St Helens College

GOVERNING BOARD

Minutes from the meeting held at the St Helens Town Centre Campus
Thursday 6 February 2025 at 3.00pm

Present:	Phil Han	External Governor
	Alison Cannon	External Governor
	Jim Pinsent	External Governor
	Andrew Lang	External Governor
	Zulakha Desai	External Governor
	Simon Pierce	Chief Executive/Principal
	Tracey Turner	Staff Governor
	Jen McGill	Staff Governor
	Fego Orughele	Student Governor
In attendance:	Stephanie Donaldson	Deputy Chief Executive
	Mohammed Ramzan	Vice Principal – Quality and Student Experience
	Philip Grant	Vice Principal - Curriculum
	Janet Hulme	Director of People and Organisational Development
	Carys Bibby	Governance Director (minutes)

Governing Board members were taken on a tour of Waterside Training by Julia Callaghan, Managing Director, and Nick Shore, Chair of Waterside Training.

Governors were given an overview of coursework by two of Waterside's electrical apprentices and were impressed by their knowledge and enthusiasm. Each apprentice gave a demonstration of some of the techniques they have learnt whilst on the course and some of the problem-solving exercises they have undertaken and how these have been beneficial back in their workplace.

Governors thanked the two apprentices and the tutor for their time and Julia Callaghan for arranging the visit

Andrew Lang joined the meeting.

322 **Apologies for absence**

Apologies were received for Liz Duncan, Natalie Ibbs, John Heritage, Paul Growney, Alun Owen and Travis Brown.

323 **Declarations of interest**

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

324 **Minutes of the previous meetings held on 12 December 2024**

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

325 **Matters arising and action tracker**

RESOLVED: The board noted the action tracker updates.

Catherine Sykes joined the meeting.

326 **AI Governance Training**

Governors received training from Catherine Sykes, Governance Director at Hull College, on artificial intelligence and the risks and opportunities for education and particularly governance of the College. The board discussed what governors need to know about artificial intelligence (AI), including examples of AI applications and how the board might use AI to enhance foresight, engagement, adaptability, and inclusivity. Examples of AI applications used at Hull include 'Decisions' as a board portal and TeacherMatic to create learning materials. AI can also offer solutions for governance such as supporting report writing; making documents more accessible and data driven.

The session covered safeguarding AI use and emphasised the importance of human oversight. It was noted that systems should be put in place to ensure compliance with GDPR, that IT equipment and software is prepared to handle AI applications, and that staff and students are trained around what data can and should be entered into AI to receive reliable information and keep college data safe.

The board queried if governors at Hull College are informed if a policy has been AI-generated. At Hull, the owner of a policy is responsible for the content, even if AI-generated, and there is an expectation that they will have critically analysed any AI output if included. There is a requirement for staff and managers to be trained to use AI in this way, as a tool rather than a replacement, with clarity around how to spot factual inaccuracies. Review processes for these policies should also highlight any issues before approval.

The board thanked Catherine for her attendance and a thorough presentation.

Stephanie Donaldson and Catherine Sykes left the meeting.

The board considered the College's progress with AI. The College has plotted its current position on Jisc's 'AI maturity model' and is in the second stage of maturity; experimenting and exploring. The College is currently using TeacherMatic to alleviate workload for teaching staff and an AI steering group has been set up to drive AI adoption and ensure safe use.

A discussion was held around students' use of AI. AI is not a reason for students to stop developing their skills, but training will be required to ensure that students can use AI effectively and input the right questions. The Student Governor raised a risk around students using AI to undertake assessments. For final exams, AI applications are locked on college computers, in line with awarding body regulations. For formative assessment, tutors are aware of the abilities of individual students and can spot when AI has been used, particularly for lower-level students. The governing board discussed the importance of synoptic assessments and presentations to confirm that students understand the work they have undertaken and to test their academic capability, communication and critical thinking skills.

327 **AI Policy**

The report presented a draft Artificial Intelligence (AI) policy for governing board scrutiny and approval. The board noted Jisc's advice that an AI Policy was not a necessity as AI considerations and usage should feature across all policies but agreed that at this stage in the College's adoption of AI, a dedicated policy is a useful tool. Due to the dynamism of AI, a leadership action plan will be developed to support this policy, which will be driven by the AI steering group. The board suggested that the steering group include representation from at least two students.

The board considered whether this policy would alert students who were not already aware of the potential of using AI inappropriately but agreed that the benefits of setting out proper usage guidelines outweighed this risk. The board discussed that currently, setting a strategy for AI would be difficult as the landscape is changing rapidly, but that the policy is generic enough to withstand any developments. The policy will be reviewed annually, or in line with any significant changes.

In response to a query on what software the College uses to check whether student work is AI generated, it was confirmed that, for work submitted at Level 4 and above, the College uses Turnitin, plagiarism detection software, which is being developed to better spot the use of AI. Some level 3 courses also use Turnitin software but at lower levels, tutors check for signs of inauthentic work.

The board challenged how the College plans to educate students about the use of AI. This will be built into the pastoral curriculum, but more work is needed to ensure that all tutors build AI training into their delivery plans. Training for staff around AI has primarily focused on the use of AI to enhance teaching and learning but more sessions will be planned to upskill teaching staff, to enable them to teach students on how to use AI safely and efficiently.

The board agreed that AI should not be used for marking student work, outside of multiple-choice questions. The board requested regular updates on the outcomes from the AI steering group and suggested that the steering group should consider the impact and risks around technological knowledge, weighed against the development of critical thinking skills.

RESOLVED: The board approved the College's draft AI Policy.

328 **Digital Strategy**

The report presented the Digital Strategy for approval following review at the Finance, Resources and Commercial Committee. The Chair of the committee provided an overview of the thorough presentation given by the Head of IT and the ensuing discussion. The committee have suggested that an action plan be developed against this strategy, to ensure the strands are achieved.

RESOLVED: The board approved the Digital Strategy.

329 **Equality, diversity and inclusion annual report**

The report summarised staff and student profiles across a range of protected characteristics and compares the performance of different groups of students. The report also highlighted some of the activities the College has undertaken during the 2023/24 academic year, to promote equality, diversity and inclusivity, including activities within the curriculum to develop students' awareness and understanding.

The board noted that the College has adopted the concept of FREDIE - fairness, respect, equality, diversity, inclusion and engagement through its work with the National Centre for Diversity and that this is impacting student and staff awareness of this initiative. The board supported the College applying for 'Gold' status for Investors in Diversity and queried when this could be achieved. The College has now been awarded 'Silver' accreditation, which is valid for two years. The National Centre for Diversity has also provided the College with an outline action plan based on their findings during the silver accreditation process. This plan will be further developed and implemented following which the College aims to apply for a 'Gold' award. Improving inclusivity at the College will help to support the increasingly diverse communities the College serves and aligns with the College mission to improve social mobility and 'transform lives through education'.

In response to a query on gender differences in participation and achievement rates, the board was informed that achievement rates in 2023/24 were lower for females due to poorer retention on courses with predominantly female students, such as Hair and Beauty, and Health and Social Care. The number of male students has grown more significantly than the number of female students as the College has expanded provision in Construction, Engineering and Apprenticeships, which traditionally have more male students/apprentices.

The board queried whether the aging workforce of the College posed a risk. Further education colleges often have an older workforce profile than that of school or sixth form colleges as vocational tutors have often worked for many years in their respective occupations before entering teaching. More people are working until retirement age or older, which may be a factor for the increased number of staff aged 60+. There is a risk in Construction and Engineering, priority areas for the College, which have an older workforce than other curriculum areas as people are likely to work for longer in industry before starting teaching. The College is mitigating this risk with campaigns to recruit new teachers from industry and will keep this under review.

The board discussed references to high levels of ill health amongst the local population in the context section of the report and whether this contributes to student absence. Ill health is more prevalent amongst adults in the region and can be linked to poor levels of employment and qualifications. It is both a barrier to adults attending college and a reason to promote college attendance within the community, to improve prospects.

RESOLVED: The board noted note the annual report, which will be published on the college website.

Janet Hulme joined the meeting.

330 **Performance/exception report inc. strategy deep dive**

The report provided governors with a summary of progress against the College's key performance indicators (KPIs) as part of the agreed approach to assurance reporting, together with the board compliance report.

The board noted that the Attendance and Retention Officer post is having an impact on attendance in English and maths and as such the post has been extended. This is additional to the two Attendance and Retention Officers already in the staffing establishment. The board queried the strategies used by the Attendance and Retention Officer to improve attendance. The new role has focused on intensive follow up of non-attendance for English and maths classes, whilst the two other Attendance and Retention Officers are engaged in chasing attendance generally and for vocational classes. The board discussed that English and maths challenge remains a challenge and how this might impact exam performance with GCSE exams around 14 weeks away. The Governing Board requested data on the improvement seen in English and maths attendance as a result of the Attendance and Retention Officer's intervention and that English and maths attendance be shown separately in the Key Performance Indicator dashboard.

Alison Cannon left the meeting briefly

The board received an update on negotiations with trade unions on the approved pay award, which are ongoing.

Since the last report, destinations and progressions data capture has been completed and the percentage of students from 2023/24 who progressed within the College or to a positive destination has increased. The board noted that 57% of students progressed internally, but the College is aiming for 65% progression, in order to grow 16-18 numbers.

The board challenged areas of non-compliance in the report and requested that leaders and managers provide an estimate for when the College will be compliant with these measures.

Stephanie Donaldson and Janet Hulme joined the meeting. Phil Han left and the Vice Chair, Alison Cannon, chaired the remainder of the meeting.

The Director of People gave a presentation on the People Strategy, linked to the Employer of Choice strategic goal with an overview of progress, impact and next steps. The board discussed the improved experience for new staff, who had provided feedback that the onboarding into the organisation was one of the best processes they had experienced and that they felt valued by the College as a result. The board suggested that the College might use reasons that staff enjoy working at the College to support recruitment. Staff governors provided feedback that the College is a flexible employer, which supports its employees and has a "family" feel. The Director of People corroborated that the College will always aim to approve flexible working requests.

The board considered the impact of the actions taken. The College is on track to halve staff turnover in 2024/25 compared to 2023/24. This is not due to a lack of vacancies advertised by other providers, some of which are at a higher salary point, and therefore it could be assumed that staff are happier and therefore not searching for employment elsewhere. This is supported by the improved pulse survey result, in which the score for leadership 'providing direction' improved by 48%, indicating the value of stability at senior leader level.

The appraisal process is part of wider strategies to drive continuous improvement and a focus on teacher capability. Of 30 ineffective lesson observations, 14 reobservations were effective, 7 staff have left the College and others continue to be supported. This is equal to around 10% of teaching staff.

The board noted staff receptiveness to new initiatives, many of which have been led by the employee engagement champions, a solutions-focused group of staff. The College's new communication and employee reward platform, MyHub is used by 210% more staff than at other comparable educational establishments. The staff award ceremony in January was well received and ensured a positive start to the spring term.

The board took assurance on the success of the People Strategy so far and the change in culture from the feedback and metrics provided. Governors commended the People Team on the amount of work undertaken and the positive results.

RESOLVED: **The board noted the progress against high-level KPIs and targets for 2024/25.**

The board noted the compliance report.

The board noted progress against the Employer of Choice strategic goal.

Janet Hulme left the meeting.

331 **<u>Governor recruitment</u>**

The report contained an update on governor recruitment.

RESOLVED: **The board approved the updated Terms of Reference for the Curriculum and Quality Committee.**

The board approved the appointment of Paul Oginsky and Isabel Lucas as co-opted members of the Curriculum and Quality Committee, as recommended by the selection panel.

The board noted the update on external governor recruitment.

Jim Pinsent left the meeting.

332 **<u>Financial management report</u>**

The report presented a summary of the St Helens College Group management accounts for the period ended 31 December 2024 and an update on the college estate, for information. The accounts had been scrutinised by the Finance, Resources and Commercial Committee and the board noted risks around reduced income, until confirmation of government grants is received.

The board queried whether a forecast financial health score of 150 would trigger intervention from the Department for Education. This lower performance score is partially a result of the increased pay award approved by the board. No further intervention would be triggered by this score and the college accounts continue to be scrutinised by the Department, until continued financial resilience is demonstrated. Budget setting for 2025/26 will aim to improve the financial health score.

[redacted]

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

333 Corporate risk register

The board considered whether any of the discussions in this meeting have resulted in changes to the risk register. It was noted that there is now no risk of clawback of £250k of bursary funding.

The board discussed risk 19 and agreed that this should be kept under review, dependant on government grant funding announcements. It was agreed that AI be included in the risk register following the discussions earlier in the meeting.

RESOLVED: **The board approved the Corporate Risk Register.**

334 Any other business

There were no items of other business.

335 Date of next meeting

The next meeting of the Governing Board will be the Strategy Day be held on 28 February 2025.