Agreed by the Board, 20/10/25

HART LEARNING GROUP

Minutes of a meeting of the Hart Learning Group Board, held on Monday 15 September 2025, starting at 18.30, by videoconference.

PRESENT

Philip Moore (Chair)
Kate Barclay
Toni Beck
Liz Chatman (Staff Governor)
Richard Cooksey
Kit Davies (CEO/Principal)
Geoff Lambert
Claire McCafferty
Grace Wade (Student Governor)
Richard Wilson

IN ATTENDANCE

Paul Harte (Group Finance Director)
Lizzie Jones (Corporate Services Director)
Emma Masters (Head of Wellbeing and Safeguarding)
Lorna McCallum (Executive Director-Apprenticeships and Partnerships)
Keith Turner (Deputy Principal, Curriculum, Quality and Inclusion)
Robert Dale (Company Secretary)

WELCOME

- The Chair welcomed welcome Emma Masters to the meeting to present the annual Safeguarding report (Item 5). This would be taken out of sequence to permit Emma to present the report and then leave the meeting.

ITEM 1A: APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

- Jacquie Bamber.

ITEM 1B: DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

- Kit Davies declared that as well as being a Member and Trustee of the Hart Schools Trust, he was a member of the Board of WENTA, of the Stevenage Redevelopment Board and of the Hertfordshire Virtual School.

ITEM 1C: MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

- Minutes of the meeting held on 14 July 2025 were approved as an accurate record of proceedings.

ITEM 1D: MATTERS ARISING/ACTIONS

- Actions had been addressed as follows:
  - Develop an action plan that enables a reduction in the number of accidents and incidents taking place on NHC campuses. **Action under way**. The H&S Committee was due to meet on 18 September to discuss this.
  - Agree a schedule for student ambassadors to report. **Action under way**. A proposal would be discussed at the Q&C Committee meeting on 2 October 2025 and a provisional schedule had been created.

- Begin search for candidates for up to three governor vacancies, using the information from the recent skills audit to inform the focus for recruitment. **Action under way**. Recruitment had been informed by the outcome of the recent skills audit; one candidate had been identified to date.

- Ensure reports are included on any calls made on the 2025/26 contingency provision within management accounts reports. **Action complete**. The CEO would determine whether any calls could be made on this provision and report accordingly within his performance report. No calls had been made to date!

- Develop outline plan for student/staff participation in the proposed Podcast. **Action under way**. The Student Services team was working on this.

- Publish the revised [five Fees and Charges] Policies. **Action complete**. These policies had been added to the website and to Sharepoint.

ITEM 2: APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIR

- Kate Barclay had agreed to take on the role of Vice-chair and the Board was pleased to confirm this appointment.

- The **Board approved** the appointment of Kate Barclay as Vice-chair.

ITEM 5: ANNUAL SAFEGUARDING REPORT 2024/25

- The Board considered a substantial report looking back on activity relating to Safeguarding issues during 2024/25. It followed the report made in May 2025 which had covered the first two terms of 2024/25. The year had been a hard one, beginning with the loss of a student (outside termtime) and an inquest about a student who had sadly taken their own life in 2021. While the latter had made no criticisms of the college's provision (Springboard) the team had nonetheless continued to reflect on its practice and never assumed that it had got everything right.

- As reported elsewhere, numbers of learners at the college had grown, and the level of need had grown too. As a result, the decision had been taken to increase the number of staff working on safeguarding and in particular to appoint a Deputy Head of Wellbeing and Safeguarding. This helped ensure that the team could be immediately responsive if required. The range of issues that the team had to address was very wide including urgent needs for accommodation. One team member was in the process of being recruited, and there would be an emphasis on developing and broadening team skills and experience this year.

- One issue periodically raised (eg by Ofsted) related to the open campuses at both Hitchin and Stevenage. The installation of security barriers at Hitchin at the start of the year had addressed one of these issues, together with the enhanced security fencing on the site. Similar barriers would be installed at Stevenage during 2025/26. The importance of providing effective web filtering tools was fully appreciated and a robust system providing monitoring and daily reporting ensured information was more accessible and comprehensive. The system picked up and blocked inappropriate content, hate speech, potential radicalisation etc.

- The recent Matrix report (associated with re-accreditation) considered the pastoral and safeguarding support available through each provision type and identified excellent work from our Employability delivery, evidencing the effectiveness of safeguarding support off campus. The college had also been shortlisted for an apprenticeships award for safeguarding and support by the NCFE.

- Safeguarding matters are discussed at the regular Safeguarding Forum meetings, attended by key safeguarding and student services staff and the Safeguarding governor. Although the Safeguarding Governor had been unable to attend the most recent meeting, she had discussed this report separately with Emma and endorsed its contents. She noted that the team was very good at accessing free support!

- Governors welcomed the inclusion of case studies as providing real insights into the work of the team.

Question: *What did the college do to discourage drug use among learners?* This was covered via the Personal and Academic Development (PAD) curriculum as taught sessions. Resources were provided through the Healthy Hart Sharepoint pages, and the 'Drug dog' was brought into college every year. If a student smelled strongly of cannabis or was clearly under the influence, they would be asked to go home. The Positive Behaviour policy provided for sanctions to be imposed in such circumstances and individuals would be referred to external agencies if necessary. Staff were good at picking up indications or suggestions of drug use and regular reminders were issued to staff about the issue.

Question: *The number of reports of concerns were lower from Apprenticeships; why was this?* For apprentices, the first contact about mental health or safeguarding concerns would be their employer and this was one factor, although CPOMS had not yet been extended to adult provision (this was being worked on) and might lead to an increase in reports.

Question: *Who were the individuals categorized as belonging to 'unknown' departments?* This had been an issue with students continuing from one year to another and had now been resolved so this classification should not re-appear.

Question: *Why were walkie-talkies needed?* This was to help ensure there could be an immediate response to an urgent incident; they had been issued to a small group of key staff. Klaxon was useful for broadcasting communications about issues and incidents but was less good for alerting individuals to an immediate need. It was also reassuring to the person making the call that their message had been received and was being responded to.

Question: *The report showed that during 2024/25 support had been given to 478 learners with 492 categories of need; did this mean that some had more than one issue?* Yes.

Question: *The year had seen more issues addressed, albeit with fewer students; what more could be done proactively to tackle student issues?* A good deal of pro-active work was already undertaken eg through the PAD curriculum, events, news articles etc. There were good links with local Hertfordshire groups to share advice and guidance and engagement with the mental health support team. Extra sessions were also available including twilight sessions for parents and carers. A member of staff had received 'train the trainer' mental health first aid training and was currently training other staff. The LGBTQ Allies programme was being extended in 2025/26.

Question: *Given the extension of staff training and expertise, should the Board expect the number of issues recorded and addressed to go up?* Yes, along with the increased number of students at the college, this might result in more issues being recorded in 2025/26.

- **The Board accepted** the report.

- Emma Masters left the meeting.

ITEM 3: DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST 2025/26

- Governors were invited to confirm or update their declarations of interest, which were shown as at 31 July 2025. Governor attendance records would also be published in the Annual Report. Termly reports would continue to be made in 2025/26.

- **The Board agreed t**o review and update their declarations of interest as required.

Action: Confirm declarations of interest with the Governance Professional.

ITEM 4: STRATEGIC PRIORITIES 2025/26

- The proposed strategic priorities for 2025/26 took account of the policy landscape including the potential impact of the recent transfer of the Skills portfolio to the Department for Work and Pensions – and the expected tight financial picture over the forecast period. Managing the ECC's transition to the new site and exit from Units 1 to 5 at Fulton Close remained a significant priority, but so did the focus on the quality of teaching and learning to drive outcomes, the need for financial sustainability and employer and stakeholder engagement. Highlighting six strategic priorities did not, of course, mean that other activities would be downplayed.

- The Board welcomed the selection of priorities and the linkage to the existing strategic pillars. Making these links even clearer in papers to the Board would be useful.

Question: *How would issues such as Digital Transformation and AI, Sustainability and Innovation/future readiness be addressed?* These would continue to be reported on through Board reports, strategic thinking sessions, all-staff emails and governor in college sessions. Digital transformation was particularly recognised as an area where more needed to be done. Governors agreed that it was sensible to have a smaller number of areas to concentrate on.

Question: *How could the success of stakeholder engagement be measured?* This was a particularly complex area with different audiences responding in different ways and it was possible that no single measure could capture impact. There could be different measures at strategic and operational levels. The team was currently working on a stakeholder map which would begin to identify where the gaps were in our current relationships and metrics might well become identifiable as a result.

Question: *How could the Board members leverage their own networks and contacts to support curriculum planning and development?* Board members could play a role in supporting reputational development activity and individual governors were able to provide contacts in particular curriculum areas.

- Governors agreed that making clear links between papers presented to the Board and the strategic priorities would be helpful for example in providing greater confidence in answering questions about how they were involved in setting and monitoring strategy.

- **The Board approved** the proposed strategic priorities.

Action: Consider how to clearly link papers and Board discussion items to the organisation's strategic priorities.

ITEM 6: STUDENT GOVERNOR UPDATE

- This was Grace's first report for 2025/26 and reflected on the very start of the autumn term only. Nevertheless, a lot had taken place already or was to happen shortly.

- A number of additional enrichment activities had been organised, including boxing for ECC students, supported by funding from the Hertfordshire Heritage Foundation (which was also supporting Fim and TV students). A visit to the Broadway Cinema in Letchworth had been arranged for this group including backstage tour and an introduction to the technical equipment being used.

- Training and support for ambassadors and reps was under way, and student welcome events had taken place at each campus to welcome new learners to the college and make them aware of the role of student reps and ambassadors. Training for student reps and ambassadors would include some breakfast meetings at the start of October at which governors were also welcome. There had been some good engagement from new students.

- There was also enthusiastic support for arranging a summer Prom for students in 2026 and a provisional 'Great Gatsby' theme had been suggested. Creative Arts students were keen to make decorations. A number of potential venues had been identified and fund-raising was proposed. A great deal more work would be needed before matters could be finalised, but there was a lot of interest.

Question: *What feedback had been received from students about the welcome events?* Informal feedback had been excellent but there had been fewer responses to the survey, which was disappointing. For some reason, learners were reluctant to scan the QR code that gave them access to the survey. Anecdotally, students had particularly liked the sessions on student finance and the support available to them from Student Services. PAD tutors had been asked to undertake some follow-up research and this would be reported at the next meeting.

Question: *How many students had taken part?* There had been 474 at Stevenage, 252 at the ECC and 568 at Hitchin. Participating stakeholders had been positive about the events' organisation and the level of student interaction with them.

- **Governors welcomed** the excellent report **and praised** the energy and commitment of the student governor and her colleagues.

ITEM 7: CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S UPDATE

- The Board welcomed the news that the summer's achievement rate data (which would be discussed in detail at the Quality & Curriculum Committee meeting on 2 October) was very good. Every curriculum area had made progress since 2023/24 and all were above the latest reported national averages, many considerably so. The focus on quality teaching had been very impactful, and continued the trend seen in 2023/24. This was true not just of vocational qualifications, but Maths and English too. A small number of scripts submitted for re-marking were likely to increase the current reported outcome rate as well. It was good to see that the forecast outcomes shared with the Board in July had been borne out by actual results.

- The financial position had also remained as forecast. The outcome was a surplus slightly higher than budget, with provision also having been made towards future dilapidations costs in respect of the ECC premises. The Corporation was also debt-free, the remaining loan balance with Lloyd having been repaid early by 31 July 2025.

- The start of the new academic year was critical for the largest income stream (for 16-19 full-time study programmes. Three figures were important for this: (a) the DfE funding target (c2,300); (b) the budget assumption (c2,400); and (c) the actual enrolment number (currently 2,771). It was always necessary to plan for some over-recruitment against the funded number because there was always some drop-out

before ‘Day 42’ when funding and the basis for outcome measurement was fixed. Over-recruitment of more than 100 extra learners also normally led to some additional in-year funding (as had been received in 2024/25. With careful management of group sizes, the increased learner numbers had largely been accommodated this year without the need to recruit extra staff (with one or two exceptions). This meant more efficient use of NHC resources. It was important to note, however, that teams were reaching the limit of what could be achieved in this way.

- One area in which recruitment continued to be challenging was the T-level offer. Some courses were recruiting well (eg L3 Nursing) but others were not attractive. No applicants for the Laboratory Science offer had met the entry criteria and the course would not be run. The general sense was that courses without clear ‘academic’ alternatives and a direct pathway into employment were attractive to learners; those with existing popular alternatives (A-level sciences) were not. The college was providing its feedback – together with others in the sector – to DfE on this.

- A major area of work for the next six months concerned capital investment. The DfE grant funding previously earmarked for the longer term Plot B project had now to be redirected into other works on the college estate to ensure it could be spent before the deadline of 31 March 2026. A long list of repairs, upgrades and improvements to the physical and the digital infrastructure would now be addressed and Willmott Dixon had been engaged to provide project management for the construction elements. Some of the works would need to be undertaken while keeping the campuses open for students, which would bring its own challenges, so having a professional project management team would help ensure delivery within the right timescale and in the right way.

- The marketplace refurbishment work would be led by Stevenage Borough Council with input from the college. Tender documents were due to be returned by 22 September and it was hoped to have appointed contractors to start work by early to mid November. The project timeline was expected to run up to May/June 2026, with decant from the current ECC premises at Fulton Close taking place over the summer, ready to open on the new site in September 2026. Discussions with the Fulton Close landlords over the lease terms and dilapidations were continuing slowly.

- The CEO reported that the SMT had prepared development plans for 2025/26 (and these had been shared with the papers) showing their key objectives for the year.

Question: *Why did some T-levels succeed and others fail?* A lot came down to employer experience with prior qualifications. Nursing, for example, had previously had a prior qualification liked and understood by employers; it was easy to pick up the new T-level. The Lab Technician offer was liked by business, where it provided a sharper and more focussed qualification than the previous more generic offer. In contrast, the Life Science offer was struggling to compete with the better understood A-level route. Students were also more likely to remain within a sixth form and take several Sciences rather than switch to the T-level.

Question*: At what point did the Lab Technician T-level cease to be a useful programme to offer?* There would be a conversation about this during the autumn term. The team still wanted to grow the Science portfolio and thought that there would be employer demand, but not necessarily for the Lab Technician option. Healthcare might be a better offer and more closely aligned with other college programmes.

Question: *How did the growth in student numbers affect the numbers needing Maths and English?* There was an impact in Maths and English classes, but the increase in size on average was marginal and could be managed.

Question: *Where programmes needed specialist resources or technology to deliver, could the bigger groups be adequately provided for?* This and physical space was starting to become a limiting factor for some programmes (such as Electrical or lower level Multiskills programmes). This meant than not all applicants were being accepted. Overall, however, the increased numbers meant that better use was being made of our existing resources.

Question: *Were there any staff vacancies causing difficulties for curriculum areas?* Not really. There were vacancies for some additional Learning Support assistants but this was the only current area of pressure.

Question: *What risk was there that DfE capital would not be spent wisely?* The estates strategy had already identified and documented areas where investment was necessary; the decision to spend rather than risk clawback meant that these works could be brought forward rather than delayed further. The team was confident that the programme could be managed within the DfE's deadline.

- Governors expressed their delight at the academic and financial outcomes for 2024/25 and looked forward to another strong year.

- **The Board accepted** the report.

ITEM 8: 2025/26 KPIS

- The Board considered the proposed Board KPIs for 2025/26, noting that the SMT also considered an extended set (also included in the paper). The more focussed version was considered to show the most significant and higher level key indicators that the Board would find most informative in monitoring progress during the year. They would be reported on at each Board meeting, with half-yearly updates on progress with the Board's strategy also provided.

- Governors endorsed the proposed indicators and looked forward to receiving progress reports.

- **The Board approved** the proposed Key Performance Indicators for 2025/26.

ITEM 9: ESTABLISHMENT OF A SEARCH AND GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE

- One of the recommendations of the External Board Review had been the re-establishment of a Search and Governance Committee with refreshed terms of reference that incorporated oversight of Board development and review plans. This paper suggested Terms of Reference for such a Committee and identifies a partial membership.

- The Committee was expected to cover the annual skills audit, self-evaluation and period external Board review, Board training and development, succession planning and recruitment and will undertake other tasks allocated to it by the Board.

- **The Board approved** the proposed Terms of Reference for the Search and Governance Committee.

Action: Set up the Committee and issue diary appointments.

ITEM 10: FINANCE COMMITTEE REPORT AND P12 (JULY 2025) MANAGEMENT ACCOUNTS REPORT

- Claire McCafferty had agreed to take on the role of Chair of the Finance Committee and the Board confirmed this appointment.

- The Committee would meet next on 16 October 2025 and the paper set out the planned agenda. A high-level summary of the year-end position had also been included with the report and confirmed the provisional surplus outcome to be discussed shortly with the auditors.

- **The Board accepted** the report.

ITEM 11: QUALITY & CURRICULUM COMMITTEE REPORT

- Governors noted that a verbal report of the business at the Q&C meeting held on 8 July 2025 had been made at the previous meeting; the paper provided a written report for the record. It was especially pleasing, however, to see that the forecast outcomes projected at that meeting had been borne out by the actual summer results.

- **The Board accepted** the report.

ITEM 12: AUDIT COMMITTEE REPORT AND CORPORATE RISK REGISTER

- The Committee would next meet on 22 October, before which at least one new member needed to be appointed. One candidate had been identified to date, but would be better suited to a different Committee; an interim solution might be needed.

- The Board noted that the SMT would be undertaking a walkthrough of the business continuity plan with an adviser provided via our insurer on 30 September and the experience of that session will be reported at the meeting.

- **The Board accepted** the report.

ITEM 13: ANY OTHER BUSINESS

One to one calls with the Chair

- The Chair was planning to arrange one to one calls with all Board members over the coming weeks.

ITEM 14: DATE OF NEXT MEETING

- Monday 20 October 2025, at the Stevenage Campus, starting at 18.30 preceded by a Strategic Thinking session, likely to consider strategic development and thinking and/or AI.

action log

Meeting	Minute Reference	Summary of Action	Who	When
21/10/24	9.	Develop an action plan that enables a reduction in the number of accidents and incidents taking place on NHC campuses.	Lizzie Jones	30/11/24
14/07/25	1d.	Agree a schedule for student ambassadors to report.	Keith Turner	30/09/25
14/07/25	2.	Begin search for candidates for up to three governor vacancies, using the information from the recent skills audit to inform the focus for recruitment.	Robert Dale	30/09/25
15/09/25	3.	Confirm declarations of interest with the Governance Professional.	All	31/10/25
15/09/25	5.	Consider how to clearly link papers and Board discussion items to the organisation's strategic priorities.	Robert Dale	13/10/25
15/09/25	9.	Set up the [Search and Governance] Committee and issue diary appointments.	Robert Dale	31/10/25