

**Strategic & Finance Committee meeting
Held on 29 January 2026 at 5 pm, via Teams
Draft Minutes**

Present: P Walker (CEO), M Williams, A Walmsley (chair), and A Denner
In attendance: M Platten (Director of Finance - DoF), H Warren (Director of Operations - DoO) and I Candy (Lead Governance Professional - LGP)

Quorum: the meeting is quorate

Circulation: Directors (through GovernorHub), FFT website

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| | Decision | | Action due |
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| 1. Welcome & apologies | |
| Apologies were received from I Thomas (work commitment) | |
| 2. Declaration of Conflict of Interests | |
| Declarations of conflicts of interests were invited by the chair. None was made. | |
| 3. Minutes of the last meeting of the S&F committee | |
| 3.1. To approve the minutes of the last meetings of the committee (held on 20 Nov 2025) | |
| The draft minutes of the last meetings were circulated ahead of this meeting. They 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 not otherwise on the agenda was circulated ahead of the meeting. The only matter arising not on the agenda or not completed was around circulating information about pay progression, in order to validate the information shared at the October meeting. | Appendix 1 I Candy |
| 4. To receive and discuss the DoF report, to include: | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Management accounts for Nov 2025 | |
| <p>The DoF report and Jan 2026 management accounts were circulated ahead of the meeting.</p> <p><u>Management accounts:</u> The DoF highlighted that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The management accounts showed a small surplus currently, which was slightly ahead of budget. This may not be a marked improvement, but there was no indication of any forthcoming issues. Most schools were tracking really close. There were some schools which were tracked centrally, due to supply and alternative provision costs. These showed a variance which was balanced by the FFT corresponding budget line. There were no significant issues to follow up but the team would keep reviewing any significant variance. The LGPS employer contribution were due to decrease and therefore the forecast was still broadly accurate. The next forecast would be done in March. <p>The committee enquired how the restructure was working and how new schools were bedding in.</p> <p>The addition of the most recent joiners made the Trust more viable. These new schools were bedding in well. There had been some changes in personnel in</p> | Appendices 2 - 3 |

some of these schools which had allowed structures to be amended so they were more in line with the standard FFT structures.

The new operations team structure seemed to be more effective and working well. Schools had not reported any issues about the change. It felt like this structure has been in place for a long time. The role of school support manager, which had been the least defined role, seemed to be working very well although there was still some work to do around that position in order to continue developing the structure to ensure it worked efficiently at scale across the Trust. For example, around the school census, the link with the school administrators and signposting. The head of estates had had a busy week due to the heavy rain and flooding.

The chair reported that he had met with the DoF around the management accounts and had discussed the variance linked to alternative provision costs.

The chair queried whether the Trust had further considered developing an internal provision to mitigate costs and to provide a better provision to pupils who needed it.

The CEO felt the Trust would be able to develop an offer, but this would require investing at the detriment of retaining an acceptable level of reserves, therefore it was not the right time to do this. Geographical spread was also an issue which made this more complex, as the provision would need to be flexible and agile. The Trust would keep reviewing the situation in terms of finance. It would be more beneficial to target resources earlier to prevent the need for alternative provision where currently the Trust needed alternative provision for children with complex needs. The Trust was developing various provisions like SEND bases or similar arrangements as a way to do this. It was unfortunate that decisions were being dictated by costs rather than needs currently, across the system.

In reply to a comment highlighting the surplus space in some of the Trust schools currently, the CEO further explained that there had not been a geographical cluster of needs, therefore it would not be appropriate to develop a provision in a set geographical area.

The committee probed whether this could be done by cooperating with other trusts / schools. For example, in Plymouth where there would be more needs because of the size of the city.

The CEO explained that the FFT was exploring options with other trusts, e.g. in Exmouth, around place-based planning. In some places, there was a range of views, needs and internal capacity. There was currently no agreed definition of inclusion in Devon which was not helpful. As there were fewer alternative provision places than were needed, it was a providers' market which made cost control difficult. The DoF commented that it would be difficult to find money to invest in this because reserves were below 5% currently. However, the Trust may be able to identify opportunities during the year to enable this despite the background of decreasing pupil numbers. This would continue to be kept under close review.

2024-25 accounts:

The DoF confirmed that these had been submitted to the DfE and filed with Companies House.

FSM auto-enrolment:

The committee asked about the impact of the additional funding generated through free school meals auto-enrolment in Devon for the FFT Devon schools' budget.

The CEO explained that the rate of PP funding was increasing, the funding per free school meals was also higher and the increase in eligible pupils through auto-enrolment would also drive the deprivation factors in the budget. It was therefore not clear yet how that would translate into the funding for schools, across the Trust. Another factor impacting the budget of the Devon schools would be the 0.5% transfer into the high need block that had been confirmed on the day of this meeting.

5. To receive and discuss the DoPO report

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| <p>To include updates on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IT transformation • Procurement planning • Estates • Health & Safety • HR • School support priorities • Marketing and communications | |
| <p>The DoO report together with a list of prioritised IT infrastructure projects were circulated ahead of the meeting.</p> <p>The DoO explained that, as she had recently started her post, she had aimed for a comprehensive overview in order to have a baseline.</p> <p><u>IT:</u></p> <p>The DoO reported that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IT was a significant aspect for the Trust. • The IT connectivity work (the main and back up lines being into schools being installed) was around 80% completed. Where it had not yet been done, this was because it was logistically more challenging. • The Trust would be getting quotes for the six top priority schools highlighted in the list which had initially been based on the age of infrastructure and had been reprioritised where necessary to take into account the impact of any issues (for example the impact of issues at Blackpool and Brixington on the central team). The other priority schools were Chickerell, Gatehouse, Hawkchurch and Charmouth. • The head of procurement and the DoO were meeting monthly with the RM project lead around the managed service provision (i.e, IT support tickets). This included going through a detailed report including ticket priority levels. They had also been looking at the type of enquiries, which showed that many could be resolved with some staff IT training. • They were also monitoring and tracking any SLA breaches (for which the Trust would get credit back). There had been nine apparent ones, but these had been due to third party equipment which RM was not responsible for. • Changes around filtering and monitoring were also progressing well. A demo attended by the Trust safeguarding lead had taken place the day of the meeting. The Trust safeguarding lead had been happy with what had been shared. • The DoO was also keen to put a strategy in place for staff and pupil devices, including things like screens in school, in order to have a plan in place to replace equipment. This would include having a typical offer for staff depending on their role and for classes, which would be really helpful in order to help make better informed decisions over time. The first meeting of the IT group was due to take place the week after this meeting to help feed the voice of stakeholders into the planning. • 400 chromebooks had been ordered. It had been confirmed on the day of this meeting that those would be delivered at the Blackpool office the week after this meeting. Schools would be informed when the devices had been set up. • The DoO had looked at priority schools in terms of devices, separately from the infrastructure priorities. She was working with schools and RM around the number of current devices. The aim would be initially to have one device for three pupils, so schools that were not near to that ratio would be prioritised. The Trust would then aim to go for a 1 to 2 ratio, then 1 to 1 ratio over time, as funding allowed. <p>The committee queried whether there was a budget for the infrastructure work.</p> <p>The DoF explained that some capital funding had been set up aside to do this. The amount of the next SCA (School Capital Allocation) should be known around March. The Trust was hoping to use DFC (Devolved Formula Capital)</p> | <p>Appendices 4 – 5</p> |

funding on devices and a portion of the SCA on infrastructure works. More information around this would be shared at the next meeting of the committee.

DoO / DoF

The committee enquired whether there was a business continuity plan in place should the system go down at Brixington and/or Blackpool.

The DoO explained that RM reacted quickly when there were issues. However, the equipment was really old and therefore could only be patched.

The committee probed what the time scale was for the top three priority schools.

This would be known once the quotes were available as the DoO was not sure how much the total cost would be. In addition, it would take time to work through because the nature of the work would impact when it could be done. The team would look at spreading the work and therefore spreading the impact in the best possible way. The DoO was aware that Brixington needed to be actioned as soon as possible as there were issues within the school as well as issues affecting the central team. She was also aware of the issues at Chickerell. The operations team wanted to have schools able to function at their best. It was about managing expectations, sharing the progress made and people seeing it happen.

The chair commented that during due diligence conversations, Chickerell had pointed out that they had been prioritising people over IT. Nevertheless, IT needed improving there.

The DoO was aiming to balance all the IT elements for maximum benefit. Whilst devices were very visible, the infrastructure improvement was less visible but critical to ensure devices were fully usable.

Contracts being worked through:

The DoO highlighted significant contracts that were due for renewal in the short to medium term, in line with her report, and the likely scrutiny thresholds and timings. In particular:

- The external DPO contract was due to be renewed with effect from April.
- Legal and HR services currently procured through PHP, and the process to follow around renewing these services.
- Catering, which would be the next big focus, around whether it was better to have this in-house or external, as there was a real mix of offer currently withing the Trust. This would involve looking at risks in terms of food safety and provision, how these were managed currently by the different providers and developing the assurance framework around this.

The aim of the DoO would be to avoid having additional meetings to deal with specific procurement and ensure information was provided in a timely manner, at the appropriate authorisation level for the value of the contract.

Estates:

The DoO highlighted that the building project at Sidmouth was currently on track for completion in May, but this may be affected by the latest poor weather. The last site meeting provided reassurance around finances and the work being on track. The DfE was keen to monitor this closely because this had been progressing over several financial years.

The chair reminded the committee that the Trust had been told the funding would not be increased. The DoF explained there was an ongoing exercise of value engineering and therefore the Trust was hoping the costs would within the quote when the work was completed. The school may be able to reuse some existing equipment, but the Trust may need to use some capital investment to that end.

Health & Safety:

Significant non-conformity items from the H&S reviews at Marshwood and Loders were shared with the committee.

The DoO explained that she had asked for a report from OSHEN (the system used to record H&S issues) and this had highlighted an inconsistency of reporting between schools. She wanted to be able to look at trends and therefore mitigate those, especially where this affected staff wellbeing. The

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| <p>information from OSHEN could be cross matched with HR data around absence for example. She was current working on identifying what data was available, and what should be collected in order to inform the Trust strategy.</p> <p><u>Workforce strategy:</u> The DoO highlighted that developing a workforce strategy was important because staff had a significant impact on the delivery of education and were a significant part of spending. This would be involve working with the Director of Performance and Development and Head of HR and should be data driven. The committee thanked the DoO for her helpful, thorough report, reflecting the amount of work done, and which was helping them to have more confidence around processes.</p> | |
| <p>6. Policies and compliance</p> | |
| <p>The policies and compliance report was circulated ahead of the meeting, as were the proposed policies.</p> <p><u>Capability policy and hybrid working policy:</u> It was highlighted that both policies were due for review and had been amended to reflect new job titles and legislative changes. In the capability policy, a point had been added in section 8 around the referral to occupational health to help clarify this. In the hybrid working policy, some clarity around the roles within the central team had been added. PHP had worked on policies to reflect legislative changes and make sure that they continued to link well.</p> <p>The capability policy and the hybrid working policy were approved by the committee.</p> <p><u>Debt recovery policy:</u> It was highlighted that this had been updated to reflect new job titles and roles, clarify each stage and to introduce a document to better track this. Debts that were below £500 would be managed operationally. Debts over £500 would come to the committee to decide. The aim of the policy was to reduce the likelihood of the Trust having bad debts.</p> <p>The committee queried whether this had been an issue. There were a few concerns in some schools, but amounts were small. The updated policy and tracker document would mean that the central team would be able to oversee this more efficiently as this would form part of the monthly finance officer monitoring.</p> <p>The debt recovery policy was approved by the committee.</p> <p><u>Trust risk register:</u> The committee reviewed the latest version of the Trust risk register policy and agreed that it did not need to be amended. It was pointed out that whilst cybersecurity insurance had been added as a mitigating measure for the cybersecurity risk, it had not yet been obtained.</p> <p><u>Availability of information:</u> The chair explained he wanted to check committee members feedback on having the occasional paper at short notice. Committee members felt that they were understanding of having a small amount of information at short notice, where this was unavoidable as long as the majority of the information was available in good time.</p> | <p>Appendix 6</p> |

Meeting times: start: 6.35 pm, end: 7.42 pm
Date of next meeting: 29 Jan 2026

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

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