

St Helens College

GOVERNING BOARD

Minutes of the hybrid meeting held at the Town Centre Campus, St Helens Thursday 6 October 2022 at 4.00pm

Present:	Bill Nixon (Chair)	External Governor
	Simon Pierce	Chief Executive/Principal
	David Balsamo	External Governor
	Debbie Calderbank	External Governor (via Teams)
	Alison Cannon	External Governor
	Zulakha Desai	External Governor
	Liz Duncan	External Governor
	Phil Han	External Governor
	John Heritage	External Governor
	Andrew Lang	External Governor
	Alun Owen	External Governor
	Jim Pinsent	External Governor
	Nick Shore	External Governor
In attendance:	Rav Garcha	Chief Financial Officer
	Mark Doyle	Deputy Principal - Curriculum and Quality
	Gillian Hayhurst	Governance Director (minutes)
	Ron Hill	Stone King LLP

The meeting opened at 4.00pm.

The Chair welcomed Ron Hill to the meeting. Over the summer, the Chair has conducted one to one meetings with the governors, which have been well received. The general themes arising from the discussions link with the feedback from the external governance review (minute 75).

66 Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Julie Heap. It was noted that Ben Bennett-Stanley has resigned as Staff Governor. Alicja Gwiazda-Treska has completed her term as Student Governor.

67 Declarations of interest

Nick Shore and Julie Heap for minute 73.

68 Minutes of the previous meetings

The minutes of the meetings held on 7 July 2022 and 25 August 2022 (Extraordinary Governing Board meeting) were approved as an accurate record.

69 **Matters arising and action tracker**

With regard to minute 55, Jim Pinsent has completed his review of the Instrument and Articles, Standing Orders and Scheme of Delegation and Financial Regulations on behalf of the board. Copies of the final documents have been made available to Governors via Microsoft Teams.

70 **Performance and compliance**

This report provided an updated set of key performance indicators (KPIs) and potential targets for consideration as part of the agreed approach to assurance reporting. A compliance report was also provided, along with an update of progress against the College's Operational Plan 2022/23.

The board noted that graphs will be included where appropriate in the next iteration, which will be circulated to governors between meetings.

A discussion was held on whether the proposed KPIs would provide the board with the information required to monitor performance at a strategic level. With regard to the draft measures relating to staff, the board queried whether there were too many and requested that these are reviewed to ensure that they are fit for purpose. Members were keen to retain both short and long-term sickness absence and staff stability, given the focus on positive culture change within the Strategic Plan.

The board queried whether safeguarding should be included within the compliance register. Senior leaders have been considering whether this should be a performance measure, rather than compliance, and will ensure that safeguarding monitoring is appropriately addressed within the next report.

In response to a query on whether benchmarking data should be included within the performance report, the board noted that the last set of validated data was produced prior to the pandemic.

RESOLVED: **The Governing Board commented on the draft high level key performance indicators and targets for 2022/23 and noted that a full set of targets will be presented to the Governing Board for approval between meetings.**

The Governing Board noted progress against the College's Operational Plan, 2022/23.

The Governing Board noted the compliance report.

71 **2021/22 results update**

The report presented the Governing Board with an update on: 2021/22 results, as recorded to date for classroom based Further Education (FE), Higher Education (HE) and apprenticeships; a best-case forecast for 2021/22 achievement rates; a summary analysis of the reasons for declining retention and pass rates; a summary of key actions to address declining retention and pass rates.

The board noted that the results are not final at this stage and work is ongoing to capture unrecorded results. This is partly due to resource pressures within the data team, who are currently involved with the Education and Skills Agency funding audit. Some external verifiers are yet to provide the data and the College had been asked to provide sample work that was not expected. There are several non-regulated awards that are being reviewed internally and the outcomes are due this week.

John Heritage left the meeting for a short period.

The board discussed the reasons for lower than forecast retention. More students are presenting with mental health concerns and many schools are reporting students withdrawing around key assessment dates. There is evidence to suggest that adult students are prioritising income generation over study.

Regarding pass rates, anecdotal evidence suggests that technical colleges have a high number of vocational teaching staff who require additional coaching on examination techniques. The College is providing additional support for vocational teachers from those with experience in Maths and English, who regularly deal with exams. Staff are being encouraged to make more use of external examination reports to gain a deeper understanding of why students have not passed.

The board considered attendance levels and the actions taken by the College to improve levels during 2021/22. Currently attendance data is not widely available so Senior Leaders are liaising with their local and national networks for comparison. This anecdotal evidence suggests that local schools are only achieving 86% attendance, despite penalties for non-attendance.

The board queried why the forecasts presented in May 2022 were higher than the year-end position. Pass rates on externally assessed components were lower than predicted. Staff have suggested that some students with long periods of absence should have been withdrawn sooner when efforts to improve their attendance had failed. The College will respond with varied approaches to improve performance for next year, including earlier intervention and ensuring staff have greater capacity to support student resilience. Greater scrutiny will be given to students who are at risk and staff will make realistic assessments as to whether these individuals can be supported to get back on track.

The board noted that, in most cases, students will not be able to resit their examinations until Spring 2023, therefore those outcomes will not be attributable to the 2021/22 year. The Higher Education achievement rate has improved.

The board requested that an action plan is provided at the next meeting in December 2022, detailing how the issues, including forecasting, are being addressed.

RESOLVED:

The board noted the report and associated actions.

The board noted that the 2021/22 results have not yet been finalised and could differ from those presented in the report. An updated position will be presented to the board within the Self-Assessment Report in December 2022.

72 Financial summary

The report provided a summary of financial and estates matters for information.

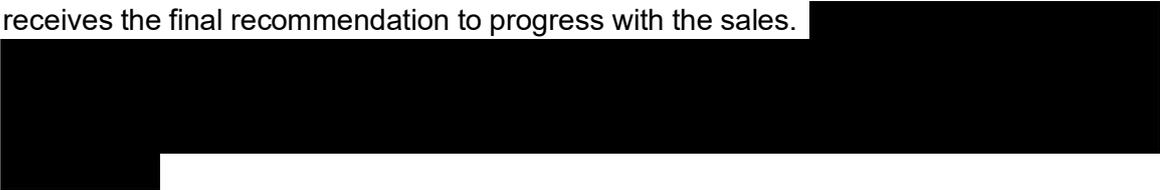
The board commented that the earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation, and amortisation (EBITDA) was encouraging. Savings were being made due to permanent staff vacancies but the cost of agency staff had increased compared to budget and there was a concern that staff were feeling overloaded.

In response to a query on pension assumptions, members were informed that a pension credit and revaluation report had been received and an updated position would be provided within the September 2022 management accounts.

Alun Owen left the meeting for a short period.

The board queried whether the College had received feedback on its T6 grant funding application. Senior staff had spoken with an organisation who had assisted other colleges with their bids. Grant funding was awarded to a greater number of colleges at a much lower rate than St Helens College had requested. It is anticipated that the College's position would be improved when it applies again in Wave 5 as currently it is unable to offer T-levels due to its previous financial position and Ofsted rating.

The board questioned why it was not considering offers for the sale of assets, particularly Bobbies Lane, at this meeting as this had been the expectation following discussions in July 2022. At that point, the sale of Bobbies Lane and other assets were being accelerated to secure match funding for the T6 project. As the Department for Education grant funding application had not been successful, the College had been advised to get surveys and legal documents prepared in advance of going to market with a view to achieving maximum income from the sales. Current interested parties wish to landbank the sites and have therefore not been deterred by the delay and the additional sales information may attract national investment. Cash flow forecasts will be provided when the board receives the final recommendation to progress with the sales.



With regard to the Health Innovation Hub, the board was advised that there are no further updates since the meeting in August 2022 but the project is still progressing. The Stage 2 property designs are due to be completed on 10 October 2022.

A discussion was held on pay awards. A more detailed report is being presented to the Finance, Resources and Commercial Committee, which acknowledges national strike action. Senior Leaders continue to meet with trade unions and have explained the reasons that the College is unlikely to agree to the Association of College's recommendation of a 2.5% increase. The Senior Leadership Team have agreed to increase market supplements and consolidated retention payments for harder to employ positions.

**recommended by the Search and Governance
Committee subject to the final amendments
highlighted within the meeting.**

74 **Matters for urgent escalation to the Governing Board**

There were no matters for urgent escalation.

75 **Discussion: external governance review**

The Governing Board was presented with the external governance review report and asked to consider how to take forward the recommendations.

Overall, the College is in a good position regarding its governance. It has been through several years of considerable pressure and the board should consider how the style of governing can change as it addresses future need.

The proposed areas for development were considered. The main focus is to ensure the board is comfortable that the College is achieving its strategic development while focusing its collective mind on how decisions will impact students and learning. Linking induction and governor development to the student experience and learning as well as innovation in teaching should ensure that all members are confident in their ability to provide high support and high challenge, no matter their background or areas of expertise.

Consideration was given to how governors can engage with teaching and learning outside of performance reporting. Suggestions included meeting students to understand their experiences of the College, curriculum visits where students 'teach' the governors and discussions are held with tutors and heads and departments, and strategic away days to consider best practice and innovative solutions to issues.

Governors provided their views on the external review and agreed that their focus should be on students and learning. Considering the terminology used within the governance framework, such as 'Resources for learning', may support a cultural transition. Heads of schools currently provide a deep dive within their areas at the Curriculum and Quality Committee and it may be more appropriate for these to be shared with the wider Governing Board.

The board agreed to set up a small sub-group to recommend a manageable and proportionate set of actions at the next meeting in December 2022. Bill Nixon, Alison Cannon, David Balsamo, John Heritage, Zulakha Desai and Liz Duncan volunteered to take part in the discussion. The action plan will be based on four themes including actions to be undertaken by the Executive Team, improvements in teaching and learning, governor induction and individual and collective annual reviews.

Alison Cannon left the meeting for a short period.

The Governing Board acknowledged that the previous years had been a focus on financial survival and it should ensure its governing framework gives space for the committees to undertake their duties and report back. It was noted that all governors do not need to be

experts in education but have a general understanding and appreciation of the College's purpose.

John Heritage left the meeting for a short period.

RESOLVED: The Governing Board noted the external governance review report.

The Governing Board resolved to set up a sub-group to draft a governance action plan based on the recommendations of the external governance review.

76 Discussion: curriculum planning

The Governing Board was provided with an overview of curriculum planning at the College.

A discussion was held on the use of technical, performance information and whether this helps the board to better govern the organisation. Considering the role of the board, members were keen to ensure time is allocated for strategic discussions on curriculum as part of the annual planning cycle to ensure that the College's culture is embedded through all operational decisions. This would allow governors an opportunity to provide strategic challenge, consider the wider context in which the College operates and ensure the business remains fit for purpose in the future.

Board members suggested several areas for future discussion, including questions around the College's educational purpose and whether the goal is to focus on curriculum delivery or a wider education and skills offering to its students. How does the board know if the curriculum offer is good and delivery is meeting standards? Who are the key stakeholders invested in the College's curriculum and how do they help to shape it? How can the College work with its delivery partners to innovate? What would students consider to be an outstanding experience and how can the board ensure that expectations are met or managed, particularly post-pandemic which changed the outlook for many individuals? A further discussion will be scheduled during the academic year.

The majority of the College's curriculum is practical and requires specialist facilities and resources provided through on-site delivery. It was acknowledged that many young people missed out on social and personal development during the pandemic so, while there is a role for on-line and hybrid teaching, the College continues to encourage attendance on campus.

Rav Garcha left the meeting for a short period.

The board discussed Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs), which are currently being developed by the Chamber of Commerce in St Helens and Knowsley. It is unlikely the final versions will be published until March 2023. Senior Leaders will undertake a full curriculum review starting in June 2023 once the LSIPs are available. The curriculum planning cycle will begin earlier in future years following evaluation of previous years and work with the Further Education Commissioner. This will give school teams more time for delivery planning. The College will also undertake its first review assessing how it is meeting skills needs in alignment with the LSIP. An initial position statement will be presented to the board along with the Self-Assessment Review in December 2022.

