There are some schools where there are opportunities, particularly the larger schools.</p> <p>The March letter for accounting officers about the ESFA was circulated and noted by the committee.</p>	
<p><b>6. To review and discuss the Director of People and Operations (DoPO) report</b></p> <p>The DoPO report (which was accidentally dated January rather than March) and completed SRM self-assessment tool checklist were circulated ahead of the meeting.</p> <p><u>Sidmouth:</u></p> <p>A Gavin highlighted that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Project timings have been extended again. 11<sup>th</sup> May 2026 is now the earliest time that children could be on site, due to the time taken to complete financial checks on potential bidders.</li> <li>• She had followed up the timeliness of information and the timeline has been adjusted so that information can come back to the next meeting of the committee on 8<sup>th</sup> May.</li> <li>• It is Likely that tenders will come over budget, but hopefully not as much as before, thanks to the changes in specification.</li> </ul> <p><u>Acorn websites provider:</u></p>	<p><b>Appendices 8 – 9</b></p>

<p>The committee agree to use Cleverbox, the current provider for the schools that transferred from Acorn, as a single supplier to bridge the gap between the end of the current contract and the tender for all the Trust websites, in order not to incur additional costs.</p> <p><b>The committee queried whether the current provider of the other Trust websites, PrimarySite, will continue to support the current sites.</b></p> <p>They are now part of Juniper and will not update the structure of the Primary Site websites but are providing general support.</p> <p><b>The committee enquired about the migration to Arbor (from SIMS).</b></p> <p>From the day of this meeting, schools were no longer entering new information into SIMS. The migration was going OK, although there were some issues linked to API (which transfer information between platforms), as well as unexpected costs to transfer the links to ParentPay (which is part of the same company as SIMS). These costs are currently being negotiated.</p> <p><b>The committee probed around the audit to be undertaken by RM, as they thought connectivity had already been audited.</b></p> <p>Connectivity into the school has already been audited, but this audit is about connectivity within the schools.</p> <p><b>The committee checked whether the support from Moxton was additional to what has already been agreed.</b></p> <p>It is not additional, the Trust is only progressing the support agreed with the committee.</p> <p>The meeting went into Part II to discuss a staffing matter.</p> <p>The meeting went into Part I.</p>	
<p><b>7. Policies and compliance, to include a review the Trust risk register</b></p> <p>The policies and compliance report and the latest version of the Trust risk register were circulated ahead of the meeting as were the proposed updated staff code of conduct and flexible working policy.</p> <p>The updated staff code of conduct and flexible working policies were agreed by the committee.</p> <p>The committee reviewed the Trust risk register and agreed not to amend it as financial risk was already on the register and scored high.</p>	<p><b>Appendix 10</b></p>

Meeting times: start: 6 pm, end: 7. 21 pm

Date of next meeting: 8<sup>th</sup> May 2025, 6 pm

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

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

**Date:**.....