



Annual General Meeting MINUTES

13th January 2025
6.00pm

This meeting was held in person at Landscope School House with an option for some attendees to join the meeting via TEAMS

Members: Christina Mabin (CM) (EDEN) (TEAMS)
Gary Kinchin (GK) (Marjon) (TEAMS)
Peter Bethel (PB)
Isabel Cherrett (IC) (TEAMS)
Lucy Herring (LH) (YMCA) (TEAMS)

Trustees: Cheryl Mathieson (Chair)
Nicky Dunford (CEO)
Kate Evans (KE) (TEAMS) – former Standards & Curriculum Committee (S&CC) Chair
Dominic Course (DC) – Audit Committee (AC) Chair
Graeme Scott (GS)
Christine Cottle (CC) – Chair of S&CC

Officers: Charlotte Roe (GP) (Governance Professional)

No	Item	Action
1.	Welcome and apologies The Chair opened the meeting with a welcome. Apologies were received from Paul Waterworth and Ben Thorne – these were accepted by the meeting. The Chair welcomed Christina Mabin and Lucy Herring, who were standing in temporarily as Member representatives for EDEN and the YMCA respectively. Permanent representatives would be elected at the next Board meetings of both EDEN and the YMCA. Members, Trustees and the CEO introduced themselves. PART II was taken	
2.	Declarations of interest Isabel Cherrett has a family member who is the Trust Inclusion and Improvement Hub Manager. Peter Bethel is a trustee of Totnes Elizabethan Museum, Member of Totnes Rotary Club and Totnes Town Council Sergeant. The CEO is a Trustee for the Bearnes Education Foundation. Dominic Course is Chair of Governors at South Dartmoor Community College and a Director of DACORS Ltd. Graeme Scott is an employee and Executive Chairperson for educational software company, The Mario Framework. Kate Evans is Director for Education of The Good Shepherd MAT. Christina Mabin and Lucy Herring declared that for the purpose of this meeting, they were representing EDEN/YMCA as Corporate members and not in their professional paid employment.	
3.	Any other business No other business was brought forward.	

4.	<p>Approval of meeting minutes</p> <p>The Minutes of the General Meeting held on 15th July 2024 were accepted by the meeting as a true account and the Chair signed accordingly.</p> <p>Part II Minutes were circulated before the meeting.</p> <p>Members indicated they had questions relating to the Part II Minutes; it was agreed that these would be dealt with predominantly under Item 7. The Part II Minutes of 15 July 2024 were accepted by the meeting and signed by the Chair.</p>	
5.	<p>Matters Arising from Minutes held on 15th July 2024</p> <p>Item 6.1 Internal Audit Service</p> <p>Members had asked for an update on the provision of the Internal Audit Service provided by Westcotts. The Audit Committee (AC) Chair confirmed Westcotts had accepted the concerns raised by the Trustees and had agreed to ensure more senior officers handled the Trust's portfolio. In response, a senior officer had attended some of the Autumn Term Trustee meetings, focusing on how effective communication was across the Executive, Trustee committee and Board meetings. As the officer had commenced maternity leave, there was a delay in the completion of the analysis of their findings. The Audit Committee Chair would discuss with the CEO of Westcotts how the analysis could be progressed. Members asked to be updated on the position at the July 2025 General Meeting; internal audit was an important resource to provide assurance to the Trustees that governance arrangements, including those beyond finance, were effective to support decision-making.</p>	DC/GP
6.	<p>External Audit Service</p> <p>On 24 January 2023, Members had appointed Bishop Fleming LLP as External Auditors for the three years from 2023-24, the appointment being subject to an annual review based on performance in accordance with the Articles of Association.</p> <p>The AC Chair had circulated his report on the performance of the External Audit Service for the Link Academy Trust for 2023-24. This confirmed the service was thorough and benefited from sector expertise, the auditor understood the Trust and its activities, issues were raised in a timely way and audit recommendations were appropriate and low level. The Members thanked the AC Chair for his report and approved the recommendation that Bishop Fleming LLP be appointed to conduct the external audit of the Link Academy Trust for the financial year 2024-25.</p>	
7.	<p>7.1 Annual Report and Financial Statements for the year ended 31 August 2024</p> <p>The Chair confirmed that the financial statements and audited accounts for the year ended 31 August 2024 had been signed and lodged with Companies House, in accordance with the Academies' Trust Handbook. They were now available on the Trust's website. A business support update from the Deputy Chief Executive Officer (DCEO) summarising the financial position at the end of August 2024 had been circulated prior to the meeting.</p> <p>There followed a detailed discussion relating to the Annual Report and Financial Statements (AR&FS) and the DCEO'S business support update. The CEO confirmed that the reference in the Trustees' Report to 'existing academies' that joined the Trust related to Wolborough which joined in October 2023.</p> <p>Finance</p> <p>§ Reserves equated to 8 pc of turnover and although this was less than the previous year, it was at the upper end of the range recommended by the Department for Education (DfE). This level was questioned but the Trust was well within the guidance. Nationally, Trusts were challenged financially within the context of ongoing uncertainty about future funding. With so many calls on national funding, it was unlikely this uncertainty would lessen in the foreseeable future. The Link Academy Trust appeared to be more financially secure than others, as evidenced in the meetings of the Southwest Business Group which the DCEO chaired. Indeed, the Trust had been asked to share its good practice nationally.</p>	

§ Members and Trustees had discussed in previous meetings the level of reserves and the imperative to spend funds to benefit the pupils attending at that time. The Trust held comprehensive records of capital works requiring funding and had been successful in securing national funds to support capital improvements according to priority of condition and benefit to the number of pupils. The Capital Infrastructure Fund (CIF) which had provided much funding for new roofs, mechanical and electrical improvements was likely to cease, replaced with a fixed capital payment which may allow the Trust to plan and budget more precisely.

§ The meeting noted the deficit recovery plan for individual schools and the CEO confirmed this did not appear to be a disincentive for staff.

§ The meeting noted the small numbers of pupils in some schools and asked if there was a break-even point where future viability became an issue. The CEO and DCEO conducted a comprehensive review of the budget of incoming schools as part of the due diligence process and there was regular discussion with existing schools to ensure budgets were achievable. The Trust was committed to doing everything possible to ensure they remained open through the deployment of staff across schools, ensuring economy of scale and the ability to negotiate beneficial purchasing.

§ Kellogg's already funded some of the Breakfast clubs and the Trust would apply accordingly if any further funding was available.

Educational Data and progression

§ *How did governance monitor data relating to educational outcomes at Board and local level?*

The S&CC monitored data and focussed specifically twice a year in the Autumn and mid-year, but it was also a focus at each Committee meeting as well as the Local Advisory Committee (LAC) in each hub and the Executive Improvement Team (EIT). Key Stage 2 (KS2) data was also provided for Trustees in July each year.

A new data system had been commissioned and installed; this would provide greater, in-depth analysis across the Trust, as well as for specific groups such as Special Educational Needs & Disability (SEND), Pupil Premium and Looked After Children. It was surmised that data from the new schools may impact negatively on the Trust's overall position so an analysis of data of schools within the Trust for three or more years had been requested to assess whether this view was true. The system was in its first term and officers were confident it would provide clearer data to identify any trends.

Local governors undertook school visits in line with an annual agenda and data was a key element. Results were reported back through the LAC and then the S&CC, alongside a presentation or report from members of the EIT. The results did not always reflect a clear picture where there were very small class sizes; the lower performance of one or two children in a strong school could reduce the overall percentages significantly.

Nationally, the number of SEND pupils continued to increase and cases were becoming more complex. The Trust's ethos was one of inclusivity and its reputation reflected its success in keeping open very small schools for the benefit of their local community. This was attractive to parents where education could be tailored to meet children's needs. All schools were exploring ways to integrate SEND children into mainstream education; the Government was reviewing the availability of places within special education and SEND was high on the national agenda.

Aspirational targets for all schools had been set in September 2024 and the data would be scrutinised. The re-organisation of school improvement into three hubs enabled a stronger understanding of outcomes, trends and actions to raise standards. Ofsted no longer looked at internal data, but the CEO anticipated this may well change.

Growth of the Trust

§ CM said that the Diocese was hugely grateful to the Trust for taking on the four East Devon schools where the Trust's impact was already positive.

	<p>§ Members and Trustees agreed that the Trust should continue to take a cautious approach when considering growth. Officers should ensure that the Due Diligence process was sufficiently robust. The Trust had recently taken on four very small schools and Members were concerned that attention should not be diverted to these to the detriment of others. The CEO cited the example where she had stepped in personally for a term in the absence of the Executive Head of the four new schools in order that the EIT could remain focused on the schools within their respective hubs. The budgets of incoming schools were ring fenced to ensure they did not impact existing schools.</p> <p>§ Where possible, the Trust would only consider schools that were 'capacity givers' and, indeed, one school in this category had shown interest in joining. If this was successful, it would add to the Trust's capacity to deliver an outstanding provision. Each admission was considered on its merits and fit with the Trust's overall ethos, capacity and opportunity to bring it into a positive financial position.</p> <p>§ The division of the school improvement structure into three hubs ensured that staff wellbeing and capacity was recognised, as well as allowing closer monitoring and accountability. This change may have added to central costs but would be mediated by any additional schools recruited.</p> <p>§ The birth rate nationally had fallen and the shortfall between Year 6 Leavers and incoming Reception children was 38. Whilst new schools brought additional pupil numbers, Members and Trustees alike were concerned that falling rolls led to a reduction in overall numbers and income. The Trust's Admissions Committee met weekly and there was some interest from pupils considering leaving private education with the introduction of VAT on school fees. Academy Heads were focussed on increasing recruitment and, as an example, Branscombe had increased from six to 14 pupils in just one term. If the Government formalised home education, this may bring more pupils back into school. Parent and toddler groups were flourishing in all the schools.</p> <p>Other issues</p> <p>CM reminded Members and Trustees that governance training was offered by the Diocese as well as the other bodies referred to in the AR&FS.</p> <p>7.2 Summary of financial position at end of 2023-24</p> <p>A copy of the Annual Report and Financial Statements, together with a Financial Overview had been circulated with the agenda. This was discussed in Item 7.1.</p> <p>7.3 Summary of year to date, including update of current financial position</p> <p>A report was circulated by the CEO and questions were invited. The CEO said that one of the Trust's successes was attendance rates. <i>A Trustee asked whether the Trust's attendance data was lower than the national data and asked for a breakdown of authorised and non authorised absence, particularly persistent absence.</i> The CEO said that the overall attendance percentage was 95.54% (national average 94%) with persistent absence at 10.53% (national average 27%). The Chair said that in the last few OfSTED inspections, attendance had been judged as strong.</p>	
8.	<p>Governance</p> <p>8.1 Appointment of Members</p> <p>The Chair noted that Paul Reisbach had stepped down as the Member representative for the YMCA and that Pete Brown had stepped down as the Member representative for EDEN. The Chair formally thanked Paul for his support over the last three years and also thanked Pete for his support in the last year. The Chair added that the Trustees looked forward to working with the new Members to be elected by EDEN and the YMCA.</p> <p>Lucy Herring asked for an analysis of the Member's role for her to take to the YMCA Board meeting to help the members of their Board decide who would be the most appropriate representative for the Trust. The Governance Professional agreed to</p>	GP

	<p>send the analysis that Isabel Cherrett had prepared and which was agreed by the Members on 18th July 2022.</p> <p>8.2 Appointment/Re-election of Directors/Trustees</p> <p>Sarah Cox had decided not to seek a second four year term due to work commitments. The Chair thanked Sarah for her support and dedication, especially on the Audit Committee and with the risk register.</p> <p>Paul Waterworth's first term of office had expired and he had agreed to put himself forward for re-election as a Foundation Trustee. The Chair confirmed his valuable insights from a different perspective, from outside of education, and his legal background were very useful and he had made a positive impact over the last four years. The Trustees were supportive of Paul Waterworth being reappointed as a Foundation Trustee. Subject to the completion of the formal paperwork, the meeting supported his appointment for a second four-year term from January 2025.</p> <p>8.3 Local Advisory Committees</p> <p>The CEO had briefly covered local governance in her report and added that the new structure was shaping well and the Governors in post were more efficient and professional. In a recent inspection, the OfSTED inspector had commented on the strength of one of the local governors. There was now more consistency with their reporting making it easier for the Trustees to get a clearer picture of the individual schools across the Trust.</p> <p><i>The Members asked about the reporting of the Christian distinctiveness and who was responsible from a governance perspective?</i> The CEO said that Sharon Lord was leading the Ethos Groups with the Foundation governors of each LAC overseeing. The Foundation Governors then reported to the LAC and the Minutes from these meetings along with the Ethos Groups Minutes were sent to S&C termly. The Board of Trustees had overall responsibility for the Christian distinctiveness of the CofE schools across the Trust.</p>	GP
9.	<p>Evaluation of Governance Impact</p> <p>9.1 Meeting to consider what impact the meeting has on the outcomes of the pupils and staff of The Link Academy.</p> <p>The Chair asked for any feedback.</p> <p><i>CM said that it was important for the Members to ask what was the succession planning for the CEO's retirement?</i> The Chair updated the meeting under Part II and agreed to keep Members informed of any decisions made. The CEO said that currently the Trust was in a strong position with the senior leadership team in post having a comprehensive understanding of the Trust. The three geographical hubs were having an impact and the systems were robust.</p>	Chair

The meeting closed at 1943

General Meeting to be held on 21st July 2025 in Landscove School House