

HART LEARNING GROUP

Minutes of a meeting of the Hart Learning Group Board, held on Monday 4 September 2017 in the Council Chamber, the old Town Hall, The Broadway, Letchworth.

PRESENT

Lynne Ceeney (Acting Chair)
Jo Charles
Matt Hamnett (Principal/CEO)
Mitchell Holloway
Rob Irving

Vernon McClure (Acting Vice-chair)
Jeremy Newman
Richard Palmer
Andrew Simmons

IN ATTENDANCE

Kit Davies (Principal, NHC)
Paul Harte (Group Finance Director)
Mark Lewis (Managing Director, the Hart Schools Trust Ltd)
Chris Thomas (Executive Director, Quality)

Drew Thomas (Interim Chief Operating Officer)
Robert Dale (Company Secretary)

WELCOME

The Chair welcomed two new Governors:

- Mitchell Holloway had been elected Student President (sabbatical basis). Mitchell had previously been a student at the Thomas Alleyne Academy before completing a Public Service course at NHC Hitchin, with the ambition of entering the police service.
- Richard Palmer, recommended by the Search Committee, was Head teacher at St Chris's School, Letchworth and Chief Executive of the business. He had extensive experience as a practitioner across primary and secondary phases, and would bring additional education expertise to the Board.

A third governor – Jack Tomlinson – a former student President – was also to be appointed on the recommendation of the Search Committee and would attend the next meeting.

These new governors would join the Quality & Innovation Committee, and Rob Irving would move from this Committee to the Hart Learning & Development Board.

The Chair welcomed Chris Thomas, newly appointed Executive Director, Quality.

ITEM 1A: APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

- Apologies for absence had been received from Paul Holgate, Peter Johnston and Ruth Orpwood.

ITEM 1B: DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

- None.

ITEM 1C: MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

- Minutes of the meeting held on 5 June 2017 were signed as an accurate record of proceedings.

ITEM 1D: MATTERS ARISING/ACTIONS

Actions had been addressed as follows:

- *Review Governor biographies to identify potential 'specialisms'. **Action under way.*** To be concluded as part of the planned governance self-assessment exercise and informed by the skills audit circulated over the summer.
- *Add a Hertvec briefing to the September agenda. **Action complete.*** Included in the Chief Executive's report.
- *Plan and arrange SAR events for September/October 2017. **Action under way.*** Initial SAR meetings have taken place; governor participation is planned for October and will be scheduled shortly.
- *Board Working Party to work with the Executive and professional advisors to explore the possibility of a deal – and bring options/a proposal forward for Board consideration as appropriate. **Action under way.*** Two meetings had been held and a third is being arranged for w/c 11 September. Professional advisers were not working as quickly as had been anticipated.
- *Circulate note concerning VAT declaration to HMRC prior to submission. **Action pending.*** A draft letter to HMRC was expected to be ready by 20 September; there had been a large quantity of data for RSM to assimilate. It would take at least six to eight weeks thereafter for HMRC to respond and it was possible that more information would be sought from the Group.

ITEM 2: SEARCH COMMITTEE UPDATE

- The Committee had recommended the appointment of two new members – Richard Palmer and Jack Tomlinson and the Board had supported this.
- The Committee had commissioned an executive search consultancy (Gatenby Sanderson) via a competitive tender process to support the recruitment of a new Chair, after Richard Alberg stepped down at the end of June. Advertising had begun in August and was continuing with a closing date for applications of 18 September. The aim was to interview in early October, with the intention of being able to announce an appointment at the next Board meeting.
- The Search Committee received regular progress reports and some suitable candidates were applying; it was hoped there would be a good field for interview.

ITEM 3: CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S REPORT

- The paper highlighted key issues, including progress with the annual audit, the disposal and transfer of property, student enrolment at NHC, the agreement of a major Hart L&D deal with the Co-op, and work to transform the management information function. Enhancing the MI process, and enabling curriculum leaders to analyse and apply it in a more sophisticated way would become crucial to delivering incremental improvement in future.
- The main improvement priority for teaching and learning in 2017/18 would be the Engineering and Construction Campus (ECC) at Stevenage where results had fallen and leadership and management were not at the required standard.
- Rob Irving and Peter Johnston had helped analyse this year's staff survey data; staff engagement was another vital aspect of driving improvement this year.

- The SAR process had shown that managers were hugely passionate about the institution and that their capability was building year-on-year.

Question: *Given indications that young people were moving away from HE programmes, were there opportunities for the Group to develop its offer?*

- The existing HE offer was relatively limited and was focussed at level 4 – foundation degree. Given local competition and other curriculum priorities the expansion of our HE offer had not yet been prioritised – save for in Hart L&D where we are seeing growing demand for higher level apprenticeships.

Question: *What was the reason for the extra bad debt provision?*

- Work by the Finance team since January had revealed historic neglect in chasing debts from students and third parties. Although a lot had been done in recent months to chase outstanding debts, and new processes been put in place to prevent this recurring, a substantial proportion of the historic debt was now seen as irrecoverable.

Question: *How much related to historic debt? How up-to-date was the debtor position now?*

- Almost all irrecoverable debt related to 2014/15 and 2015/16. New processes meant that debt was age-profiled and c90% fell within the 0-60 day timescale. The team was confident that there would be no large exposure to bad debt in future.

Question: *What effort had been put into chasing historic debt?*

- Managers had pursued debts and an external agency had been used but poor practice in the past meant that debtors claimed no knowledge of the debt, and the process had generated a number of complaints. From 2017/18, bad debts would be charged back to departments so as to incentivise early action.

Question: *Were there any sanctions to encourage students to repay?*

- Students could be prevented from returning to college in later years, but could not be denied certificates. The enrolment process had been strengthened so that students understood their liabilities more clearly and to help identify possible hardship cases.

Question: *Why was it not sensible to withdraw cash from Hertvec now?*

- There was a risk that if we took cash out now, we would need to put it back in 2018. Work was in hand to assess what if any could 'safely' be withdrawn in the near future.

Question: *How might Saudi authorities handle the end of the contract in 2019/20?*

- The experience of colleges whose contracts came to an end before Hertvec's was being monitored to garner early insight.

Question: *Would NHC hit its recruitment target of 2,200 full-time students this year?*

- Recruitment was on track at this point.

ITEM 4: CURRICULUM OVERVIEW

- The summer's exam results had been consistent with indicators used during the year to forecast progress and performance. There had been some big improvements (e.g. GCSE Maths) and we were now receiving re-mark which were further improving the position – particularly for English GCSE. The final dataset would be sent to funding bodies at the start of October.

- SAR sessions had begun at executive level. The emerging picture, overall, was very positive. The Engineering and Construction campus (ECC) was the key underperformer at present. KPI data showed a dip in 2016/17 and leadership and management was not at an acceptable level. The ECC along with the business department, Maths & English would be the focuses for improvement work in 2017/18.
- Hart L&D was forecasting improved outcomes for apprenticeships and traineeships with the latter in particular showing strong growth, higher quality and really strong progression – the latter being a key factor from an Ofsted perspective.
- As a team, managers had performed strongly and demonstrated considerable improvement in their performance and capability over the last year.
- The overall picture was consistent with self-assessment as Good.
- The quality manual summary circulated with the papers was a vital improvement document. It was supported by templates and manuals and would apply across the Group. Governors commended an excellent, readable and easy to follow document.

Question: *It was vital that governors participated in and supported the SAR process. When would they be asked to join in?*

- The next round of SAR meetings would take place in October; governors would be asked to support one or more of them if they could. Governors should also try to undertake learning walks to help confirm independently what they heard in meetings.

Action: Timetable SAR panels with governor involvement.

Action: Governors to commit to undertaking learning walks.

Question: *What was the outcome of HCC's interest in Profound and Multiple Learning Disability (PMLD) provision?*

- Unfortunately, it had not yet been possible to secure the necessary commitment from HCC for capital funding to support the development – which we were in principle very keen to progress. Should HCC come forward with a more concrete proposal the Executive would want to consider it.

ITEM 5: HART SCHOOLS TRUST UPDATE

- The Trust was in a positive position following good summer exam results; this was important in giving the Regional Schools Commissioner and the associated Headteacher Panel confidence in the Trust's ability to grow.
- Closure of the two Da Vinci Studio Schools (agreed in 2015/16) had been successfully managed, with the last group of GCSE students delivering the schools' best ever results. Outcomes were low, but represented genuinely good performance from a difficult cohort with a history of poor academic engagement.
- The Thomas Alleyne Academy (TAA) GCSE and A-level results continued on an upward trend, with Maths and English GCSE and two good sciences now above national averages for the first time. Progress 8 outcomes were likely to be less strong, as some other subjects had not seen the same improvement this year. However, conversations with the Department for Education suggested it had confidence in the Trust and TAA was well placed for a future Ofsted inspection.
- The Trust's first primary school – the Roebuck Academy – had joined on 1 July. With a new head teacher, the school was aiming to build on its strong local reputation as a good school to ensure that pupils made good progress. The conversion process had

been smoothly managed with support from across the Group and experience gained to inform future conversions.

- Plans for 2017/18 included further collaboration across the Group on the curriculum, adopting the Bridge Programme for schools and augmenting the quality manual discussed earlier in the meeting for use in the schools.
- Congratulations to the staff and leadership at the Da Vinci schools were warranted. Keeping the schools open so that the final cohort completed their courses together had been the right thing for the Trust to do, in line with its values of quality and integrity, but it had been a huge challenge to improve student engagement, retain good staff and ensure everyone achieved the best they could.

Question: *What was the expected growth trajectory for the Trust?*

- Ideally, the Trust should grow to include up to 15 or 20 schools. However, the Trust wanted to focus on adding value rather than growth for its own sake – though a critical mass of five or six schools would be an important milestone. Many secondary schools that had not yet converted faced either financial or curriculum performance challenges - and sometimes both. The Trust Board would need to consider carefully its capacity to support such schools – both in terms of our capacity to deliver rapid improvement and in terms of our ability – and willingness – to carry the financial burden.

Question: *Could there be pressure to take on a difficult school?*

- Yes - but the Trust could not be forced to take on a new school, and would carefully assess the pros and cons of a given school in its context.

Question: *Could the Group's Corporate Services cope with converting extra schools?*

- The working assumption was that two schools would convert in 2017/18 and that could be handled without undue stretch. Converting more than two schools would have to be considered on a case by case basis, and in the context of the Group's wider priorities – eg if Hart L&D were growing faster than its business plan. In such a situation, the issue would be brought back to this Board.

Question: *What would the main challenge be for conversions?*

- A small amount of funding covered legal and (for example) branding costs but the main issue for the Trust would be finding resources to support turnaround in challenged schools. This would be a concern for the Trust Board in its assessment of potential conversions, and it would seek the guidance of the Group Board where a decision on significant investment would be required. Governors agreed that a strategic conversation would be required in such circumstances.

ITEM 6: ANNUAL SAFEGUARDING REPORT 2016/17

- The report outlined the Group's statutory responsibilities and those of the governors, and set out how these were being met. It described key safeguarding work carried out in the year, issues and concerns raised by students and steps taken to address them.

Question: *While it was very welcome that this report showed student awareness and feelings of safety had increased this year, responses to questions in the wider staff satisfaction survey suggested staff confidence in and understanding of safeguarding could be improved. What actions were being taken to tackle this?*

- Staff induction had been strengthened this year and extra DSPs trained to improve coverage and visibility across campuses. The SMT recognised the vital importance of ensuring processes and procedures were well-communicated.
- Staff survey data and analysis had been included within the SAR process this year to help ensure concerns of this nature were kept under review.

Question: *How was the challenge of a wider geographic spread of staff being tackled?*

- Staff based in Hertfordshire were trained by Hertfordshire County Council trainers on its procedures. Hart L&D staff based elsewhere would be trained by the relevant local authority on their procedures. The safeguarding team was identifying which authorities were involved and arranging to have training given.
- More on-line materials to support training were being made available, so that self study could be more easily undertaken.

ITEM 7: ANY OTHER BUSINESS

- The Chair asked Mitchell Holloway to provide a regular Student Voice update at future meetings, and to ensure that he sought support from the Board to assist him in his engagement with the student body during the year.

Action: Include Student Voice as a standing agenda item.

ITEM 8: DATE OF NEXT MEETING

- Monday 16 October 2017, at the old Town Hall, Letchworth, starting at 18.30.

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Signed – Chair of Governors

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Date

ACTION LOG

Meeting	Minute Reference	Summary of Action	Who	When
04/09/17	1d.	Circulate note concerning VAT declaration to HMRC prior to submission.	Paul Harte	20/09/17
04/09/17	4.	Timetable SAR Panels and Learning Walks and invite governor participation.	Kit Davies/Robert Dale	30/09/17
04/09/17	7.	Include Student Voice as a standing agenda item.	Robert Dale	30/09/17