St Helens College

GOVERNING BOARD

Minutes from the meeting held at the St Helens Town Centre Campus Thursday 10 October 2024 at 3.15pm

Present:	Phil Han	External Governor
	Alison Cannon	External Governor
	Jim Pinsent	External Governor
	Liz Duncan	External Governor
	Andrew Lang	External Governor
	John Heritage	External Governor (via Microsoft Teams)
	Paul Growney	External Governor
	Natalie Ibbs	External Governor
	Simon Pierce	Chief Executive/Principal
	Tracey Turner	Staff Governor
In attendance:	Stephanie Donaldson	Deputy Chief Executive
	Mohammed Ramzan	Vice Principal – Quality and Student Experience
	Julie Heap	Director of Student Services/Designated Safeguarding Lead
	Carys Bibby	Governance Director (minutes)

Governing Board members were taken on a tour of the IT curriculum area by Denise Harris, Head of School for Business and Professional.

Liz Duncan and Tracey Turner joined the meeting.

287 Apologies for absence

Apologies were received for Alun Owen, Jen McGill and Zulakha Desai. Apologies were received for Andrew Lang for the start of the meeting.

The board noted that Tim Jones had resigned as a governor as of 19 September 2024.

288 Declarations of interest

It was noted that Stephanie Donaldson is an independent member of Torus' Audit Committee.

289 **Minutes of the previous meetings held on 4 July 2024 and 4 September 2024**

Minutes of the previous meetings were approved as an accurate record. It was noted that Jim Pinsent did not receive an invitation to the 4 September 2024 due to an administrative error and was therefore not in attendance.

290 **Matters arising and action tracker**

Following discussion at the Governing Board meeting in July 2024, a statement has been added to the management accounts report to indicate the impact of grants on cash flow.

RESOLVED: The board noted the action tracker updates.

291 **Performance/ exception report**

The report provided governors with a summary of progress against key performance indicators as part of the agreed approach to assurance reporting. The compliance report was also provided, along with an outline of the progress made against the College's Strategic Goals.

The board challenged poor attendance in Early Years, Health, Sport, Business and Professional, and Construction. Whilst attendance for adults and apprentices is above target, several factors are impacting attendance for young people. The demographic of enrolled students has been slightly different than the business plan, with fewer students enrolled on level 3 courses and many more enrolled at levels 1 and 2. This has led to 400 extra English and maths enrolments, which is impacting attendance at English and maths classes. Interventions made since September 2024 have increased core aim attendance to 86.4%, with significant improvements for both Engineering and Early Years attendance. Overall attendance including English and maths is 85%.

In response to a query on the impact this changed demographic will have on resources, the board was informed that additional staff are being recruited to teach English and maths as currently group sizes are exceptionally large; however, all classes are staffed. Due to the nature of the students who have previously not achieved a grade 4 in the subject at key stage 4, large groups are not preferable. Schools can pay more than the further education sector for teachers in this area. More support is also required from learning support assistants as the number of students with educational healthcare plans has increased.

The board queried if students who are not attending are likely to be withdrawn and if they can be replaced with any students on waiting lists. The College has identified 95 students with less than 10% attendance currently enrolled. The priority will be to reengage these students on their existing programme or move them to another curriculum area. Where this cannot be achieved, opportunities will be offered to waiting list students as quickly as possible. It was noted that students who are withdrawn before the funding calculation deadline, day 42 after enrolment, and who are not replaced by a student from a waiting list will negatively impact the funding allocation in 2025/26. However, students with very poor attendance who cannot be reengaged are unlikely to complete their qualification and will therefore affect retention funding calculations. The College is expecting decreased attrition before day 42 and an overall increased allocation in 2025/26.

The board queried when the Higher Education Strategy will be completed. A draft has now been received and it is intended that the Curriculum and Quality Committee will receive a version for review at their December meeting. The strategy will model the current curriculum offer and include considerations around internal progression, changing demographics and the wider Higher Education landscape.

RESOLVED: **The board noted the high-level KPIs and targets for 2024/25 and where available, early progress against these measures.**

The board noted the compliance report.

The board noted how the College intends to progress its strategic goals.

292 **2023/24 result summary**

The presentation provided achievement data to date for 2023/24. Final achievement data is subject to external verification visits in some areas, including in Engineering. In June 2024, the College predicted an 80.4% overall achievement rate for 2023/24, aligning with likely achievement of 80% and indicating accurate target setting.

Governors commended the 7% improvement in achievement rates for 16-18 and noted that the College is now within 2% of national averages for achievement by age, based on colleges with a similar delivery profile. Reasons for the decrease in adult entry level achievement rates include lower retention on ESOL courses, due in part to relocation of refugees. The College has identified issues with qualification sequencing and information, advice and guidance given to adults and is implementing actions in 2024/25 to improve retention and achievement rates for adults. The board noted that achievement rates for male students were higher than those for female students. Black or minority ethnic students achieved better than white students. The reason for this disparity is mainly retention, which, for female students and white students, was lower. Retention of these groups will form part of the college Quality Improvement Plan for 2024/25. A key reason for poor retention in these groups in 2023/24 was the economic climate, with students withdrawing to pursue paid employment.

Significant improvement in the percentage of high grades for BTEC and level 3 students provides assurance that staff are using starting points and feedback to challenge students and enable them to make expected progress. High grades have also increased for higher education students. Benchmarking data is not yet available.

In response to a slight decline in achievement for care experienced young people, more resource will be focused on these students this year. Similarly, a small decline in achievement for students with an educational health care plan for those enrolled in cross-college provision, rather than discrete inclusive learning, will be addressed by the Quality Improvement Plan. High needs students continue to achieve well and above the college average.

The board discussed issues in Engineering in 2023/24 including staffing and changes at leadership and management level; however, improved achievement rates are expected once all results are verified in this area. The schools with poorest retention in 2023/24 have seen the largest drop in achievement, while overall pass rates have remained similar to those in 2022/23. Retention therefore remains a key area for improvement in 2024/25 and retention targets have been set for all schools based on retention in 2023/24.

Apprenticeship achievement has improved significantly to above 65% and is significantly above the national average, despite the low starting points of some apprentices. The College has more young apprentices than adult apprentices, which differs from the national trend. The College has seen particularly impressive performance in Early Years where 100% of apprentices passed their standard.

The board supported the infrastructure introduced in-year to improve pedagogy and support for teaching staff and took assurance from the improvement in achievement rates, value added score and high grades that this was having impact. The rapid improvement seen in the past 12 months is despite the challenge of a cohort of young people who have had their education severely disrupted by the pandemic. Governors also took assurance from the accurate achievement predictions that staff know their students well and are taking the required actions for them to excel.

The board queried the three-year trend, and challenged managers around how the College will now maintain the positive trajectory from 2023/24. Whilst results in 2022/23 may have been impacted by a national rebasing of GCSE achievement levels, in some areas poor achievement in 2022/23 was due to weaker teaching. Many students in areas such as Construction were not sufficiently prepared for external exams at the end of technical qualifications. In 2023/24, the College has prioritised pedagogical practice, quickly intervening in curriculum areas where there were issues, which has led to the improved achievement rates. In Construction, achievement rates improved by 13.4% due to improved teaching. The centralisation of teaching, learning and assessment and the renewed focus on professional development for teachers, with both internal and external input and support, will continue in 2024/25. Staffing issues have now been resolved in areas such as Business and Access to HE.

The board queried if a similar level of improvement can be achieved for 2024/25. Targets for 2024/25 will be presented to the Curriculum and Quality Committee for scrutiny. It is intended that targets are set for the next three years to balance ambition and achievability. Ensuring staff have the same high expectations of adults as of young people will help to improve achievement rates further.

The board discussed how the College might use examples of outstanding achievement to engage stakeholders. Results will not be published until they are validated in Spring 2025, but the College uses stories such as high grades as part of the recruitment campaign for new students.

RESOLVED: The board noted the results summary for 2023/24.

Andrew Lang joined the meeting.

293 <u>Financial management report including medium term financial plan</u>

The report presented a general financial update and summary of the College's financial position as per the management accounts for the year ended 31 July 2024 (subject to audit) and the period ended 31 August 2024. The Medium-term Financial Plan (2024 – 2027) was also presented for approval. Governors were invited to provide any feedback on the new format of the accounts.

Paul Growney left the meeting briefly.

[redacted]

[redacted]

The board agreed that achieving the Medium-term Financial Plan would improve the financial position of the College. The plan will be reviewed annually to ensure the College is on track to meet the targets set. The plan will be impacted by the emerging Higher Education and curriculum strategies and will in turn inform the revised estates strategy.

[redacted]

RESOLVED: **The board noted the report.**

The board approved the two scenarios of the Medium-term Financial Plan.

Julie Heap joined the meeting.

294 **<u>Safeguarding and Prevent training</u>**

The board received training on updates to Safeguarding and Prevent and the College's response, to supplement mandatory training governors have already completed online.

The training session included an update on changes to the safeguarding team and how the team provide help and support to meet the needs of young people as soon as problems emerge. Students can be placed onto early help plans and will be linked to external support such as social workers or agencies who can provide financial support to struggling families to support better retention of students. The board queried how students are identified by the safeguarding team. Students may self-refer, or be referred by another student, or a member of staff who have noticed changes in behaviour. The safeguarding team meets with referred students to identify appropriate support mechanisms. All safeguarding team members are mental health first aiders, as mental health remains the primary reason for referrals.

Governors were informed of changes to internal processes to strengthen safeguarding measures, including the introduction of Senso software to identify when students are searching for inappropriate or harmful material using the college internet network. Any instances of inappropriate searches are sent to the student's Head of School, and a discussion will take place. The board queried whether the safeguarding team has enough resource to monitor Senso notifications. This is completed by all members of the team to ensure it is manageable. The College has filters on the network to block particularly dangerous content. Intervention activities will be planned for any emerging themes flagged through Senso, whether on a one-to-one or one-to-many basis. Students are aware that their searches are monitored.

The board received an update on regional Prevent priorities. Online radicalisation and self-initiated terrorism remain a key threat for the northwest, highlighting the importance of monitoring online activity in college.

The Safeguarding Link Governor reminded the board of the challenging work the safeguarding team undertake and encouraged governors to engage with members of the team. The safeguarding team receive external supervision to ensure they are supported through the issues they may have to deal with.

RESOLVED: **The board noted the training on Safeguarding and Prevent.**

295 **Safeguarding and Prevent annual report**

The report presented a summary of the range and type of incidents raised with the Safeguarding, Mental Health and Wellbeing Team along with measures taken by the College to ensure it is compliant with the requirements of Keeping Children Safe in Education 2024 (KCSiE).

Governors agreed that the high numbers of referrals indicate a strong culture of reporting. The Designated Safeguarding Lead reiterated that staff would flag low level issues to ensure that these do not escalate. The safeguarding team have good availability and approachability for students.

RESOLVED: **The board noted the update on the number and nature of mental health and safeguarding concerns in 2023/24.**

The board noted that the College has met the requirements of KCSiE 2023 for Safeguarding and Prevent.

296 **Annual careers report**

The report presented an update on the implementation of the College's careers strategy to July 2024.

The board queried whether face to face engagements are more impactful than engagement via Teams or on the phone. Anecdotally, students prefer a face-to-face appointment, with Teams the second option and the phone the least preferred. As part of the Matrix standard, all students are offered a face-to-face careers interview; however, some students choose not to engage in this way or are not able to attend in person. Each young person also has three personal development reviews per year, which include careers advice. All personal development tutors have completed their level 2 information and guidance qualification to improve the content and value of these discussions. Where necessary, students are signposted to the careers advisors who are qualified to level 6.

The board queried the attendance of some local higher education providers at Higher Education Forums but not others. The College links with all providers impartially, as set out in the Gatsby benchmarks; however, there is more engagement with the providers listed in the report due to a higher number of progressions to those institutions. The Higher Education Forums also promote the College's internal higher education offer. To increase the number of level 3 students progressing internally, higher education tutors have visited level 3 classes during induction in September 2024 to raise awareness of the offer and encourage progression. The Higher Education Strategy will aim to link level 3 provision with sequential pathways.

RESOLVED: **The board noted the information provided and took assurance that work is ongoing to embed the career focused activities contained within the strategy.**

Julie Heap left the meeting.

297 Ofsted preparation

The board received a presentation on preparing for Ofsted inspection. The next inspection will be a full inspection, rather than a monitoring visit. The inspection will focus less on the outcomes of the last inspection and the areas for improvement highlighted; starting points, feedback, student attendance, information and guidance, and staff shortages. It will instead look more widely at the four key judgements, which allow inspectors to ascertain overall effectiveness. The training provided to staff this year has concentrated on building a culture of high standards and high expectations, rather than preparing for an inspection.

The board queried whether there is evidence of effective work scrutiny in all areas. As part of the College's observation processes, feedback on written work is randomly sampled and scrutinised, and teachers and managers are asked comparable questions to those which inspectors would ask to prepare them. Written feedback has also been externally validated by Ofsted inspectors. At this point in the year, it is too early to see whether the feedback has led to improvement in students' work, but formative assessments have taken place, and students have received their feedback. For practical activity, the student's skills at the point of observation are compared to logged starting points and expected industry standards.

Governors discussed how they can prepare for inspection, including reviewing the challenge and support they have provided to managers, as evidenced in the minutes. Governors also considered the impact that curriculum area walk throughs have had on their understanding of the student experience in the last year. A group of governors will be selected to meet with the Ofsted inspectors as part of the leadership and management judgement meetings.

RESOLVED: The board noted the presentation on Ofsted preparation.

Alison Cannon left the meeting.

298 Reserves policy

The report provided the draft St Helens College Reserves Policy for approval, as recommended by the Finance, Resources and Commercial Committee. It was noted that whilst retaining 3-6 months' cash reserves is organisational best practice, this is not always practicable in the further education sector. The Association of Colleges suggests that colleges agree their own minimum level of reserves, which is suggested within the draft Reserves Policy as £2million.

RESOLVED: The board approved the Reserves Policy and delegated the review and approval of this policy to the Finance, Resources and Commercial Committee.

299 Corporate risk register

The report presented proposed amendments to the corporate risk register for approval. The board supported the updated presentation of the risk register and noted the future intention to include a 'direction of travel' indicator.

The board requested that the control measures for risk 17 be updated to state "employing suitably qualified specialists."

The board challenged the high impact score for risk 5; failure to grow the higher education curriculum, as the income for higher education is not a substantial percentage of overall college income. This impact score is based on higher education being an opportunity area for growth, as each student brings around £8k of income. It is expected that this risk will decrease with the implementation of the higher education strategy, although some actions taken such as the introduction of new courses may not have an impact for up to two years due to the timescale for validating new provision with partner institutions.

RESOLVED: The Governing Board approved the corporate risk register.

300 Any other business

There were no items of other business.

Date of next meeting

The next meeting of the Governing Board will be held on 12 December 2024 at 3.00pm.