St Helens College

GOVERNING BOARD

Minutes from the meeting held at the Town Centre Campus, St Helens
Thursday 3 July 2025 at 3.00pm

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
	John Heritage	External Governor (via Microsoft Teams)
	Ann Marr	External Governor
	Alistair Greer	External Governor
	Clare Milsom	External Governor
	Doug Laver	External Governor
	Simon Pierce	Chief Executive/Principal
	Jen McGill	Staff Governor
	Tracey Turner	Staff Governor
In attendance:	Stephanie Donaldson	Deputy Chief Executive
	Mohammed Ramzan	Deputy Principal
	Shirley Collier	Association of Colleges Reviewer
	Carys Bibby	Governance Director (minutes)

Governing Board members were taken on a tour of the College Nursery by Nicola Glover, Nursery Manager.

379 Apologies for absence

Apologies were received for Liz Duncan, Travis Brown and Fego Orughele.

Ann Marr, Alistair Greer, Clare Milsom and Doug Laver were welcomed to their first meeting.

380 Declarations of interest

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

381 **Minutes of previous meetings held on 15 May and 22 May 2025**

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

382 **Matters arising and action tracker**

RESOLVED: The board noted the action tracker updates.

Shirley Collier joined the meeting.

383 **External Governance review**

Governors were provided with an overview of the review outcomes. The review highlighted a number of strengths in governance at St Helens College including inclusivity and the board composition. Areas for development included student governor recruitment and engagement, the use of risk in governance processes and the presentation of reports. Governors agreed that greater visual representation of data in reports would be helpful. Governors receive a dashboard at each board meeting and requested that this be reviewed to ensure it is comprehensive. The inclusion of graphs may make patterns of improvement clearer.

The board discussed how the use of risk as a lens for governance business might be facilitated. The Chair of the Audit Committee assured governors of improvements made to the corporate risk register over recent years that would enable this work. Assigning risks to committees will enable better oversight but the board noted the limitations of using Microsoft Excel to capture the risk register . The board agreed that a periodic 'risk appetite' workshop would be helpful to ensure that governors and staff understand this.

Governors noted that while board meetings were perceived as welcoming and supportive by the reviewer, this could still be an intimidating environment for younger student governors and discussed possible solutions for this.

The board thanked Shirley for leading the review and commented that they had found the process helpful and informative and particularly enjoyed the one-to-one meetings, which had challenged their view of good governance.

Recommendations from the review will be considered by the Search and Governance Committee, which will develop an action plan for Governing Board approval.

RESOLVED: The board approved the external governance review report.

Shirley Collier left the meeting.

384 **Performance and compliance**

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

The board noted that 90% retention was an improvement for the College and an explanation of how student retention is calculated was provided for new governors. The board considered the financial health score and the new benchmarks provided by the Further Education Commissioner. These had been scrutinised by the Finance, Resources and Commercial Committee who noted that the benchmarks were aspirational.

Tracey Turner left the meeting briefly.

An update was provided on the pay award. [redacted]

The College had received confirmation that no Ofsted inspections would take place in September or October, and it is expected that inspections will commence in November under the new framework. This new framework has not yet been published and is not expected until September, which presents a risk that inspections may be delayed further. Governors queried how grading will work under the new inspection framework, which will be based on a scorecard with no overall single-word judgements. The College will be graded numerically in a number of different areas. Governors requested a training session on the new framework. LJMU had been part of the pilot for the new framework and [redacted] offered to share insights with managers to help prepare for an inspection under the new framework.

Governors received an update on the strategy sessions at the staff CPD day, which the Chair had attended. Useful input had been received from staff, which will help to develop the new strategy.

Governors noted a large number of policy changes at government level. The comprehensive spending review had indicated a real term increase in funding of 3% over 3 years for 16–19-year-olds but not for adults or Higher Education students, which make up around 20% of college income. The further education sector is seen as a key partner in helping the Government achieve its goals, for example as set out in the recently published Industrial Strategy. Skills England also see FE colleges as key delivery partners with employers

Jim Pinsent left the meeting briefly.

In response to a query on assumptions around the support for employer national insurance contributions, it was confirmed that the College had received 97% of this cost, compared to the 80% budgeted, which had helped to improve the financial performance in-year and the budget for 2025/26. The budget assumes a similar level of support from April 2026 although this is not yet confirmed.

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

The board noted the compliance report.

385 [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

Alison Cannon left the meeting briefly.

[redacted]

[redacted]

RESOLVED: The board noted the report.

386 <u>**Financial management and estates update**</u>

The report presented a summary of the St Helens College Group management accounts for the period ended 31 May 2025 and an update on the college estate, for information. The College is now forecasting a surplus and ‘good’ financial health, largely due to higher bank balances from the estates condition grant and capital underspend due to invoicing timescales.

The board noted the creation of the Strategic Director of Estates role, which will lead on the development of an estates strategy, considering priorities for spend of grant or capital receipt money and environmental sustainability objectives.

RESOLVED: The board noted the report.

387 Budget for the year ending 31 July 2026

The report presented the draft budget for the year ending 31 July 2026 for approval. The amount of additional 16-19 funding had been unconfirmed when this budget was recommended by the Finance Resources and Commercial Committee. The budget included £600k additional funding; the College has since received confirmation that this will be £1.1m. The board requested that the Finance, Resource and Commercial Committee provides oversight of how this unbudgeted surplus is utilised to generate additional income and benefit the College. The Finance, Resource and Commercial Committee had scrutinised the decision not to include any savings from vacancies. It is reasonable to assume that there will be vacancy savings and after removing agency costs, these are expected to be around £200k; However, the People Strategy aims to reduce the number and duration of vacancies, and the budget reflects this ambition.

The board queried the risks in the budget. These include assumptions around pension credit and support for increased employer national insurance contributions, although it is expected that the pension position will improve further upon evaluation. The budget includes a stretch target for £100k additional full cost income. The Finance, Resource and Commercial Committee had challenged assumptions around Higher Education income as this budget line has not been reached for several years. Managers have turned around historic patterns of underachieving adult skills fund income targets and have achieved significant growth in apprenticeships, which offers assurance that processes for monitoring and achieving income targets are robust. Targets in these areas are prudent.

Governors agreed that there was resilience in the budget. The improved procurement function will also result in cost savings in year.

The budget includes investment in 900 additional hours for English and Maths. Governors queried whether any other investment would help to reach key performance indicators. English and maths remain a key challenge, with the number of students increasing each year and the number of hours required to meet the condition of funding also increasing. The achievement of English and maths attendance targets also remains a priority and managers will consider whether any of the additional surplus could be used for this purpose.

RESOLVED: The board approved the budget for the year ending 31 July 2026.

388 Curriculum and quality update

The report provided the Governing Board with a comprehensive update on the quality of teaching, learning and assessment, predicted achievement rates for 2024/25, and the key curriculum developments for the 2025/26 academic year.

The report indicated strong progress across the key priorities in the quality improvement plan. Following a review of High Needs learners' progress towards their EHCP outcomes, priority 7 was now on track to be achieved. Further evaluation is being completed on priority 9 and whether the college contribution to skills needs could now be considered to be 'Strong'. Final curriculum delivery plans for 2025/26 are being completed and will be presented to employers for feedback.

Attendance remains the biggest challenge, particularly in English and maths. English and Maths department continue to develop collaborative working processes with other schools to ensure holistic good attendance for all students. The board challenged what progress had been made against attendance targets this year and requested confirmation of how many schools had improved attendance rates. This will be addressed in school quality improvement plans, which are currently in development. For 2025/26 students, completing barriers to success starting point assessment will indicate their school attendance to ascertain where support is most needed.

The board discussed the improvement in predicted achievements. These predictions included some risks around GCSE English and maths and functional skills outcomes and results from externally assessed technical curriculum. Improved achievement is expected across all schools and the two most underperforming areas from 2023/24, Business and Engineering, have made significant improvements. Governors queried what makes the most impact on student performance. Early intervention, strong support mechanisms alongside improved teaching are the most effective strategies.

Clare Milsom left the meeting.

The board considered the Colleges current online/hybrid delivery processes. In some areas hybrid learning presented a risk to engagement for adults, such as in English and Maths. Managers have recently visited Arden University to consider how blended learning might be utilised to help adults to balance work and study, and to start to develop a strategy for this. A pilot in GCSE English will be launched in Knowsley in September.

RESOLVED: **The board noted the continued improvement in teaching, learning and assessment, the forecast student achievement rates and associated risks and the key developments within the college curriculum in preparation for 2025/26.**

389 **External audit plan**

The Chair of the Audit Committee provided an overview of the plan presented by the new external auditors, Beever and Struthers. The Audit Committee had received assurance around the auditors' robust handover processes.

RESOLVED: **The board approved the external audit plan, as recommended by the Audit Committee.**

390 **Governance framework review**

The report presented amendments to the College's governing documents for consideration.

RESOLVED: **The board approved the:**

- **Instrument and Articles of Government**
- **Standing Orders and Scheme of Delegation (including terms of reference for committees recommended by those committees)**
- **Governor Recruitment and Selection Policy**
- **Governor Conduct, Investigation and Resolution Policy**
- **Complaints against the Corporation Policy**

- **Terms of Reference for the Strategy Working Group.**
- **Schedule of business and meeting dates for 2025/26.**

391 **Policies**

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

RESOLVED: The board approved the:

- **FE Fees and Fee Discount Policy**
- **Financial Regulations**
- **Health and Safety Policy**
- **Senior Post Holder Remuneration Policy**

360 **Link governor update**

The Safeguarding Link Governor provided an update on the Safeguarding Team, who continue to work effectively. With regards to Careers, this area now has more focus from Heads of School, linked to the skills strand of the Ofsted framework.

The Health and Safety Link Governor confirmed that all measures were now compliant in line with the update from the Health and Safety Manager at the last board meeting.

The Sustainability Steering Group have signed up to the SDG Accord and are embedding goals into the curriculum. The last meeting considered the self-assessment process to ascertain the current level of sustainability across the College. The group remains focused on 'quick wins,' which have resulted in accelerated progress over the year. Next year students will be invited to attend the meeting.

RESOLVED: The board noted the updates.

361 **Committee minutes and chairs update**

Curriculum and Quality Committee

Students had attended the latest committee meeting and provided positive and pertinent feedback on the progress they had made while at the College. The committee had scrutinised predicted achievement and noted that whilst adult achievement is below target, there is a strong improvement trajectory. The committee noted several positive performance indicators including CPD for staff being effective with 88% of staff rating the training they received as of good quality, and employer satisfaction improving from 92% to 95%.

The committee approved the suspension of the FdA Early Years Practice and FdSc. Media Production for 2025/26 due to low application numbers.

Finance Resources and Commercial Committee

The committee focused on the 2025/26 budget and the management accounts, alongside the feedback of the Estates Working Group [redacted].

Strategy Working Group

The first meeting of the working group has taken place. The second meeting will focus on the outcomes of stakeholder engagement activity. Ann Marr expressed an interest in joining this group.

Audit Committee

The committee received an impressive deep dive on Recruitment and Marketing from the Commercial Director. The Chair of the Audit Committee invited governors to suggest any potential areas for further deep dives. Two “Substantial assurance” internal audit reports were received on Additional Learning Support and High Needs Students, and ICT Business Continuity and Disaster Recovery.

Search and Governance Committee

The Search and Governance Committee had led recruitment activity over the previous months.

Performance and Remuneration Committee

The Performance and Remuneration Committee had considered Senior Postholder Policies and the targets for the new Deputy Principal.

RESOLVED: The board noted the updates.

362 Corporate Risk Register

The report presented the Corporate Risk Register for approval, which include risk narrative changes around support for employer national insurance contributions and the rollout of Windows 11, the risk of which is being managed through a detailed plan.

RESOLVED: The board approved the updated Corporate Risk Register.

Jen McGill, Tracey Turner, Stephanie Donaldson and Mohammed Ramzan left the meeting.

364 Senior postholder targets

The Chair of the Performance and Remuneration committee presented the updated senior post holder targets as scrutinised and recommended by the committee. Targets are updated each year. The board suggested that targets might be simplified in coming iterations.

The board approved a change to the Deputy CEO/CFO targets [redacted]

The board approved the Deputy Principal’s targets for 2024/25

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 16 October 2025.