

St Helens College

GOVERNING BOARD

**Minutes from the meeting held at the Stockbridge Lane Campus, Knowsley
4 July 2024 at 3.15pm**

Present:	Phil Han	External Governor
	Alison Cannon	External Governor (via Microsoft Teams)
	Alun Owen	External Governor
	Liz Duncan	External Governor
	Zulakha Desai	External Governor
	Andrew Lang	External Governor
	Tim Jones	External Governor
	Natalie Ibbs	External Governor
	Simon Pierce	Chief Executive/Principal
	Tracey Turner	Staff Governor
	Jen McGill	Staff Governor
In attendance:	Stephanie Donaldson	Deputy Chief Executive
	Mohammed Ramzan	Vice Principal – Quality and Student Experience
	Philip Grant	Vice Principal - Curriculum
	Ian Johnson	Head of Finance
	Carys Bibby	Governance Director (minutes)

Governing Board members were taken on a tour of the Learning Resources Centre by Library and Learning Resource Manager, Claire Daly.

Andrew Lang and Alison Cannon joined the meeting.

262 Apologies for absence

Apologies were received for John Heritage, Paul Gowney, Jim Pinsent and Michael Ridgeway.

263 Declarations of interest

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

264 Minutes of the previous meetings held on 16 May 2024

Minutes of the previous meeting were approved as an accurate record.

265 Matters arising and action tracker

RESOLVED: The Governing Board noted the action tracker updates.

266 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.

A discussion was held around the risk of vacancies at the start of the new academic year. Managers are working with the People Team to reduce the risk, particularly in areas where new staff may have long notice periods with previous employers, through agency staffing or occasional overtime for additional staff. Consideration is given to which option will give students the best experience at the start of the year to reduce early withdrawals. Governors queried whether there were any areas of particular concern regarding staffing. In some areas there are two or three vacancies; however, for the majority of vacancies, suitable applications have been received and offers have been made. In Engineering, timetables will need to be planned carefully to ensure subject specialists are available for the correct lessons. One vacancy for a plumbing assessor has received little interest and assessor workloads will need to be managed accordingly.

The College is consulting with trade unions around increasing notice periods, bringing these in line with local competitors, to reduce the amount of time that cover is needed between staff leaving and new staff starting.

The Governing Board queried whether the staffing position had improved from the same point in 2023. The College has around the same number of vacancies but a clearer, proactive approach to appraising and managing the risk of these vacancies. Curriculum planning has been completed earlier this year, meaning that resulting vacancies have been advertised sooner and new Directors in the Senior Leadership Team are focused on finding solutions for vacancies.

The Governing Board considered the compliance report and the comments on health and safety. The Chair of the Audit Committee provided feedback on the deep dive into risks around health and safety that was completed at the Audit Committee meeting on 13 June 2024 and which provided assurance around the work being undertaken on health and safety processes. The Audit Committee was satisfied that the College has a good culture of health and safety, although there is further work to be completed around risk assessments. Interviews for the new health and safety manager will be completed in July and the Board discussed the importance of a handover between the health and safety consultant and the new manager to ensure that momentum is not lost.

RESOLVED: The Governing Board noted progress against the high-level KPIs and targets for 2023/24.

The Governing Board noted the compliance report.

The Governing Board noted the progress against the College's Strategic Goals.

The Governing Board approved the receipt of strategic progress updates three times per year at their 'performance' meetings, with deep dives into one or more strategic goals at their strategy meetings.

267 Plan for strategy refresh 2025

This report set out a preferred option for the development of a new college Strategic Plan from 2025. The Governing Board considered the implications of the change of government and the impending Ofsted inspection on the timeframe for the strategy refresh. The College has not moved away from the current Strategic Plan, which has been underpinned by additional strategies such as the People Strategy. The impact of this strategy can be seen through improved staff engagement.

Governors challenged if the College's finances are robust enough to delay a strategy refresh. The College currently does not have liquidity to cover one-month fixed costs and a new strategy could help the College to generate cash for reinvestment. It was clarified that the cost of general maintenance was not equal to depreciation due to the significant depreciation accounted for on Stockbridge Lane. The College's financial position has improved over recent years, and the College is no longer under intervention from the Further Education Commissioner. The Finance, Resources and Commercial Committee has not raised any risks around the current liquidity of the College. [REDACTED]

The Governing Board agreed that Ofsted should be the key focus of leaders, managers and staff until the full inspection has taken place and a strategy refresh would distract from this. A 'good' Ofsted inspection will strengthen the College as much as a new strategic plan, as this may open further income streams for the College.

The Executive Team will bring considerations for the new Strategic Plan to the Governing Board Strategy Day in Spring 2025.

RESOLVED: The Governing Board discussed and approved the proposed timeline for strategy refresh.

Ian Johnson joined the meeting.

268 Finance management report

The report presented a general financial update and summary of the College's financial position as per the management accounts for the period ended 31 May 2024.

The full kitchen refurbishment project has been postponed as received costs were significantly above budget. Essential remedial replace and repair work will be completed over the summer to ensure courses can continue in September 2024.

Governors queried the adverse variance on staffing costs. This is due to the higher than budgeted pay award. The draft 2024/25 budget includes a 2% pay award against current inflation of 2.6%. [REDACTED]

The financial risk rating of the paper is low at this point of the year due to certainty around the College's performance as per these accounts.

RESOLVED: The Governing Board noted the report.

269 Financial Strategy

The report presented the draft Finance Strategy 2024-2027 for consideration and approval. This Strategy will be underpinned by a medium term 3-year financial plan, with the draft budget for 2024/25 forming year one of the plan. The performance indicators in the strategy are aligned to Education & Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) requirements. The Governing Board discussed the relationship between this Finance Strategy and the overarching College Strategic Plan. The Finance Strategy will be subject to annual review; should the Strategic Plan change significantly when it is refreshed, this will be considered in the review of the Finance Strategy.

The Governing Board queried how the financial objectives, which will be included in the Finance Strategy, will be developed. Internal performance indicators will be based on the budget for 2024/25, financial boundaries set by the ESFA, bank covenants and the curriculum strategy. Work will be completed over the summer to provide proposed targets to the next meeting of the Finance, Resources and Commercial Committee.

The College does not currently have a reserves policy outside of the Financial Regulations as historically cash reserves have not been high enough to warrant such a policy. A reserves policy will be developed alongside the financial objectives, to ensure that additional cash generated by the Finance Strategy is managed appropriately.

The Governing Board suggested that the financial risk rating on the paper should be increased to medium.

RESOLVED: The Governing Board approved the Finance Strategy 2024-2027.

270 Budget for the year ending July 2025

The report presented the St Helens College Group budget for the year ending 31 July 2025 for approval. The presentation also provided an overview of the work undertaken by the Executive Team to assess whether a budget for 'Good' financial health was feasible. No changes had been made to the budget since the Finance, Resources and Commercial Committee.

The College will achieve 'Good' financial health for 2023/24. Verification of the financial health score is expected in February 2025 and will last for one calendar year. During this time, the College may be able to apply for additional discretionary funding due to the improved financial health rating.

The Governing Board queried whether presenting a budget for 'Requires Improvement' financial health to the ESFA, following a year of 'Good' financial health, implies financial instability. It was discussed that a budget for 'Good' financial health in 2024/25 would be imprudent as it could contain uncertain income and potential savings. The College may achieve better financial health than budgeted but underachieving against the budget would have poor implications.

Governors queried how the College will mitigate the risk of a 'Requires Improvement' budget for 2025/26. This will be set out in the medium-term financial plan. [REDACTED]

The Governing Board challenged that cash balances of £2m are too low as a percentage of income. An overly challenging budget in terms of income generation would be too

much of a risk for the College and could result in a worsened financial position. The biggest expenditure is on staffing and the Governing Board discussed that removing cost from this area may harm recruitment, retention and student experience. It was clarified that although it appears that the net current ratio is decreasing from 2023/24, this is due to the capital grant expenditure, which must be spent on specified items and by a specified date. The Governing Board requested that the new format of the management accounts remove the effects of grants on cash flow to provide a true representation of financial performance.

RESOLVED: **The Governing Board resolved to accept the recommendation of the Finance, Resource and Commercial Committee to approve the budget (including capital expenditure) for the year ending 31 July 2025.**

271 Estates update

The report presented an update on progress of capital projects at the College, since the last Governing Board held on 16 May 2024. The Governing Board noted that the College has now proceeded to vacate the site at Cherryfield Drive after notice was served by the Council. Together with the council, the College is planning 'WorkWorld' employability provision at two community centres in Kirkby to ensure that the College maintains a presence in the town. The College will also offer ESOL and English and maths qualifications there.

[REDACTED]

RESOLVED: **The Governing Board noted the report.**

Ian Johnson left the meeting.

272 Quality update

The report presented a summary of the impact of the quality assurance and improvement activities undertaken across the College to enhance the quality of the student experience. The report provided insights into the progress and effectiveness of the various initiatives, as part of the College's commitment to continuous improvement. These matters were scrutinised by the Curriculum and Quality Committee at its meeting of 13 June 2024.

The proportions of observations of effective teaching learning and assessment had increased since the start of the year. The Vice Principal Quality and Student Experience thanked the Governing Board for their support for investment in the Quality Team and staff development, which has accelerated improvements in teaching learning and

assessment. Staff feedback indicates that a culture of improvement has been established at the College with all staff engaging in development activity. Staff governors corroborated this view.

The Chair of the Curriculum and Quality Committee had taken part in an external developmental deep dive on apprenticeships and provided feedback to the Governing Board. The deep dive provided assurance that apprenticeship provision is good and best practice identified in this area will be shared across the College. There was good evidence of use of starting points and how this is used in assessment practice, as well as continuous feedback demonstrating progress towards end point assessments, and strong evidence of skills enhancement in the curriculum through employer links. Any staffing challenges in the new year will need to be mitigated to ensure that they don't impact apprentice experience. Self-assessment reports and the resulting quality improvement plans will establish actions where any achievement and retention targets have been missed this year.

The Governing Board challenged poor retention rates for adults. As the College aims to include adults from deprived backgrounds, these students are often impacted more severely by financial difficulties or government policy, such as relocation of refugees, creating an inherent higher risk around retention. The College will look closely at the planning of the curriculum to ensure it is suitable for the students served and that the length of time required to achieve a qualification is appropriate. Information, advice and guidance offered to adults on enrolment will also be considered, ensuring that adults fully understand the commitment required for the course.

The Governing Board discussed the progress made in the quality of education at the College and thanked the team involved.

RESOLVED: **The Governing Board noted the report and the key actions being taken to enhance the student experience and took assurance that the work undertaken to improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment is having a positive impact.**

Liz Duncan left the meeting.

273 Adult curriculum

The report presented a high-level summary of the adult curriculum for 2024/2025, focusing on the changes agreed through the College's curriculum business planning processes.

Governors were pleased to see the planned inclusion of additional courses at Knowsley in response to community need and the growing equity in the curriculum across St Helens and Knowsley sites. The Vice Principal – Curriculum has been focusing on community engagement within the Knowsley borough and curriculum planning with a Knowsley focus.

The Governing Board queried early indications of application numbers. 265 adults attended an enrolment event on 3 July.

RESOLVED: **The Governing Board noted the changes made to the adult curriculum offer.**

274 Access and Participation Plan

The report presented a summary of the attached Access and Participation Plan (APP), which was presented to the Governing Board for approval following scrutiny by the Curriculum and Quality Committee at its meeting of 13 June and the inclusion of the recommendations of the committee.

RESOLVED: The Governing Board approved the Access and Participation Plan for submission to the Office for Students (OfS).

275 External audit plan

The report presented the draft external audit memorandum for approval, as recommended by the Audit Committee. This version may be amended when RSM commence the detailed planning stage and any changes will be circulated to the Audit Committee. The Chair of the Audit Committee provided an overview of the committee's scrutiny of the audit risk summary.

RESOLVED: The Governing Board approved the external audit plan, as recommended by the Audit Committee.

276 Corporate risk register

The report presented proposed amendments to the corporate risk register for approval.

The Audit Committee have requested that a summary version of the risk register is provided to the next Governing Board meeting, to give a strategic overview of current risks and the direction of travel.

RESOLVED: The Governing Board approved the Corporate Risk Register.

277 Policies

The report presented the Health and Safety Policy and Management of Closure or Suspension of a Programme of Study Policy for approval, as recommended by the Finance, Resources and Commercial and Curriculum and Quality Committees respectively. The report presents the Fee Charges and Fee Discount Policy for approval.

RESOLVED: The Governing Board accepted the recommendation of the Finance, Resources and Commercial Committee to approve the Health and Safety Policy.

The Governing Board approved the Fee Charges and Fee Discount Policy.

The Governing Board accepted the recommendation of the Curriculum and Quality Committee to approve the Management of Closure or Suspension of a Programme of Study Policy.

278 Waterside Training governance

The report presented updated governance framework documents for Waterside Training Ltd for approval and noting. The Governance Director drew attention to the governance

agreement and its schedules and appendices, which detail the services, covenants and policies adopted by the College and its subsidiary Waterside Training. Changes to any section of this agreement will need the agreement of both the College Board and the Waterside Training Board, giving appropriate control for a subsidiary. The Governing Board noted that as a subsidiary of a Further Education College, Waterside Training must follow Managing Public Money regulations and as such should adhere to the College's Financial Regulations.

RESOLVED: The Governing Board noted the Articles of Association and the Director Service Agreement.

The Governing Board approved the Shareholders Agreement and the Governance Agreement.

279 Annual governance review

The report provided an update on governance activity within the College.

The new actions proposed for the action plan have been scrutinised by the Search and Governance Committee. The deadline for proposed action number six will be dependent on the development of the strategy. Should the Governing Board choose to refresh the College values as part of the strategy refresh, the behaviours matrix will be developed based on the new values.

The report requested expressions of interest in the Skills Link Governor role. Ensuring that the College meets local needs is the duty of the whole Governing Board and is not delegated to this link governor. The link governor role adds an extra level of scrutiny to the work the College with employers and the community to ensure their needs are met.

RESOLVED: The Governing Board approved the proposed actions to be added to the governance action plan for 2024/25.

The Governing Board resolved to accept the recommendation of the Search and Governance Committee to appoint Paul Growney to the Finance, Resources and Commercial Committee and Tim Jones to the Audit Committee.

The board approved the Standing Orders and Scheme of Delegation.

280 Link Governor update

Link governors provided a verbal update on the activity they had undertaken since the last Governing Board meeting. The Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Link Governor is now a member of the College's EDI Steering Group.

The Safeguarding Link Governor has met with the new Designated Safeguarding Lead and commended the appointment.

RESOLVED: The Governing Board noted the link governor update.

281 Committee minutes and chairs update

The Chair of the Audit Committee provided an update around internal audit actions relating to procurement, which had previously been reported as completed. The follow-up

audit had indicated that these actions were incomplete, and a new deadline has been set for these actions to be closed by the autumn. The Audit Committee has gained assurance from the executive team that the new deadline will be met, and further processes have been instated to ensure that actions are not incorrectly closed.

RESOLVED: The Governing Board noted the committee minutes and chairs update.

282 Any other business

The College has been successful in its Matrix reaccreditation; an external award relating to information, advice and guidance offered.

Date of next meeting

The next meeting of the Governing Board will be held on 10 October 2024 at 3.15pm.