



## Minutes

Held on 17<sup>th</sup> July 2023 at 6.00pm

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

- Members:** The Ven Douglas Dettmer  
 Peter Bethel Isabel Cherrett  
 Paul Reisbach
- Trustees:** Cheryl Mathieson (Chair) Paul Waterworth  
 Nicky Dunford (CEO)  
 Dominic Course  
 Kate Evans Ben Thorne  
 Graeme Scott
- Officers:** Charlotte Roe (Governance Professional)

No	Item	ACTION
1.	<b>Welcome and Apologies</b> The Chair opened the meeting with a welcome. Apologies from Chris Norman, Sarah Cox and Gary Kinchin were <b>accepted</b> . Paul Reisbach sent his apologies for the first half of the meeting.	
2.	<b>Declarations of interest</b> 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. Douglas Dettmer is a director and trustee of Exeter Diocesan Board of Finance Ltd and Exeter Diocesan Trust and a trustee of Church College Hostel Trust and Tranquillity House Trust. The CEO is a Trustee for the Bearnas 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. Chris Norman is Director of CANE Properties Ltd. Kate Evans is Director for Education of The Good Shepherd MAT. Ben Thorne is Director and Trustee at Tor Bridge Academy Trust.  The GP was asked to send declarations of interest forms to the Members.	GP
3.	<b>Any other business</b> No other business was brought forward.	
4.	<b>Approval of meeting minutes</b> Minutes of the meeting held on 24 <sup>th</sup> January 2023 were circulated before the meeting. The Minutes were <b>approved</b> as an accurate record. The Chair signed accordingly.	
5.	<b>Matters Arising from Minutes held on 24<sup>th</sup> January 2023</b> <b>5.7.2 LA support for safeguarding update</b> – The CEO reiterated that the situation with the LA Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) had not improved.	

	<p>During recent Ofsted inspections, inspectors had asked whether the LA were being held to account. The CEO said that the Trust was proactive in raising complaints about the level of provision provided by the LA as there were concerns that it could have a negative impact on the safeguarding of the Trust’s pupils. In the meantime, the Trust was ensuring that any gaps were being addressed in-house wherever possible.</p> <p><b>5.5.1 Documents circulated to Members</b> – Following on from the Role of Members document circulated last year, the Chair asked for the Members’ views on whether the new arrangements were helpful to them. The Members reported that the CEO report was helpful to keep in touch. The papers were coming in a timely manner and asked for confirmation on when the budget for the new financial year would be available. The CEO confirmed that this would be sent in the Autumn Term ready for consideration at the AGM in January 2024. The Members said they would welcome the re-introduction of reports by the Chairs of the Local Advisory Committees (LACs) including items of interest and achievement of the individual schools within their remit.</p>	
<p>6.</p>	<p><b>External Audit Service</b></p> <p>It was noted that the tender exercise was agreed by the Audit Committee (outlined in Audit minutes 30<sup>th</sup> November 2022) and a recommendation for the appointment of external auditors FY’s 22/23 to 24/25 was made in the Audit Committee Meeting on 10<sup>th</sup> May 2023. The recommendation was being brought to this meeting for final approval by Members. The Members had been sent an example of the matrix, the invitation to tender and the 3 tenders. <i>There were questions of clarification raised by the Members before the meeting via email.</i></p> <p>The Audit Committee Chair reported that having evaluated three tenders and independently completing matrix assessments, the Audit Committee unanimously recommended the appointment of Bishop Fleming LLP to provide the External Audit Service from 1 September 2023 to 31 August 2026 to cover the financial years 2022-23 until 2024-25. Having reviewed the tenders and held interviews with the three applicants, Bishop Fleming was recommended for the following reasons:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Impressive and comprehensive tender document</li> <li>• Knowledge and experience of the Academy Trust sector</li> <li>• Professional and robust past performance in dealing with the Trust</li> <li>• Being of sufficient size to rotate key personnel for ‘fresh eyes’ on the Trust’s performance</li> <li>• Commitment to training for qualified and non-qualified staff</li> <li>• Sector benchmark data which can help the Trust to improve performance</li> <li>• Useful and practical recommendations for the Trust to adopt to improve performance</li> <li>• Timely and helpful on-line and in person workshops relating to forthcoming sector changes affecting audit practice, such as changes to the Financial and Governance Handbook</li> </ul> <p><i>The Members asked about the rotation of auditors to provide ‘fresh eyes’ on the accounts.</i> The Chair of the Audit Committee said that was another reason why Bishop Fleming was chosen. Bishop Fleming was a substantial company allowing a change of auditors as appropriate.</p> <p>The Members <b>unanimously agreed</b> Bishop Fleming LLP to provide the External Audit Service from 1 September 2023 to 31 August 2026 to cover the financial years 2022-23 until 2024-25.</p>	

	<p>Paul Reisbach joined the meeting.</p>	
<p>7.</p>	<p><b>Reports from Chair of Trustees</b>  <b>7.1 Summary Report</b>  The Chair of Trustees’ report was circulated before the meeting.</p> <p>The Chair of Trustees commented that it had been a challenging year with many Ofsted inspections, teachers strike, building projects, finance challenges. The staff had pulled together and supported one another, and this was a notable strength of the Trust, and it made a difference to the Academies.</p> <p>The Teachers Strike had not had a significant impact across the Trust. Only 2 schools had to restrict the number of attending children in the initial rounds of strikes. In the last round of strikes there was no impact to academies.</p> <p>Staffing levels had settled down with fewer leaving – the main leavers being HLTAs/TAs.</p> <p>Following the Regional Deputy Director’s approval, Wolborough Church of England School in Newton Abbot and Sparkwell All Saints Primary School would be joining the Trust. There were outstanding land issues for one school which might hold up the joining. The Members said that if it persisted then they might be able to help. There was also a growth area in East Devon with an associate partnership with Honiton Primary School. At Trust level there had been robust debates around the size of the school however ultimately the Trustees had agreed that having a small handful of larger primaries supported the strength of the Trust. The Members asked about other similar Trusts to The Link Academy – the CEO said that she was working with the Small Schools Strategic Group which was nationwide. Concerns were being raised that the small schools were being ignored nationally due to the complexities of smaller budgets and older buildings. It was commented that most of these Trusts had a couple of larger primary schools within their group. The CEO said that The Link Academy closely aligned with other trusts of small schools – understanding that small schools in rural communities needed to be protected.</p> <p><i>The Members said that they understand the hesitancy about taking on a bigger school and asked how the larger school were like the Trust’s schools.</i> The CEO said it was about their vision and values, giving true alignment. Honiton Primary approached the Trust after researching other Trusts. The Trustees added that the associate partnership gave both the Trust and the school time to decide whether it would work. The CEO added that Honiton wanted to join the Trust fully.</p> <p>The Chair of Trustees said that there had been economic pressures and maintaining pupil numbers was difficult – the Trust was proactive in this area with pre-schools and marketing. <i>The Members asked what happened if pupil numbers declined too much</i> – the CEO said that class sizes were reduced, citing an example of how two schools had come into one (but on two sites) to make it more viable. In another school where pupil numbers were declining, the Trust were liaising with the LA to set up a high needs unit.</p> <p>The Chair of Trustees thanked the Members and Trustees for their time, dedication and support; along with thanking all the staff across the Trust for their hard work. The Chair of Trustees said that special thanks should go to the CEO who worked tirelessly, always ensuring that the education and welfare for the pupils was at the heart.</p> <p>The Members thanked the Chair of Trustees for the informative report.</p>	

	<p><i>The Members asked about the catering manager post. The CEO reported that one of the kitchen supervisors had stepped up into the post supported with a service level agreement with CaterEd who would be responsible with compliance. It was felt it would make savings. Following a question from the Members it was noted that the quality of the provision was expected to be maintained.</i></p> <p><i>The Members asked for clarification around some points of the CEO Report to Trustees which was circulated. The CEO reported that the RDD were raising concerns at the LA not addressing SEND and looking at ways Trusts could take on this responsibility. RDD were also looking at small schools nationwide and how better to handle the shaping of Trusts to avoid leaving out the small schools due to their funding and old buildings.</i></p> <p><i>The Members congratulated the CEO and the Trust on their extraordinary work with the constraints of public funding. The Members asked about the pressure on the leaders of the Trust and how did the Trust support the health and wellbeing of all the staff? The CEO outlined the initiatives and support the Trust provided such as a give-back staff day to acknowledge the extra work; supported staff with school lunch costs; wellbeing newsletter; various benefit schemes; employment wellbeing and survey; buddying system; flexible working requests. It was noted that Ofsted had remarked on the high level of support the Trust provided for their staff.</i></p> <p><i>The Members discussed the recent Ofsted inspections across the Trust. The Members asked how the monitoring of leadership could be tweaked across the Trust. The CEO shared the learnings and the expectation of the leaders involving EIT and the LACs. Following a question from the Members, it was confirmed that policies were to be more robustly checked and that they were being implemented across all the academies in the Trust.</i></p> <p>The Members thanked the Chair of Trustees and the Trustees for their professional leadership and dedication.</p>	
<p>8.</p>	<p><b>Finance</b></p> <p><b>8.1 Current Financial Update 2022-2023</b></p> <p>The CEO report covered the financial update. The CEO said that there was expected to be a small deficit for the current year.</p> <p><b>8.2 Finance Update for 2023-2024</b></p> <p>For the following year there had been a report from the School Resource Management Advisor (SRMA) who had come up with 3 areas of possible savings; school condition, pupil retention and growth; trust growth</p> <p>The CEO reported that the Trust had been successful in 5 CIF bids amounting to £1.2 million with £300,000 contribution from the Trust. A new Property Lead had been appointed who would be looking at a sustainable plan along with IT provision and raising funds to address the capital plan. The CEO said that the report would be circulated to the Members. The CEO said that currently that the new budget was a deficit budget (though balanced with the reserves) it was expected that this would improve. <i>The Members asked about the impact of the teachers' award and government funding. The CEO reported that in the budget 4% Trust contribution was factored however it was now 3% which would provide a saving.</i></p>	<p>GP</p>
<p>9.</p>	<p><b>Trust Risk Management</b></p> <p>It was reported that the Trust risk register had been reviewed and now had been migrated across to Every Education software system. Westcotts had audited the Trust's risk management processes. All the individual academies had their own risk registers, owned by the Academy Head. The EIT were now owners of the Trust risk register with Trustees providing oversight and challenge.</p> <p>The Chair of the Audit Committee reiterated that it had been a useful exercise and had highlighted the need for a more consistent approach. The CEO added it felt</p>	

	<p>this was more about the AH understanding around what constitutes a risk. It was also allowing questions to be asked how some schools were doing better in areas than others and then encourage sharing of good practice.</p> <p>It was noted that the Members had asked about a mechanism to ascertain at what point risks should be reported to them, the Chair of Trustees said this would be addressed once the new risk register process had been embedded. DC said that the DCEO currently highlighted red risks for the Trustees. <i>Following a question from the Members</i>, the CEO said that there had been a conscious effort to scrutinise the risk registers robustly to ensure that qualitative considerations were being made and the focus was not just on financial implications but across all areas.</p>	
10.	<p><b>Governance</b></p> <p><b>10.1 Appointment of Members</b> There were no new Members to consider.</p> <p><b>10.2 Appointment/Re-election of Directors/Trustees</b> The Chair reported that there were some Trustee vacancies. In the first instance a skills audit was to be circulated to existing trustees for the board to then highlight the gaps in expertise. In the Autumn term the Trust Board would look to recruit around 3 more Trustees. The Chair added that there were some possible applicants who had expressed an interest in join the Board.</p> <p>The Members thanked Fiona Walters for her sterling work and deep level of commitment.</p> <p><b>10.3 Election of Chair and Vice Chair of the Board of Trustees for 2023/24</b> The GP reported that the following nominations had been received: Chair of Trustees: Cheryl Mathieson Vice-Chair of Trustees: Ben Thorne The meeting <b>unanimously agreed</b> for the academic year 2023/24 the following: Chair of Trustees: Cheryl Mathieson Vice-Chair of Trustees: Ben Thorne</p> <p><b>10.4 Local Board Review</b> The CEO reported that over the academic year there had been a robust review of the Local Boards to ensure a more consistent approach. The review was now complete. The following changes had been agreed: 4 Local Advisory Committees (LAC) – geographically based: Totnes, Mid-Devon, Moorland, East-Devon The membership to be 1 Parent Governor per academy, up to 3 Trustee Appointed Governor, 1 Foundation Governor, 1 Academy Head and 1 Staff Governor (different academy to AH). Existing governors were given the opportunity to apply and then the gaps were being filled. The outstanding gaps were Foundation Governors in two of the LACs. Sharon Lord, the Trust’s RE &amp; SIAMS Lead was working with the GP on finding suitable applicants. It was noted that recruiting Foundation Governors/Trustees was a focus in the Diocese Education including trying to encourage the clergy. The meeting thanked the CEO and the GP for their work in this area</p>	
11.	<p><b>Date of next AGM – 15<sup>th</sup> January 2024</b> <b>Date of the General Meeting – 15<sup>th</sup> July 2024</b></p>	
12.	<p><b>Evaluation of Governance Impact</b></p> <p><b>12.1</b> Meeting to consider what impact the meeting has on the outcomes of the pupils and staff of The Link Academy and what changes to the future agenda could be made. The Members said that they had performed the tasks, developed a good background of the issues the Trust were working with, robustly challenged and now confident that it was a positive picture.</p> <p><b>12.2 Local Advisory Committee attendance at AGM and General Meeting</b></p>	

	Following a question from the Chair of Trustees, it was agreed to invite the LAC Chairs to the General Meeting for the more pertinent items. The GP was asked to ensure that the agenda was created to ensure that these items were blocked together. It was <b>agreed</b> that the LAC Chairs do not need to attend the AGM.	
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The meeting finished at 740 pm