

St Helens College

GOVERNING BOARD

Minutes from the meeting held at the Green Energy Skills Centre, St Helens Thursday 3 April 2025 at 3.15pm

Present:	Phil Han	External Governor
	Alison Cannon	External Governor
	Andrew Lang	External Governor
	Jim Pinsent	External Governor
	Natalie Ibbs	External Governor
	Zulakha Desai	External Governor
	Simon Pierce	Chief Executive/Principal
	Tracey Turner	Staff Governor
In attendance:	Shirley Collier	AoC, External Board Reviewer
	Stephanie Donaldson	Deputy Chief Executive
	Mohammed Ramzan	Vice Principal – Quality and Student Experience
	Janet Hulme	Director of People and Organisational Development
	Carys Bibby	Governance Director (minutes)

Governing Board members were taken on a tour of the Green Energy Skills Centre by Chris Lee, Deputy Head of School for Construction.

Governors commended the project undertaken to transform the site from a logistics hub to a state-of-the-art centre for plumbing and retrofit. The staff at the site had ownership over this area and had achieved a huge amount with the site.

340 Apologies for absence

Apologies were received for Liz Duncan, John Heritage, Travis Brown, Fego Orughele and Jen McGill.

The Chair welcomed Shirley Collier, external board reviewer, to the meeting.

350 Declarations of interest

It was noted that Stephanie Donaldson is an independent member of Torus' Audit Committee. It was noted that Zulakha Desai, Andrew Lang and Phil Han would not vote on the recommendations relating to themselves in minute 351.

351 Governor appointments

The report set out the governor appointment recommendations of the Search and Governance Committee. The Chair of the Search and Governance Committee provided further detail on the resignations received.

RESOLVED: **The board approved the reappointment of Zulakha Desai and Andrew Lang to the Governing Board for a further 4 years.**

The board approved the temporary appointment of Phil Han to the Curriculum and Quality Committee.

352 Minutes of previous meetings held on 6 February 2025 and 13 March 2025

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

353 Matters arising and action tracker

All actions were complete.

RESOLVED: **The board noted the action tracker updates.**

354 Performance and compliance

The report provided governors with a summary of progress against key performance indicators as part of the agreed approach to assurance reporting, together with the board compliance report. The report also included a short update on the 2024/25 pay award proposals and a summary of recent policy changes affecting the College.

Currently financial forecasts indicate the College will end the year in a financial deficit and with a financial health score of 150 points (requires improvement). Senior leaders are working to increase income across various funding streams. For example, it is expected that the apprenticeship team will be able to claim £70k of additional learner support funding for the work they have been doing to support apprentices. The College will also submit a business case to the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority to increase the devolved adult skills fund allocation by 3%. Governors queried how proactive teams have been in identifying additional income opportunities. This is an area for improvement across the College. In apprenticeships, the work to screen apprentices for support needs was not at an additional cost, whereas in many areas additional income could only be provided through more provision, which would have further expenditure. Whilst the College's income is significantly grant based, managers should be challenged around their targets for growth and encouraged to bid for ad hoc grant funding where available.

This financial outturn may be impacted by the College's share of the government £50m grant funding; however, as the amount and timing of this grant is unclear until an announcement is made in May, this has not been included in the forecast. This is offset by the assumption in the forecast that the College will receive 100% of the employer national insurance contribution, which is now known not to be the case with further information to be announced in May. The College will also receive £1.27m condition capital funding for estates works. In response to a query on the restrictions around spending this funding, it was confirmed that this must be spent by the end of 2026 on projects to improve the condition of the estate. In some instances, this could be linked to improving curriculum delivery areas; however, the grant cannot be used for equipment. The money will be provided to the College upfront and not paid on invoice.

The board discussed progress to date on negotiations with trade unions on the proposed pay award. The College recognises and negotiates jointly with four trade unions. ■■■■■ the board considered the implications of this delay to the pay award for staff dealing with rising costs.

Governors queried if the College was lobbying for a fair share of the £600m funding package for construction training. The College has lobbied the Metro Mayor and will write to local MPs around ensuring that specialist centres are based in FE Colleges rather than new institutes that could duplicate existing provision and increase competition. The College will also develop plans for Construction provision projects, to be enacted should funding become available. STEM is a growth opportunity area for the College but the lack of space at both the STEM and IAMTech campuses is a potential risk.

The board discussed the positive direction of movement on key performance indicators. Attendance remains the biggest risk for the College and ensuring that students return after Easter will be a key challenge, as it is during this term historically that student retention has diverged from national averages. Student progress has been more consistent this year, which is a key indicator for good retention and students who know that they will achieve their qualifications are more likely to continue to attend. Final achievement predictions will be available after the Easter break, which in 2024 differed by just 0.5% from the final achievement rates. The College intends to increase internal progression again in 2025/26. Governors had seen an example of this progression during the curriculum area walk through: a level 3 apprentice who had started with the College at level 1. Improved progression enables students to enter the labour market at high entry points.

In response to a query around compliance with human resources measures, governors were advised that disciplinary meetings had taken place with managers who had not ensured full compliance in their areas.

RESOLVED: The board noted the report.

The board noted the compliance report.

355 Financial management and estates report

The report presented a summary of the St Helens College Group management accounts for the period ended 31 January 2025, the forecast outturn for the 12 months to July 2025 and an update on progress of capital projects at the College.

The Finance, Resources and Commercial Committee considered the high cost of agency staff and challenged what managers were doing to reduce this. The Procurement Manager is analysing current staffing agency contracts to streamline these and ensure the College is getting best value for money. The increased focus on procurement is already having an impact on non-pay costs.

It was confirmed that all grants were spent by the required deadlines, except the T Level capital funding grant in respect of Animal Management, for which the deadline has been extended to June 2025.

[REDACTED]

Governors received a verbal update on the community use agreement, which forms one part of the documentation for the Stockbridge Lane PFI agreement. The lease and service level agreement have been signed. The community use agreement includes a clause allowing the College to reclaim the costs of opening the College for community but restricts the maximum rates that can be charged to be no greater than those charged by the council. The council and local community are keen to use the facilities at the site; however, the capped rates would mean the College would need to subsidise the site opening. As community use is not the primary function of the College, this would not be permitted under Managing Public Money. The level of demand for use has not yet been established. The board considered the reputational risk and implications for the relationship with the council and supported the College working with the Department for Education to address this issue in the agreement.

Alison Cannon left the meeting briefly.

The board were advised that the College will be able to manage cash flows, despite not receiving the grant towards employer national insurance contributions until September 2025.

[REDACTED]

RESOLVED: The board noted the report.

356 Curriculum and quality update

The report provided a general update on the quality of teaching, learning, and assessment across the College, alongside progress made against the Quality Improvement Plan. It also included an update on the quality of adult provision, highlighting enhancements in curriculum design and learner support.

Governors were advised that the additional resources assigned to improving attendance in English and maths sessions were having impact and evidence was provided. This will reduce the risk of the College not meeting the 97.5% condition of funding threshold in 2025/26. Reasons for erratic student attendance included employment and government changes to asylum schemes, which impact English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) students. Students who have not consistently attended are being identified and interventions put in place.

The student survey provided governors with assurance that the percentage of students who said that teaching at the College is good has increased. The number of students who would recommend a college to a friend has decreased since term one, which is a usual trend for the sector, but remains higher than the previous year. The College is in

the top quartile of national benchmarked providers, which includes almost half of further education providers. This data can be triangulated with teaching observations and the quality of marked work to indicate the improvement in teaching this year. This survey does not include qualitative information; the College collects this through student voice forums and a report will be provided to the next Curriculum and Quality Committee.

The board was advised that in specific curriculum areas for improvement, Engineering and Business, both student satisfaction and retention have improved. Some staffing issues remain in Business, which are being mitigated.

An interim update on the quality improvement plan (QIP) was provided. The second review of progress against the QIP plan will be completed after Easter and it is expected that actions 4 and 7, relating to starting points and students with high needs, will become 'green'. Retention is 1.4% higher than at the same point last year. In 2024, the College withdrew a further 4% of learners after Easter and actions have been put in place to reduce this attrition where possible and to mitigate the impact that any late withdrawals will have on student achievement rates.

For 2023/24 the College self-assessed adult provision as 'requires improvement'. Based on current key performance indicators, observations of teaching and learning, and student feedback, this would now be graded as 'good'. Significant improvements have been seen in the teaching of substantial adult courses including on Access to Higher Education and ESOL. Attendance is above target at 88.6%.

Governors were pleased to see the support in place for new teachers. The College had identified a gap for those teachers joining from a trade, who were not yet ready to sit a teaching qualification at level 5 and introduced a level 3 qualification for these staff. Positive feedback has been received from staff and early staff retention has improved. Governors requested that the College consider formal support for staff returning after a period of absence, such as maternity leave or long-term sickness. Currently staff have keep-in-touch days and phased returns where necessary.

RESOLVED: The board noted the report.

357 Corporate Risk Register

The report presented the corporate risk register for approval. Following the last Governing Board meeting, a risk related to artificial intelligence had been added to the risk register. The residual risk is low due to strong mitigations.

RESOLVED: The board approved the updated Corporate Risk Register.

Janet Hulme joined the meeting.

358 Annual gender pay gap report

The report presented information about the gender pay gap at St Helens College. The gender pays gaps has increased slightly but remains below the national average and that for some other colleges.

The small gap between the median and the mean indicates that recent pay awards have been effective across all pay grades. Since the report in 2024, the College has appointed

more males in the top quartile and more females in the lower quartile. The structure of both the Executive and Senior Leadership Team is balanced by gender; however, the top quartile in this report also includes Wider Leadership Team, to which a number of male staff have been appointed recently. Governors were advised that applications are redacted at shortlisting stage so that candidates are selected without prejudice as far as possible.

The board discussed the shortening of pay grades at lower levels and the differentiation between staff with varying responsibilities. There is a gap between each grade, but changes to the national living wage have meant this gap is decreasing and inconsistent. Trade unions have asked for job evaluation; however, this would be expensive and resource heavy and would need to be carefully considered. The board requested that managers seek to adjust salary bands once the pay award is agreed.

The board queried whether the College has considered its pay gaps for ethnic minorities and staff with disabilities. Currently, many staff choose not to disclose this information and therefore any gap analysis would not be complete.

RESOLVED: The board noted the Gender Pay Gap Report 2025.

Janet Hulme left the meeting.

359 Policies

The report presented a number of policies for approval, following consideration at committee level where relevant.

RESOLVED: The board approved the Emergency Plan, Financial Regulations, Health and Safety Policy and HE Tuition Fees Policy and 2026/27 Tuition Fees.

360 Link governor update

The safeguarding link governor advised that the Safeguarding Team and all safeguarding arrangements continued to work effectively.

The health and safety link governor reported no major issues. The Health and Safety Manager continues to address pockets of non-compliance, prioritising the highest risk areas; however, no major issues were reported by the health and safety link governor.

RESOLVED: The board noted the updates.

361 Committee minutes and chairs update

Curriculum and Quality Committee

Students had attended the last meeting and had provided an update to governors, which included themes such as their social action projects and students' mental health issues. The committee had received a full update on safeguarding and scrutinised self-referrals by gender. The committee had challenged managers around the early warning signs of student withdrawal and actions taken when students have poor attendance following Christmas due to employment. The committee received an update on curriculum

planning, which had used 4CAST software to support the more efficient planning of delivery.

Finance Resources and Commercial Committee

The committee had scrutinised the management accounts and the estates update, [REDACTED]. The capital grant announcement had been made since the meeting of this committee.

Audit Committee

A follow-up internal audit had been conducted on procurement and the committee had received a 'reasonable assurance' report, following the limited assurance report in 2023. The management team had committed to achievable actions in response to points raised in this report. An audit on GDPR had provided substantial assurance. The committee received a deep dive into the new risk on AI. The College is currently in the process of procuring a new external auditor and the Chair of the Audit Committee will be part of the tender evaluation panel. The tender will be weighted towards the quality of the submissions

Search and Governance Committee

An extraordinary meeting of the committee had taken place following governor resignations and to discuss the appointment of a Deputy Principal.

RESOLVED: The board noted the updates.

362 Any other business

Sutton Academy

The board were advised the College is no longer a sponsor of the Sutton Academy, which has now joined a multi-academy trust. The Department for Education have confirmed that no action is required by the College to dissolve the trusteeship. College managers continue to serve on the academy board, outside of this formal relationship.

Stephanie Donaldson and Mohammed Ramzan left the meeting.

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Date of next meeting

The next meeting of the Governing Board will be held on 22 May 2025.