Strategic & Finance Committee meeting
Held on 19th March 2026 at 5 pm
in person or via Teams
Draft Part I Minutes

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

In attendance: H Warren (Director of Operations – DoO), M Platten (Director of Finance – DoF) and I Candy (Lead Governance Professional, LGP)

Quorum: the meeting is quorate

Circulation: Directors (through GovernorHub), FFT website

	Decision		Action due

Note: agenda items were discussed in a different order from the planned agenda, as indicated in the minutes.

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 meeting of the committee (held on 29 Jan 2026)	
The draft minutes of the last meeting 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 following matters arising were raised and discussed: • Assurance on pay progression for teachers: the LGP will circulate a report to provide assurance on the process after the meeting. • Marshwood lease: the CEO will follow up on this with PHP as no update had been provided.	**Appendix 1** **LGP** **CEO**
4. To receive and discuss the CEO report	
This agenda item was discussed at the end of the meeting to fit with the CEO availability and location. The CEO report was circulated ahead of the meeting. Growth: The meeting went into Part II to discuss an expression of interests from an East Devon school. The meeting went back into Part I. RISE support at Exeter Road: The CEO reported that the first formal meeting to monitor the support provided by the Trust to Exeter Road as part of the RISE offer (not the joint management partnership) had taken place. It had been a positive meeting, and the RISE project lead had been pleased by the progress made. The next monitoring visit was likely to take place in late June. Class structures for 2026-27:	 **Appendix 2**

The CEO highlighted that: • He would provide more detailed information about this in due course. • Currently, he was considering that the Trust could lose up to seven classes, depending on staffing and the situation of the schools in terms of the distribution of pupils across year groups and permanent vs temporary staffing. • The Trust had been planning to lose classes in Dawlish but were contacted by Devon County Council around providing more classes because of growth locally and offering to provide growth funding for an additional KS2 class for the summer term and then an additional KS1 class and one KS2 class for September. The Trust wad due to look at growth over time in term of opening additional classes and recruiting additional teachers to cover the growth in pupils. Currently, there were seven pupils on the waiting list for Gatehouse. This could also lead to additional growth funding in time because of the increase in pupil numbers. • So the Trust may lose six or seven classes but gain two or three in Dawlish. Ofsted MAT inspections: The CEO reported that he had attended a session about MAT inspections and what they would cover, and he would share more details around this.	 **CEO**
5. To receive and discuss the DoF report To include: • Jan 2026 management accounts • Update on funding for 2026-27	
The DoF report and January 2026 management accounts were circulated ahead of the meeting. January forecast and management accounts: The DoF highlighted that the Trust had recorded a small surplus in January and was anticipating in January a small end-of-year surplus of £75k, approximately £122k ahead of the budget. The most material reason was back-dated EHCP funding. Other reasons included for the variance included additional grant income received for ECT mentors and wraparound care, and a delay in the RM work around connectivity affecting expenditure. ***The committee queried whether the Trust should have been less cautious in its budget setting, given that it had made some decisions based on an expected in-year budget deficit.*** The DoF did not think that the Trust had been too prudent as some of these changes were difficult to predict. The team would need to look at nursery and EHCP funding to be able to forecast this better in future, although EHCP funding would change in Devon next year, which would not help with predictions. The change in the central team structure should also help towards having a better understanding. In any case, the Trust needed to look at rebuilding reserves because current reserves were below the DfE recommended threshold. March forecast: The DoF explained the chart circulated which showed the change from the November to the March forecast: • The change in support staff costs was mainly linked to the change (i.e. reduction) in employer pension contribution which resulted from the latest actuarial valuation of the pension funds. Changes in support staff costs also included the removal of the bottom pay point in the pay scale and moving by one pay point up the pay scale. • Key movements around income were: o Nursery and wraparound income, ECT mentor grants, growth funding for Rockbeare (triggered by the school having at least 10 pupils more on roll than in the census) where the Trust had employed an additional teacher at the start of the year because of putting in place an additional class to help meet local demand.	**Appendices 3 - 4**

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Whilst the Trust would normally be behind the budget at this point for nurseries, it was on budget currently.
Back dated high need funding for specific children and also some additional funding to reflect higher SEND numbers than expected in the funding formula. However, additional EHCPs funding was offset by additional staffing costs.
Donations but that income was normally matched by expenditure.
The Trust aim to use DFC funding for repairs and maintenance where possible. (For example, DFC cannot be used for surveys around the work that needed to be done.)
Some energy cost savings made by changing providers to the DfE scheme, although future energy costs may be affected by current world events.
Delay in IT work completion

There were also some Alternative Provisions risks where costs may be reimbursed by the LA in future.
The DoF highlighted that forecast was currently showing a £169K surplus at the end of the year, which if realised would help to increase reserves to about 4.3%.
The chair of the committee highlighted that the Trust had been contacted by the DfE around its existing level of reserves to ask whether the Trust would be interested in an SRMA deployment to help address this. The Trust had politely declined the offer given that the Trust already had plans in place to address the level of reserves and previous SRMA deployment had not been found to be particularly beneficial in practice.
The committee queried whether the costs for the IT work were delayed, i.e. the Trust would have to pay these costs at a later date, rather than costs being lower overall.
The DoF explained that because contract costs were higher in the first year of the RM contract, the Trust should see a saving vs expected.
<u>Budget for 2026-27:</u>
The DoF reported that:

The Trust had received the GAG statements for 2026-27, and these were in line with expectations in terms of pupil numbers and funding increase. They meant a 3% increase in income from 2025-26 overall for the Trust.
The percentage of pay rises for staff was likely to be linked to the level of inflation. The Trust may benefit from additional grants if the increases were significantly more than expected from the previous pay settlement, but this would not be known until late in the budgeting process.
It was useful to be part of the Queen Street Group network around likely pay rises and reasonable budget assumptions.

The CEO explained that the next steps would be looking at matching class structures to pupil numbers. The Trust was expecting some additional funding for the Dawlish schools to match local demand.
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6. To receive and discuss the DoO report
To include updates on:

Estates including H & S
Procurement
IT (including digital standards)
School support
Marketing
HR

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<tr><td>The DoO report was circulated ahead of the meeting, together with information about the progress made on ICT work, quotes for backups, and a proposal to continue with the strategic IT support from Moxton.</td><td>Appendices 5 – 8</td></tr>
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The DoO explained that although she had aimed to keep her report as succinct as possible, the level of detail in her report reflected the amount of work being done by the operations team and was based on the input from the team. As set out in the report, some items were shared for information and some required decisions from the committee. <u>Estates:</u> The DoO pointed out that: • The most significant matters were about Mrs Ethelston's, Rockbeare and Newton Ferrers: • The survey report for Mrs Ethelston's had now been received and this would enable informed decision planning. • At Rockbeare, the Trust was chasing the planning permission for the new mobile classroom with the project manager. • The DoO was also working on the DfE estates strategy and had attended a webinar about it. Her aim was to keep ahead and align the work that needs to be done in schools with the DfE approach. It currently looked like the Trust timelines were more defined than the DfE ones. Data was being collated so that it was available centrally to inform likely expenditure. Data was also being RAG rated to help prioritise work and hopefully catch things before they deteriorated too much. This took time and was likely to match what the DfE would require trusts to provide. ***The committee asked how the DoO understood the priority and key items, and how these could be planned for the long term.*** The team was trying to keep a balance between small ticket items, for example fixing gutters to stop further building deterioration, and larger ticket items such as roofs, boilers, windows. All 'large ticket' items currently known about were included in the prioritised list of work that needed to be done but there may some more. ***The committee enquired how the costs for these items fitted with the capital budget.*** The DoO explained that some work was funded through specific grants, such as nursery grants. Some work was earmarked through the SCA, DFC and other funding. The DoF confirmed that significant items were included in the budget. The DoO commented that the QSG have useful groups about IT/cybersecurity and estates. ***The committee queried why the Trust did not know about everything that needed to be done in terms of estate.*** It was about collating information into a considered plan, from the knowledge held at each individual school. This would then enable well informed decision making, based on the funding available and therefore what could be afforded. <u>Sidmouth project:</u> The DoO reported that: • The project had been delayed by about three weeks due to poor weather. This had affected the building of the retaining wall and the area had been flooded, although it had been possible to divert some of the work to make progress on the internal improvements to the existing building. • The DO had however been able to see a difference during her last site visit. For example, there had been visible additions such as flooring and cabling. [The CEO left the meeting briefly at this point]. • The Trust was working closely with Norse and adjusting the work based on what was found as the building project progressed, including some areas outside of the scope of the project. • Costs were being monitored very closely, and some areas were likely to be less costly than anticipated.	

- The work was likely to finish at the end of June rather than the end of May, so the Trust would need to look at the work needed to move equipment and furniture to ensure the building was ready at the start of the next school year.

Catering:

The DoO highlighted that the current Trust offer was spread across internal provision and several external providers, which allowed to compare options. She would continue to work on this and look at the benefits of moving the provision in house, which went beyond purely financial considerations and could affect the curriculum and engagement with children. In time she would need a steer from the committee around the strategic intent.

A trustee commented that having food grown on site could be a selling point for schools and for parents. There could also be an opportunity in terms of selling services outside the Trust,

IT:

The DoO highlighted that:

- Most points in her report around this were shared for information around the progress made.
- Most devices have been delivered to schools. Eight schools had been given significant numbers of devices to help increase the ratio of devices to pupils.
- Chickerell devices remained to be done because their Office tenancy was currently still separate from the FFT. There were also concerns about connectivity there because it was poor. Both were being worked on. A trustee explained that the IT provision had been raised as part of hub board. The head was happy with the plan in place but was concerned about the impact on education, in particular on multiplication table tests, because pupils could not use an online platform to practice.
- The costs of IT infrastructure equipment were increasing rapidly and significantly. For example, the same order of chromebooks would now cost £28K more. Therefore, the Trust was keen to purchase necessary infrastructure now to avoid increases in costs and also secure supply. The committee agreed with this approach to help secure best costs and availability.
- Work around filtering and monitoring was continuing. New platforms were due to be rolled out to pilot schools the week after this meeting. The Trust safeguarding lead and the Trust safeguarding network had been included in the decision making. Providing all went well, the rollout would continue across the whole Trust.
- RM had provided a comparison of prices for the backups that were necessary for the Trust, as current arrangements were not fully adequate. Moxton had agreed with the recommendation to use Redstart as costs were value for money. The committee agreed to proceed with this at cost of approximately £41K including VAT. ***In response to a question from the committee***, it was confirmed that there had been a general allocation in the budget for IT infrastructure, but this had not specifically included backups.
- The first Trust IT strategy session had taken place, which RM representatives had attended in person. They were due to attend the Education Leadership Team meeting the week after this meeting to discuss the teaching & learning aspects of this.
- The extension of the Trust contract with Moxton until September 2026 (i.e a six month extension) was recommended to the committee because the current contract ended at the end of March and the Head of Procurement and Resources was leaving the Trust at the end of April for a new job in a different location. Therefore the risk was that the Trust would lose momentum on progressing IT matters through both of these happening at the same time. The vacancy for the Head of IT and Procurement had been advertised, with a section added to the role

around IT and DfE digital standards, and an updated title to better reflect the current split of work which includes a significant amount of work around IT procurement. Several applications had already been received ahead of the deadline. The committee agreed to extend the contract with Moxton for 6 months on the terms proposed by the DoO. • The committee asked for their thanks to be passed onto A Bremner for all she has done for the organisation. Websites: The new, much improved, Trust website was up and running. Updated school websites for all Trust schools were due to follow. HR: The DoO pointed out that her report had included data around HR, although the format would be reviewed to make it easier to analyse. The DoO reported that the pay gap report had been published on the Trust website and filed. External risk assessments for Health & Safety: The DoO explained that the Trust was waiting for guidance from Devon around fire risk assessments. A trustee explained that the new guidance was likely to have a significant cost implication which would need to be prioritised because expectations had changed. The committee thanked the DO for her thorough report and the strategic approach to it.	**DoO**
7. Policies and compliance	
The policies and compliance report was circulated ahead of the meeting, as were the proposed policies and the latest version of the Trust risk register. The DoO pointed out that PHP had recommended adding information about accrued annual leave to the family friendly policy. The Trust also needed to clarify within the staff expenses policy that all staff expense claims should be submitted within the financial year. Gifts, hospitality and entertaining policy: The committee noted the changes to clarify the scope of he policy and reflect the current business team structure and approved this policy. Career break policy: The committee noted that only minor changes had been made and approved this policy. Grievance policy: The committee noted that only minor changed had been made and a new appendix setting out the suggested format of grievance meetings had been added and approved this policy. Lettings: The committee noted this had been updated to reflect the current business team structure and approved this policy. Family friendly policy: This covered maternity, paternity, adoption, parental leave, shared parental leave, and neo-natal leave and pay and replaced two separate policies. The committee noted that changes had been made to reflect current employment rights and the current business team structure. The committee approved this policy subject to the information about accrued leave being added to the policy as recommended by PHP. Sexual harassment policy: As this would be a new policy, the template for this policy had been shared with the committee to check whether they agreed with the principles within it, with a view that the finalised policy would be submitted to the full board for approval. The committee recommended that: • The policy be amended to clarify who the "we" currently mentioned was.	**Appendix 9** **DoO**

• It was made clear that the policy was part of the broader context of the Trust having a safe environment where it is acceptable to raise issues or concerns, regardless of whether they are linked to sexual harassment or not. • It would be clarified who the policy applied to. Staff are able to complain about third parties such as staff from agencies or contractors, but the Trust is not able to impose its policies on third parties (unless the matters complained about fall within the framework of a mandatory framework such as Keeping Children Safe in Education). The DoO explained that the template had come from PHP and she would follow up the feedback from the committee with them as part of finalising the policy. Staff expenses policy: The committee noted that the policy had been updated to reflect the current business team structure and add clarification around what expenses would and would not be reimbursed and minimum/maximum amounts. The committee approved this policy, subject the clarification that all staff expense claims needed to be submitted within the financial year they related to. Staff sickness absence policy: The committee noted that the policy had been updated to reflect the current central staff structure as well as number of aspects such as the absence thresholds that would trigger sickness absence meetings. The committee approved this policy. Trust risk register: It was agreed that this would be reviewed at the audit & risk committee meeting that was due to take place immediately after this meeting.	**DoO** **DoO/DoF**

Meeting times: start: 5.05 pm, end: 6.29 pm

Date of next meeting: 14 May 2026

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

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