

Finance & General Purposes Committee

Minutes

16th May 2025

At 9.30am

Held at Lanscove House

Present: Ben Thorne (Chair)
Nicola Dunford (CEO)
Cheryl Mathieson
Paul Waterworth

In attendance: Matt Matthew (DCEO)
Louisa Taylor (Finance Manager)
Charlotte Roe (Governance Professional)

Minutes: Nicol Bush- Clerk to the Trust

No	Item	ACTION
1.	Welcome and Apologies The Chair of the Committee opened the meeting with a welcome to Trustees.	
2.	Declarations of Business Interests There were no new declarations brought forward to the meeting.	
3.	Any Other Business	
4.	Minutes of the previous meeting (Circulated before the meeting) The minutes of the meeting were approved as a true record and were signed accordingly.	
5.	Matters Arising from meeting held on 18th March 2025 5.8 CEO to update the Trustees on the recent AH meeting and Union meeting on 1 st April. (Staffing plan) Part II was taken	
6.	Risk Register 6.1 Update on the Risk register working party. 6.2 Trustees to review report on F&GP risk register. The CEO said she had begun visiting schools during the second half of the term to work directly with heads on assessing risk. She was using a pro forma to guide discussions, focusing on standards, outcomes, buildings, staffing, and any potential risks. She noted inconsistencies in the current risk register — for example, one of the schools was rated green despite leadership gaps and staff turnover, while another school, which was stable, was rated amber. Her aim was to align school-level risk assessments with the trust's main risk register. She planned to cross-reference these with health audits to ensure a more accurate and consistent picture. This work would help schools understand how to complete their own risk registers properly and ensure they fed into the trust-wide view. She emphasised that this was something she could complete without interfering with the incoming CEO. The DCEO noted that training had been offered to LAC Governors around the risk register.	
7.	Strategy Plan 7.1 Trustees to update on their designated areas:	
8.	Finance 8.1 Financial performance to 30 th April 2025 – Month 8 to include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Financial forecast to year end 24/25 	

	<p><i>The Chair asked if there was anything the Trust could have done to predict the financial challenges.</i></p> <p>The FM responded that the DCEO had been in talks with the Local Authority recently and said there had been no signs suggesting this event would occur.</p> <p>The FM said she was looking into the Sports Grant with the DCEO to see if there was any room to improve the after-school deficit.</p> <p>The Chair highlighted the frustration around the lack of funding with EHCPs.</p> <p>The FM said it was being investigated around how to keep those deficits down.</p> <p>The DCEO said the team were working very hard to reduce the deficit.</p> <p>The FM said the team were desperately trying to move nursery numbers up, in areas such as marketing. She added the team were looking into increasing the hours that the nurseries provided for families, such as offering year-round care.</p> <p>The CEO raised that over-staffing was a major factor for the deficit.</p> <p><i>The Chair asked if the nurseries could claw back some of the deficit by opening up the nurseries and extending the age range, for example a holiday club?</i></p> <p><i>The Trustees asked about breakfast club costs.</i></p> <p><i>The DCEO said the Trust encouraged the schools to provide wrap-around care, adding that there were only a handful of schools that were making losses on their wrap-around care.</i></p> <p>8.2 Budget planning update for Year 2025-2026</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National pay awards • Progress of deficit recovery plan <p>The FM shared the Mid-year budget and Staffing pay increases document and highlighted the following:</p> <p><i>The Chair raised a concern about the ongoing recruitment efforts despite the significant £769k deficit.</i> The DCEO said that some recruitment was essential, particularly for critical teams. He cited an example at one of the schools, where recruitment was underway and less well-suited candidates had applied, as a contingency, the Trust were considering moving an existing staff member into the role instead.</p> <p>Part II was taken</p> <p>8.3 Income Generation report</p> <p>The DCEO noted that while the role was not currently generating significant income for the trust, some progress had been made. The DCEO said as part of this effort, the Trust had joined the Newton Abbot Chamber of Commerce, and a business lunch was scheduled to support further networking and relationship-building.</p> <p>The DCEO raised the importance of pupil recruitment, which remained a key priority. It was noted that some schools had raised concerns about the effectiveness of current marketing efforts. In response, it was agreed that the CEO would meet with headteachers after the half-term break to refocus on marketing strategies. Efforts were also being made to raise the profile of all schools through local media and online platforms. The Trust had begun working with local outlets such as the Mid Devon Advertiser and Totnes Times, with plans for weekly editorials featuring different schools. The Income generation officer had taken on a significant portion of this work—these actions were in response to parental feedback.</p>	
9.	<p>Property</p> <p>DCEO to raise any issues for discussion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Update on CIF <p>The DCEO presented the CIF bid report (circulated to Trustees via email before the meeting)</p> <p>The DCEO explained that the Trust had submitted its latest round of capital funding bids in December. These included projects such as the heating system at Hennock, and safety or infrastructure works at Cheriton Bishop. The DCEO raised that the Trust was unlikely to be successful across all bids — they might receive funding for one or two projects at most. The projects had been ranked in priority order. He also clarified that the funding would come from capital reserves, not revenue reserves.</p> <p><i>The Trustees asked if there were enough Capital reserves for the CIF bids and the Wolborough nursery projects?</i></p> <p>The DCEO noted that the trust had already secured funding for Wolborough’s nursery, which they were committed to. However, he clarified that the Trust would still have the option to decline any of the projects at that stage. The main risk was that the trust</p>	

	<p>would still be liable for the consultant’s fees for preparing the bids, even if the projects did not go ahead.</p> <p>The CEO said she had recently visited Hennock and was impressed with the changes it had received with its new roof, paint work etc.</p> <p><i>The Trustees asked if there was any precedent for sponsorship from outside bodies in education?</i></p> <p>The DCEO said that securing external grant funding, though it was acknowledged that this is becoming increasingly difficult. It was noted that PTFA associations were playing an increasingly important role in supporting many of the Trust’s schools. The DCEO added that there had been notable successes in this area, which were not celebrated enough across the Trust. It was agreed that recognising and sharing these achievements more widely should be a priority moving forward.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wolborough SNB <p>The DCEO explained that the scheme offered up to £150,000 in capital funding for existing schools or new nurseries to repurpose underused space. Wolborough was the only school in the trust that met the criteria — not only having suitable space, but also demonstrating a clear local need, supported by evidence from the local authority.</p> <p>The school planned to extend its age range to include two-year-olds, creating provision for 2, 3, and 4-year-olds. The project involved revamping two unused spaces at the end of the school building, knocking through and extending to the rear to create an all-year-round nursery. The facility would have a separate entrance, ensuring it would not impact the main school’s operations.</p> <p>The DCEO expressed confidence in the success of the project, describing it as a strong foundation for the school’s future. He noted that only five bids were successful across Devon, and this was one of them, which the trust was very pleased about.</p> <p><i>The Trustees asked Given the increasing demand for places for two-year-olds, had it been financially and operationally viable for the trust to lower the age range across more of its nurseries, considering the higher staffing ratios, additional facility requirements, and the government funding and grant support that had been available at the time?</i></p> <p>The DCEO explained that the staff-to-child ratio for two-year-olds was one adult to every four children, which required more staffing than for older age groups. He noted that facilities also had to be adapted, including the addition of changing areas, and staff needed to hold a Level 3 qualification.</p> <p>The CEO pointed out that this model was not viable for small schools with only a handful of children. It only became practical where numbers were higher, as expected at Wolborough and potentially at Newton Abbot, where demand was stronger. The CEO added that the year-round nature of the provision was also a key factor in its viability.</p>	
10.	<p>Human Resources CEO and CM to raise any issues for discussion It was agreed that HR had been discussed in item 8.</p>	
11.	<p>Health & Safety 11.1 CEO and DCEO to raise any issues for discussion The DCEO highlighted that there were no issues to report.</p> <p>11.2 DCEO to update the meeting on Harbertonford incident The DCEO updated the meeting and said the person involved had recovered and was back to work a few days later.</p>	
12.	<p>Safeguarding CEO to raise any issues for discussion</p> <p>The CEO informed the group about issues with the safeguarding report that had been shared with the Standards and Curriculum Committee. The report contained several data inaccuracies, including incorrect pupil numbers. After discussions with Alex and the EIT team, it was identified that the root cause was inconsistent data entry into SIMS across schools. This inconsistency affected how CPOMS and other systems pulled data, resulting in conflicting figures.</p> <p>Some discrepancies were due to the inclusion of nursery pupils or children who had only attended briefly. However, other figures—such as those from schools without</p>	

	<p>nurseries—were still incorrect. Similar problems were found in SEND and EHCP data, which were also not being entered consistently.</p> <p>The CEO planned to provide an update to the Board of Trustees to explain the situation and outline steps to improve data accuracy. It was noted that while some parts of the report were accurate, others—particularly pupil numbers and inclusion data—required urgent attention.</p> <p>The CEO said that further training was needed to improve data accuracy. The Director of Safeguarding was committed to providing additional training sessions. The CEO also confirmed that, at Academy Head level, there would be a renewed focus on ensuring SIMS data is regularly updated. As part of ongoing risk register visits, the CEO planned to reinforce this message directly with Academy heads. The CEO added that checks would be introduced on a three-weekly basis, with headteachers working alongside their administrative staff to review and verify their SIMS data regularly.</p>	
13.	<p>Due Diligence DCEO to provide an update on any potential joining schools.</p> <p>The CEO noted that no due diligence had been started, as the trust was not currently pursuing the next school in line - Tiverton. Work had been planned this term on a management partnership agreement; however, this had been paused. The CEO explained that the decision was made to delay progress until Rachel- the new CEO could be involved, as it was important for her to have a clear understanding of the process and to be part of any decisions moving forward.</p> <p>The Trustees agreed to discuss Due diligence in more detail at the upcoming Board of Trustees meeting.</p>	
14.	<p>Policies 14.1 Financial procedures manual (to include procurement and tendering policy)</p> <p>The Chair highlighted the approved mileage rates, meals, and subsistence allowances. Specific concerns were raised about the overnight stay limits—£65 outside London and £85 inside London. It was questioned whether staff would realistically be able to find accommodation within the £85 limit in London, suggesting that this may need to be reviewed.</p>	
15.	<p>Review of Risk Register RAG rating</p> <p>Finance- The meeting agreed for this category to remain red RAG rated. Property- The meeting agreed that this remains unchanged RAG rated.</p>	
16.	<p>Evaluation of governance impact The Chair concluded that the meeting had been successful and productive, with clear actions identified to move forward with the deficit and redundancy plans. Adding that the meeting had been effective in terms of governance and decision-making.</p>	

The meeting ended at 11.25am

Signed by the Chair of the Committee..... on 11th July 2025