Agreed by the Board, 27/4/26

HART LEARNING GROUP

Minutes of a meeting of the Hart Learning Group Board, held on Monday 9 February 2026, starting at 18.30, in the SITEC Immersive Stevenage campus.

PRESENT

Philip Moore (Chair)
Jacquie Bamber
Kate Barclay (Vice-chair)
Toni Beck
Liz Chatman (Staff Governor)
Richard Cooksey
Kit Davies (CEO/Principal)
Stylianos Kampakis
Geoff Lambert
Claire McCafferty
Grace Wade
Richard Wilson

IN ATTENDANCE

Claire Anderson-Byrne (Deputy Head of Student Services) (Item 2 only)
Paul Harte (Group Finance Director)
Lizzie Jones (Corporate Services Director)
Lorna McCallum (Executive Director-Apprenticeships and Partnerships)
Keith Turner (Deputy Principal, Curriculum, Quality and Inclusion)
Robert Dale (Company Secretary)

WELCOME

- The Chair welcomed Emma Masters (Head of Safeguarding and Wellbeing) to the meeting to present the termly Safeguarding Report. This item (Item 5) and Item 10 (the annual review of the Safeguarding, Child Protection and Prevent Policy) would be taken immediately after the opening business to permit Emma to get away promptly.

ITEM 1A: APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

- Genevieve Bosah.

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 10 December 2025 were approved as an accurate record of proceedings.

ITEM 1D: MATTERS ARISING/ACTIONS

- Actions had been addressed as follows:
  - Arrange to publish the 2024/25 Annual Report and Financial Statements on the Group website. **Action complete**. This had been added to the website.

- Publish the revised Health and Safety Policy on Sharepoint and the Group website. **Action complete**. The revised policy had been added to the website and to Sharepoint in the policies section.

- Add report [of the Chair's one-to-one conversations with Board members to the agenda for the next Board meeting. **Action complete**. See Item 4.

ITEM 5: SAFEGUARDING UPDATE – AUTUMN TERM 2025/26

- Governors considered latest termly report about Safeguarding activity at NHC and HL&D covering the autumn term 2025/26. Highlights included:

  - North Hertfordshire College (NHC) had been awarded the Emotional Wellbeing in Schools (EWiS) Mark graded as 'Effective Practice'. This was a Hertfordshire-based quality mark looking at mental health and wellbeing for students and staff in education and provided independent validation of our current practice. The team was looking to improve the grading in future to 'Advanced Practice' by developing more links with parents and more proactive engagement with families. This would contribute strongly to the Ofsted framework's consideration of Inclusion.

  - NHC had become the first college to join the MCR Pathways Mentoring Scheme. This helped students from under-served families to build their confidence and aspiration and supported inclusion. Initially, this would apply to students who had worked with the programme at their schools, but would be extended to new students in need of this help. This supported transition to post-16 education, including providing earlier visibility of student needs.

  - NHC had recently applied to become a College of Sanctuary, part of a network of colleges that aims to "raise awareness within Further Education (FE) of the issues facing people in the asylum system, including barriers to accessing and progressing in education, offer specialised support and education, and contribute to building a culture of welcome in the wider community." Its application was one of the three (of 8 submitted) that had been accepted. The Board would hear more about this in future reports.

  - The team was using a free digital crisis intervention tool to complement the web filtering and monitoring system. This will intervene not only in suicide and self-harm online searches, but also when individuals search for harmful content related to substance misuse, gambling addiction, eating disorders, financial hardship, domestic abuse, LGBTQIA+ struggles, separation/divorce, and more. This provides more support for wellbeing and inclusion.

  - Staff were reviewing the protocol adopted following a fight to include serious escalation of behaviour by an individual. This results from an episode of very heightened emotion, verbal aggression and intimidation from a student.

  - CCTV coverage now included more of the spaces in the Sports Exercise Science block at Hitchin and some more spaces at Springboard Watford.

  - Autumn term PAD sessions had covered Safeguarding and wellbeing issues.

  - The team had supported more than 319 students so far this year – significantly higher than the same time last year (190). This partly reflected greater student numbers and improved record keeping but there had also been a growth in demand and concerns. Mental health continues to be the lead issue with self-

harm being most prevalent within this category. However, Home/parenting issues was now featuring as often as Anxiety and Emotional concerns and staff were seeing more breakdown of family relationships leading to homelessness.

- Construction was currently the area with greatest need with Supported Studies and Springboard also high. However, these tended to be more proactive cases where professionals were already in place. Learners with partners and sub-contractors were also monitored.

- Governors noted that staff training on safeguarding took place monthly to keep the number above the expected threshold. The Deputy head of Wellbeing and Safeguarding was now in post and helped deliver this training, as well as supporting the Head in proactive work and projects and carrying out data analysis.

Question: *What was the reason for the increased level of mental health needs observed in Construction?* This was likely to be a reaction to the encouragement given to these students - typically young men – to be more open about their anxieties and mental health. This made it easier to signpost them to support and resources earlier.

Question: *There appeared to have been a big increase in the recording of behaviours placing self or others at risk of harm. What had led to this?* This generally reflected failure to respond to staff directions, and behaviour such as filming fights between students, with the claim that this was intended to capture evidence, but actually put the individual at risk. There was better and more consistent recording of this kind of issue. Another example, was vaping in the toilets, which risked setting off the fire alarms, which then caused severe stress and anxiety among other learners, as well as disrupting education.

Question: *Did the increased level of domestic abuse recorded reflect more consistent reporting?* The police were recording more such incidents and passing more information on to the college even when the student had not actually observed the abuse, as it could still affect them even if they had not been present. It was likely that the increase was a result of better recording.

Question: *How was the team coping with the increased demand for support?* Team workload was monitored regularly and support provided proactively. There were more support coaches, reflecting the increase in student numbers, and they have half-termly supervision support.

- Governors noted that following the recent sad loss of a student due to meningitis, additional guidance was being provided to curriculum teams.

- **The Board thanked** Emma Masters for her thorough and detailed report and **accepted** the report.

ITEM 10: POLICIES REVIEW

- The Safeguarding, Child Protection and Prevent Policy had undergone its regular review by Emma Masters and her colleagues. The main aim of this review, as well as ensuring consistency with the latest guidance including Keeping Children Safe in Education, had been to reduce the length of the policy, following the Board's feedback at the previous review that it was perhaps too large for staff easily to get to grips with.

- The review had cut the length of the policy by nearly 50%. Most of the reductions were matters covered in other policies and documents that staff are also required to read such as *Keeping Children Safe in Education*. Links have been provided to this external content so that staff can easily access this without repeating it in the policy

itself. The review had also considered the local authority's model policy. There were no fundamental changes beyond that.

- The Safeguarding governor commended Emma Masters for a very thorough job and recommended that the Board accept the revised policy.

- Governors welcomed the shorter version and endorsed the rationale for making these changes.

Question: *Should Annex E include reference to governor training?* Yes, this oversight would be amended.

- **The Board approved** the revised Safeguarding, Child Protection and Prevent Policy.

Action: Amend the annex to include reference to governor training.

Action: Publish the revised Safeguarding, Child Protection and Prevent Policy on Sharepoint and the Group website.

- Emma Masters left the meeting.

ITEM 2: STUDENT GOVERNOR UPDATE

- This year's student voice activity had gathered richer and more detailed feedback than before and enabled student suggestions and concerns to be picked up and responded to more promptly. These suggestions had included improving wifi in the Pod at Hitchin, developing more vegetarian and vegan options for catering outlets at Hitchin (working with the catering department), and providing more teaching on financial matters in Personal and Academic Development (PAD) sessions. These recently included a presentation on university finance for students and families which was well received; more such sessions were intended.

- The student governor and her team were promoting volunteering at present, including highlighting opportunities and finding out about barriers. Volunteering gave opportunities to young people to build their self-confidence and develop a range of transferable skills that supported progression into further study or employment. The student governor had noted that her service on the Board had been explicitly mentioned as a factor in encouraging her chosen university to make her an unconditional offer. This approach would complement the strong existing enrichment offer and support inclusion.

- Students were keen to improve the creative appearance of the campus and an ambassador role for this was being explored.

- **The Board accepted** the report.

- Claire Anderson-Byrne left the meeting.

ITEM 3: STAFF VOICE – FEBRUARY 2026

- The circulated paper set out the various mechanisms for gathering staff views about the organisation and their roles. The staff survey provided good quantitative data, and was shared at departmental level to permit action plans to be developed that sought to recognise the different issues and concerns that arose at those levels. Those joining

- analysis reported through the Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) process, regular reports to the SMT and within the monthly HR Performance Board paper.

- Staff had responded positively to the decision to offer the AoC recommended pay award (4%) from February 2026 and to give a £500 non-consolidated bonus at Christmas 2025. Leadership training was being provided to managers with external facilitation to support this programme.

- Some new engagement activity had been started including 'kitchats' in which the CEO met all new staff. These were particularly useful in getting feedback about the onboarding process and making staff aware that the CEO was readily accessible.

- Staff recognition was supported by the annual One Awards; the last (December 2025) had attracted more than 130 nominations, with all those nominated seeing what their colleagues had said about them.

- Campus investment included the new security barriers at Stevenage (Hitchin's having been installed in 2024/25) which had addressed staff feedback. Walkie-talkie devices had been provided to aid communication in emergencies so that staff knew that messages had been received and were being responded to.

- Further mechanisms for gathering staff feedback (such as a group of staff champions co-ordinated by the staff governor) were being discussed.

Question: *To what extent did staff participating in conversations feel able to ask honest questions?* Two sessions had taken place so far. There had been a detailed discussion about Walsworth House and the conditions in that building which had been frank!

Question: *Was there a mechanism for governors to have more open-ended conversations with staff or students?* Space can be made within Governor in college sessions – or additional events could be organised, if governors were able to participate.

Question: *Was there a question about workload in the staff survey?* Yes, and the data was being analysed to look at any differences by department to inform action planning.

Question: *How might the staff governor make use of a team of champions?* The idea was being developed, but one benefit was that this group could also sense-check and deepen understanding of feedback from the staff survey, and help create the resulting action plans. They could also encourage the wider staff community become more vocal about work matters, both before and after action.

Question: *What role would managers have in securing and responding to staff voice?* It was important that managers were not taken out of this process. They should be expected to listen to the outcomes of the staff survey and ask probing questions in a supportive way.

Question: *How did cross-college staff issues get addressed?* More consideration of this was needed.

- Governors endorsed the approach being taken and welcomed the commitment to develop this further without extending workload. This report would be a standing agenda item for Board meetings.

- **The Board accepted** the report.

ITEM 4: 2025/26 GOVERNOR CONVERSATIONS

- The Chair had conducted a series of one-to-one conversations with Board members during the autumn term and the paper summarised the feedback, and provided some initial responses

- Governors agreed that it would be useful to convene an additional Strategic Thinking session to precede the scheduled April meeting, which would also become a face to face meeting to enable the Board to engage further with the current strategy. This meeting would be well-timed to examine progress towards meeting local skills needs and developing the latest version of the Accountability Statement – which had to be submitted by 31 July 2026. The Board had contributed in several different ways to the creation of the current strategy, but the high level narrative warranted further discussion not least in the light of the changing external environment. Ensuring governors understood the linkages between the strategic priorities and this over-arching narrative and could show how they influenced this was important.

- Governors had also expressed a wish for more engagement with students and staff. These opportunities were always included in the termly governor in college sessions but could be extended and made more open-ended. More governor attendance at such events would help.

- Other improvements included enhancing the governor induction process and making more training opportunities available to governors. Governors were welcome to ask questions of the authors of papers to the Board and other committees; papers always included their contact details. It would be sensible to confine that kind of interaction to questions of fact and to save 'challenge' questions to Board and committee meetings themselves. The governor handbook provided examples of the style of challenge questions.

- There would also be opportunities to work with governors on different elements of engagement with stakeholders – such as government, local government, employer networks and major clients.

- As well as looking at the NHC strategy and current performance, the next strategic thinking session would include a chance for the Board to articulate what else it was seeking.

- **The Board accepted** the report.

Action: Amend the diary appointment for the next Board meeting to include a strategic thinking session and develop an agenda for the meeting.

ITEM 6: CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S OVERVIEW

- The report showed a strong financial and quality position including starting a second cohort of Lab Tech apprentices for Autolus, and engagement with Airbus over the development of a new Engineering curriculum. This was a significant development.

- The sector was awaiting announcements about curriculum reform including the launch of V-levels and the delayed defunding of some existing qualifications. The later these announcements were made, the more challenging planning for next year and beyond would become.

Question: *How was the college handling this uncertainty?* The application process was affected and discussions with applicants and their families focussed on a sector and

possible destinations with the particular course ultimately taken dependent upon the learner's actual GCSE or equivalent results.

Question: *How quickly could the college respond should announcements not meet current expectations?* A quick response was possible. However, the situation was broadly reassuring; the proposed new science qualification was different from A-levels and would be an opportunity for the college if and when they were launched.

Question: *Were there risks to enrolment from all this change?* Yes, potentially; uncertainty was never helpful. However, the college had delivered T-levels very well, learning from the different phased launches, growing numbers and giving a good experience for learners. As previously indicated, T-levels worked very well in some areas – such as Health – and less well in others where there were well-established alternatives. The college's enrolment process aimed to advise prospective learners as to the right pathway for them.

Question: *Which of the current KPIs looked most worrying at present?* The apprenticeship rate was the hardest to forecast, but currently the position was six percentage points better than at the equivalent time in 2024.25. The current year-end forecast was for an achievement rate of 73% with a target of 68% so while the current figure looked worrying, it was in fact on track to achieve the year-end target. Other risks included managing the exit from the ECC and addressing the dilapidations works.

Question: *What more could be done to improve attendance?* Attendance was currently 88.9%, short of the 90% target, but good in comparison with the FE sector in general. There was a full range of actions in place to underpin and encourage attendance.

Question: *To what extent were curriculum teams aware of jobs plans for their sectors?* These were already being taken into account and the curriculum showed job roles – such as healthcare workers in Health -not just the broader title.

Question: *Was staff turnover a concern at present?* Some of the turnover related to redundancies last year caused by

- **The Board accepted** the report and **supported** the CEO's forthcoming organisational structure review project.

- Grace Wade apologised but had to leave the meeting at this point. The meeting remained quorate.

ITEM 7: AUDIT COMMITTEE REPORT AND CORPORATE RISK REGISTER

- The Committee had not met since its previous report to the Board in December 2025; it net met on 23 March and the paper highlighted the expected business.

- The report also covered the latest update of the Risk Register. This continued to undergo regular review by the SMT; this iteration included adjustments and the addition of a new Emerging Risk relating to the government proposals to restrict employers from using their apprenticeship levy funds for certain higher-level apprenticeships. This might affect the Group's delivery to major clients such as Lloyds Banking Group and John Lewis Partnership.

- This was a concern across the sector, but could also create opportunities as well as risk. The position would continue to be monitored and might transfer from the emerging risk list to the main register when more detail was known.

- **The Board accepted** the report.

ITEM 8: FINANCE COMMITTEE REPORT AND P5 (DECEMBER 2025) MANAGEMENT ACCOUNTS REPORT

- The year-to-date (YTD) position continued to be ahead of budget with all individual revenue lines and overall pay and non-pay cost lines showing positive variances overall. Some of this was because delivery had been achieved sooner than expected (for example, by sub-contractors and partners) and this was reflected in some negative variances in individual non-pay cost lines. When a reforecast was carried out at Period 6, the full year forecast for these elements was expected to be closer to budget.

- Cash remained in a strong position, although the capital investment programme was expected to complete the expenditure of £6.4m on condition improvements on the college estate by 31 March 2026, as required to avoid the risk of DfE clawing back this funding. Reserves also remained in a good position.

- An improved and more engaging presentation of financial data was being developed, to assist governors understand and monitor the Gorup's financial performance.

Question: *Was the higher than forecast expenditure on agency staff reflective of recruitment challenges or sickness absence?* There was a level of sickness absence, and this was generally higher at this time of year, although absence levels were not unusually high. The main reason for higher agency costs related to the need to cover some hard to recruit posts, principally some Electrical tutors for apprenticeships, and some Motor Vehicle tutors. These skills were hard to recruit to and cover was expensive. This was a sector-wide issue and not particular to the college.

- **The Board accepted** the report.

ITEM 9: QUALITY & CURRICULUM COMMITTEE REPORT

- The Committee Chair expressed appreciation of the work of the Student Governor and her colleagues. Good student feedback continued to be collected through student voice activity. Issues raised through these processes were being responded to. The regular student survey had now been split into three parts (previously two) to better focus the questions and to reduce the time needed to complete each survey. The three surveys would be (a) the First Impressions survey, carried out in the autumn term and focussing on student induction, awareness of course expectations, and general impressions of the college (such as feeling safe); (b) the Course Impressionssurvey, conducted in the spring term and concentrating on the student's academic and vocational experiences; and (c) the Last Impressions survey, conducted in the summer term and looking back at the student's overall experiences. Response rates to the first survey this year had been very high and the general picture was very positive.

- Governors had also welcomed the introduction of the Quality Development Plan (the QDP) – renamed to reflect the new emphasis on proactive innovation and development of teaching and learning rather than the previous improvement plan (QIP) which concentrated more on addressing weaknesses in performance. The new approach emphasised high quality teaching and learning and sought to bring a more aspirational style to the college's curriculum delivery.

- Overall, the reports made to the Committee had evidenced continuing increases in the quality of student outcomes and satisfaction, and increased confidence in the coherent improvement plan that the college has been following for a couple of years.

- **The Board accepted** the report.

ITEM 11: ANY OTHER BUSINESS

- None.

ITEM 12: DATE OF NEXT MEETING

- **Monday 23 April 2026**, starting at 18.30, at the Stevenage campus (preceded by a Strategic Thinking session starting at c16.00).

ACTION LOG

Meeting	Minute Reference	Summary of Action	Who	When
15/09/25	9.	Set up the [Search and Governance] Committee and issue diary appointments.	Robert Dale	31/10/25
09/02/26	6.	Amend the diary appointment for the next Board meeting to include a strategic thinking session and develop an agenda for the meeting.	Robert Dale	28/02/26
09/02/26	10.	Amend Annex E to include reference to governor training.	Emma Masters	28/02/26
09/02/26	10.	Publish the revised Safeguarding, Child Protection and Prevent Policy on Sharepoint and the Group website.	Emma Masters	28/02/26