Strategic & Finance Committee meeting
Held on 14th May 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

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 19 March 2026)	
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 following matters arising were raised and discussed: • <u>Charmouth church lease</u>: PHP are still due to report on this, possibly because this is more complex in terms of building than first expected. • <u>Information about pay progression:</u> a summary setting out the number of teachers eligible for pay progression who had progressed (on the Main Pay Scale - MPS) or applied to progress (to or on the Upper Pay Scale - UPS), and the number who had received a pay increment, by school and as a total for the Trust, was circulated ahead of the meeting, together with assurance information about the process. ***The committee enquired why 17 teachers across the Trust had not applied to progress to the UPS. In some schools, there was a mix of people who applied and did not apply but in one school none of the eligible teachers applied.*** Generally, this was because teachers did not want to take on additional responsibilities. The school where no eligible staff applied was a former Acorn school and this was likely to have been because	**Appendix 1** **Appendix 2**

of this trust having a different culture historically, which would take time to change. • <u>Report from the Ofsted MAT inspection training session</u>: the CEO explained that the slides from the sessions had not been shared with attendees. The session covered early proposals around how a MAT inspection would differ from school inspections (and the options included other areas which were already checked in a different way e.g. through external audit). Another session was due to take place in July. MAT inspections were currently not likely to start for at least two school years. ***The committee queried whether Ofsted was planning to develop a framework for MAT inspections following a similar format to the existing one for schools.*** This was the plan and developing this would be a significant piece of work. The framework would have to be different to previous MAT evaluations because these were time consuming, which would mean that the frequency of MAT inspections would be very low. A trustee reported that, at a recent inspection they had taken part in for a different trust, the Ofsted inspector had asked questions around finances. This was linked to issues around a site needing some significant investment.	
4. To receive and discuss the CEO report To include: • Update on growth • Update on class structures	
The CEO report was circulated ahead of the meeting. <u>Growth:</u> The meeting went into Part II to discuss potential growth. The meeting went back into Part I. <u>Staffing:</u> The meeting went into Part II to discuss a recent school leadership change. The meeting went back into Part I. The CEO highlighted that: • The head at Willowbank had had her baby. S Bomby who came from a school in Exeter was covering the maternity leave and had settled well. • N Carvell had been appointed to take over from N Brooks at Budeaux from September 2026. <u>School structures:</u> The CEO highlighted that: • The central team had started to look at class structures based on existing pupil numbers and also on the demand for school places in a few locations. • Gatehouse was likely to grow because of growth funding linked to the LA anticipating demand for local places, and the Trust was working closely with the LA around this. • The Trust was currently looking at reducing the total number of classes across the Trust by nine classes. The meeting went into Part II to discuss a staffing matter at one school linked to a potential reduction in class numbers. The meeting went back into Part I. ***The committee checked whether the Trust had full clarity about pupil numbers for next year.*** Information about currently anticipated numbers would be provided by the CEO following the meeting. ***The committee asked what reduction in pupil numbers the Trust was expecting next year (due to Year 6 cohorts being larger than Reception cohorts).***	**Appendix 3** **CEO**

692 Year 6 pupils were due to transfer to secondary school at the end of the year and the Trust was currently anticipating 478 pupils in Reception, therefore expecting a reduction of 214 pupils, although reception numbers had increased since the numbers were first collated.	
5. To receive and discuss the DoF report To include: • March 2026 management accounts • Indicative budget for 2026-27 • Capital spending plan	

The DoF report was circulated ahead of the meeting, together with a draft budget bridge graph, draft budget and SCA capital summary report.
<u>2025-26 Budget monitoring:</u>
The DoF highlighted that:
• March was the year end for the LAs and was used to produce the Budget Forecast Return (BFR), therefore figures for that month were particularly significant.
• The Trust was currently anticipating a £200K in-year surplus. This would mean reserves of £1.5M at the end of August, which was around 4.5% of income, and therefore close to the DfE recommended 5% threshold.
<u>Budget for 2026-27:</u>
The DoF highlighted that:
• The bridge graph described key movements compared to the second year of the budget agreed in July 2025.
• The sector was still waiting for some information around pay scale changes. Therefore, these had been estimated.
• The deadlines for staff resignations that would impact staffing for next year had not passed, therefore there may be more staff movement.
• The Trust was also waiting for information around the Inclusive Mainstream Fund. Therefore, the amount that the schools would receive had been estimated.
• There were some risks around premises and insurance.
• Currently the budget for 2026-27 was showing a £200K in-year deficit estimated but this may improve. There may be some savings on staffing costs due to resignation. Prudent assumptions were made around likely staff increases and potential part funding by the DfE. The amount of Inclusive Mainstream Fund may be higher than estimated. These three areas combined should result in a small surplus potentially, although there were some risks, for example, around having more employees on maternity leave that anticipated.
• He had wanted to share the emerging picture to build reassurance.
The committee commented that it would be helpful to have more advance notification from the DfE of income and pay scale increases, over several years, to help prepare three-year budgets.
<u>SCA (School Capital Allocation) funding:</u>
The DoF highlighted that:
• The 2026-27 SCA for the Trust had now been confirmed (£1.025M) and this was approximately £20K more than anticipated
• There would be £1.1M brought forward from the previous year's SCA. This was due to be spent on IT infrastructure and a range of larger and smaller projects. Approximately £190K had already been spent.
• SCA spending had been allocated or was earmarked as follows:
  o The replacement of the roof at Newton Ferrers (£435K)
  o Some smaller premises projects (£55K)
  o Installation of the IT hardware that had already been committed (£302K)
  o Estates work (£50K) at Mrs Ethelston's because of complex premise matters. It was confirmed that the building affected
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by the storm was back in use and the retaining wall had been stabilised. Surveys were being done to assess any further work required.
    o £100K to cover the shortfall between the DfE grant and LA funding for the Sidmouth project.
• If all earmarked projects were fully spent, this would leave £36K remaining of the 2025-26 SCA allocation.
• The team was currently planning to earmark the following expenditure for the 2026-27 SCA allocation:
    o Further IT infrastructure (this was likely to be ongoing over a period of several years).
    o Contingency planning
    o Some proactive work to avoid more costly repairs where possible. The operations team was looking at the condition of all schools and therefore how to prioritise what was needed. They had developed scoring mechanism to prioritise the list consistently and to keep the right order of priorities as more information became available.
The committee queried whether the Trust was anticipating any other significant issues of a similar scale to Newton Ferrers roof.
The team needed to look at what the next large project would be, preferably ahead of it being needed. The Trust had an aging estate which required remedial work. The DoO wanted to adopt a strategic approach over several years to gradually move from being reactive to being proactive The DoF added that the 2025-26 SCA allocation had been much higher than previous years, because of the increased minimum funding for small schools. This should enable the Trust to be more proactive in future.
The Trust also needed to use the funding within one year of it being granted (in tax years rather than school years), or risk it being clawed back unless the funds were earmarked for specific projects.
<u>Procurement</u>
The DoF reported that:
• The team had done some exploratory work around financial software, because the current contracts were due to expire in February 2027.
• There were some new products launched which would be worth investigating.
• Most trusts tended to use frameworks rather than tenders, and therefore he was recommending the Trust use a framework rather than a tender for procurement in this area.
• The team may be able to provide more detailed information around this for the July board meeting.
The committee agreed with this approach (using a framework rather than a tender to procure financial software).	

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	
The DoO report, quotes for the IT work required at Charmouth, information about the planned cybersecurity review, the consultation report for the relocation of the Axminster Hub and the reports for the recent H&S inspections at Musbury and Rockbeare were circulated ahead of the meeting. ***<u>Estates:</u>*** <u>Sidmouth built:</u>	**Appendices 8 - 12**

The DoO highlighted that: • The contingency built in the SCA budget was likely to be needed. • Having been affected by the particularly wet weather, the delivery date had now been further affected by the work that National Grid needed to do. National Grid had now finally confirmed they would start on 21 July; which meant the overall project timeline had been extended. The Trust was therefore proposing to delay the start of the year at the school by one day, for pupils to start on 8 September 2026, in order to have an extra day to make the site ready. • The deadlines for National Grid were outside of the control of the project manager (Norse) and building contractors (Skinners). • The Trust was carrying on with plans to clear Vicarage Road, keeping only what would be needed in future, and storing this organised by room, ready to open the Manstone Avenue site. The committee agreed to delay the start of the year by one day, so parents have time to adjust childcare, and there is an additional day to get the site ready. The DoO further reported that: • Mitigation plans were in place around moving back to the Vicarage Road site for a period of time, should the completion of the building work at the Manstone Avenue site slip further. • The Trust had also started to liaise with Exeter diocese around arrangements for the Vicarage Road site which is owned by the diocese. • There would be some changes in documentation such as the supplemental and church funding agreements, linked to the change. Rockbeare: ***The committee queried whether Devon County council would be meeting the full additional classroom costs.*** Devon CC had to confirm decisions at each stage of the process because they had their own approval process based on the information being provided around value for money and this sometime caused delay. The Trust was also still waiting for planning permission. The plan was still to have the classrooms ready to use in September. Mary Dean's: ***The committee enquired why the nursery bid for the school had been declined.*** The trust did not know why. This application round was led by the DfE. The next round would be led by the LA, and the Trust would be reapplying. The Trust was also planning to submit an expression of interests for St Budeaux. Devon County Council had also indicated that they were looking for additional nursery capacity in Dawlish. ***IT:*** Charmouth server: The DoO highlighted that: • The Trust had been aware that the server needed to be replaced but the server had now failed and therefore immediate remedial action was needed. • The Trust had obtained two quotes for moving the school IT to the cloud and also to upgrade some staff devices to facilitate this, which would improve the provision for the school significantly. • Although the amount was small and below the delegated threshold, this was brought to the attention of the committee because it had not been budgeted for. Cybersecurity audit: The DoO was still waiting for a quote which has been requested to complement the project information submitted.	

The proposed timing of cybersecurity audit would fit well with the start date of the new head of IT and procurement, J McKennan. ***<u>HR:</u>*** <u>Axminster hub change:</u> The committee appreciated the detailed report on the formal, in-depth consultation undertaken for this, to explore options and ensure staff concerns and questions were answered. The recommendations as the result of the consultation were: • Not to renew the lease for the current Axminster hub because there were appropriate spaces available within the current school estate, separate from the main school sites, where colleagues could be accommodated without incurring ongoing additional costs, and therefore this would enable the Trust to redirect some funding towards children. • For affected staff to be relocated to the location out of two options that was the most appropriate for them. Longer term, there were two rooms available in Sidmouth which would be ideal for Trust central team offices. In the shorter term, Charmouth had appropriate spaces that would help to accommodate the needs of existing employees in terms of commute time vs family commitments. The proposal was to use a mix of virtual and in-person approach to help meet employees' needs as well as business needs. The recommendations were approved by the committee. The DoO was thanked for the detailed, thoughtful work done around this. <u>Crisis management:</u> A date would be provided to hold a crisis management planning session looking at both strategic and operational levels. The DoO and CEO had already started some discussions around this and were aware that some matters that the session needed to cover would not necessarily be easy to discuss.	
7. Policies and compliance To include a review of the Trust risk register	
The policies and compliance report, proposed sexual harassment policy and the latest version of the Trust risk register were circulated ahead of the meeting. <u>Sexual harassment policy:</u> This had been finalised in response to the feedback previously given to the DoO. The policy was approved by the committee. The committee was informed that some policies were likely to be ready before its next meeting, and would be submitted for approval by written resolution if that was the case. <u>Trust risk register:</u> The committee reviewed the register and agreed that it did not need to be updated.	

Meeting times: start: 5 pm, end: 6.30 pm

Date of next meeting: Thu 2 July 2026 Post meeting an additional meeting was called and held on 18 June 2026]

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

Signed:………………………………………… Date:………………..

Chair of S&F committee