



CORPORATION BOARD Finance & General Purposes Committee

Minutes of a meeting held on Wednesday 18th June 2025 at 6pm

Present

Alan Bark (Chair)
Jacqui Canton, Principal
David Walker

In attendance

Kash Barlow, Vice Principal
Olivier Cognard, Vice Principal
Mark Lay, Finance Director
Kevin Wilkinson, Head of People Services
Michael Chiyasa, Estates and Capital Development Director
Jude Brown, Clerk and Governance Advisor

Governor questions are represented with bullet points in bold italics and Management responses follow.

1. Opening Comments

1.1 Apologies and matters to be raised under AOB.

Apologies had been received from Edward Collett and Ben Rose. Mackenzie Nordal-Howe had not replied. The meeting remained quorate.

1.2 Declarations of interest

All College staff present declared an interest in item 6.3 Staff Pay Award.

2 Minutes of the meeting held on 11th March 2025

2.1 Public Minutes

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 11th March were reviewed and approved as an accurate reflection of the meeting.

3 Matters Arising, Written Resolutions & Action Points

3.1 Matters arising, written resolutions and action points

There were no matters arising, written resolutions or actions points due or raised since the last meeting. The Committee noted the report.

4 Reports

4.1 Estates and Capital Projects

The Estates and Capital Projects Director updated the committee on current projects. The building work at Common Leys had been completed. A change of planning use class for the ODS site has been submitted and a planning decision is expected by the end of July 2025. The team are reviewing tenders for the internal remodelling works for this project.

- ***Is this [ODS] project on track with regards to timing and expectations? Has it slipped?*** Yes, but the delay has not made much difference. It made the College reflect on whether this was the right project and it was reaffirmed as the right thing to do. There had been some publicity on the local BBC about the project, so all staff were updated about it, noting that it is still subject to planning permission.

There has been good progress now on the RAAC project at Witney with work expected to start in July which enables the demolition work to happen as early as possible with a view to reducing the impact on the Witney campus.

The team are working with their helpdesk software vendor to enable better analysis of reactive maintenance and repair activity so that proactive capital projects can be identified

which would improve the campuses. The team have also supported property surveys by Aviva and the FE Condition Data Collection 2 appointed surveyors which are important for insurance and grant funding.

- **Regarding utilities and the table of consumption trends, what is happening at Common Leys as there is a very large variance?** The Estates and Capital Projects Director has reviewed this and believes the cause is the decarbonisation work that has happened which moved from oil and gas consumption to electricity meaning higher electricity use. The period covered also encompassed the building work at the campus with contractors on site.

There was a discussion about the ongoing situation with the fire hydrant. The situation is mitigated by the type of use of the building and liaison with the fire service in the event of any incident occurring. It was agreed that the College solicitors will be consulted again. The College's insurers are aware of the situation.

- **Did the insurers raise any issues after the property survey?** There were few issues raised, mainly housekeeping. An update to the Permit to Work procedure was requested. The insurers were happy to see the new fire suppression systems put in place and want to see service records in future.
- **Regarding the Estates asset register, it's being generated on an incremental basis. How long will it be before we have one and you can sign it off?** This register is on smartlog with QR codes now on equipment such as chairs, so Estates know where furniture is. Based on the data the team now has; the Estates and Capital Projects Director can now make more realistic estimates of costs for replacement in his budget. Effectively the College now has a register, but it will always be added to as new equipment is bought. It was agreed that this can be taken off the report.
- **On Value for Money and the tender information, are these real savings?** The Estates and Capital Projects Director makes sure that the team follow the Financial Regulations to get the right number of quotes so look at it as a saving compared to what could have been spent if they had not surveyed the market.
- **The variances are surprising in the quotes received, what accounts for that?** Sometimes the team do not know the indicative budget until they go to tender. The suppliers are given the same specification and the same opportunity to see the building. It may be that some suppliers have full order books so quote high.

The Committee noted the report.

4.2 People Services

The Head of People Services gave an overview of the report focussing on the importance of recruitment to the College in a challenging market. Staff retention has improved significantly, and the team are targeting hard to recruit sectors such as Construction with a variety of events. The target of 6 weeks from offer to arrival remains challenging. The Head of People Services outlined the new role of Recruitment Manager as one element of moving towards a more proactive recruitment strategy.

- **Is there a tightening up of the market?** The Head of People Services felt that a more strategic approach to recruitment was necessary and outlined the new role of Recruitment Manager as one element of moving towards a more proactive recruitment strategy. The team feels that this will position the College more effectively externally and improve the speed at which people can be brought in. Pay

is considered competitive, and the College can recruit but the team want to be able to pull in talent more effectively.

- ***What do we have now?*** There is a recruitment team of two people but to move towards being an 'Employer of Choice' it is felt that a more strategic approach needs to be adopted and to be more proactive in terms of head hunting for example.
- ***When ODS comes online how many more staff will be needed?*** The Principal felt that the College already has most of the staff it needs although one or two more posts may be needed to supplement provision. The adult provision will largely be through existing Hourly Paid Lecturers.

Positive progress has been made in other KPIs during the period, and it is felt that a culture of performance is developing.

The Aspiring Managers Day was also a highlight of the period, and another day will be held in the Autumn term.

- ***How are potential managers identified?*** Line manager input is used based on their knowledge of staff and development discussions. Nine people attended the session last week and demonstrated really positive attitudes. There will be a further cohort of nine or ten in the autumn. There will be proactive follow up with line managers and individuals to help them progress.
- ***Was this run cross-campus?*** The event was run in Abingdon, but attendees were from all the campuses. Networking by attendees was encouraged.
- ***Does the Aspiring Managers Programme get advertised across the College?*** The programme is promoted through the college staff newsletter, under the Leadership Development Academy (LDA) and people can self-refer through their personal development plan in discussion with line managers.
- ***How do you deal with disappointment?*** Staff are given feedback in a conversation and the chance to reflect if this would be the right route for them or if different routes might serve them better.
- ***Is it a small group every time?*** The Head of People Services feels that ten is a good number to enable discussion and networking, some cohorts in the past have been five or six. Due to demand this year two cohorts are being run. It is hoped this will help build momentum and enable the programme to grow.

The Principal extended the offer to governors that if they felt they would like to be an assessor on the day then they would be welcome to be involved.

- ***What is 'You said, we did'?*** The Vice Principal, People and Culture outlined that, after the staff survey results were analysed and themes identified, SMT together with CLT form an action plan to address the themes. The idea is that this will enable better feedback for the next survey and that staff can see a tangible impact. An all-staff session was held to show the results and feedback to staff on what was said and then what was done about the feedback. This is done annually.
- ***What is survey participation like?*** This year the participation rate was 55% which was an increase over 43% last year. Historically it has been much lower but there was a big push last year. This year's survey is now open.

The Committee noted the report.

5.3 Health and Safety Report

The Principal gave an overview of the report as the Head of Health and Safety had given his apologies. The report shows continued increase in Near Miss reporting which is positive. The Head of Health and Safety had undertaken a project in Construction to assess risk assessments and teacher practice in the classroom. There had been no significant areas of concern identified.

- ***If someone falls from height, why is it not a RIDDOR? [noted as a minor incident in the report]*** The Principal will review but if there are no significant injuries or broken bones, or significant time off work then the incident would not be a RIDDOR. The Health and Safety team do review all reports and categorise them to ensure consistency of reporting.

There was a discussion as to the clarity of the two tables in the Accidents and Incidents list. It was clarified that the second table was last term's data.

- ***Reflecting on the Student Engagement Days where students themselves say that ID badges help make them feel safe, on the Behaviour data relating to anti-social behaviour - how much of that is in relation the badges? To be reported there must have been some significant challenge for staff?*** The Principal explained that there are regular patrols, meet and greet duties by staff in the mornings, all staff can ask students to wear badges, but most students do wear their badges most of the time.
- ***On 'Run, Hide, Tell' – what should governors do in this situation?*** It was agreed that this should be added to Governor induction, but the key message is not to endanger oneself and to go in the opposite direction and attempt to exit the building safely if there were to be armed person on campus for example. There is no perfect answer as not every possible scenario can be covered and we follow national guidance.

The Committee noted the report.

5 Policies

5.0 Policies Cover Paper

The Clerk gave an overview of the policies for discussion at the meeting. In general, the policies presented were refreshes for clarity and updated referencing.

5.1 Smoking Policy

There were no comments on the policy, and it was approved by the Committee per the policy framework.

5.2 Financial Regulations

There was a discussion of the matter of bank authorisation by SMT members. It was explained that with leave and working at different campuses, six people having the mandate was necessary to get the two signatures required which could otherwise be a challenge. Payroll was noted as having fewer people as only the Principal, Deputy Principal and Finance Director can authorise this. It was agreed that the Finance Director should make clear in Appendix A that the approval limit related to purchase orders rather than payments. There was a discussion as to whether the policy is robust enough to deal with the kinds of issues found at Weston College. It was felt that the policy was comprehensive enough.

- ***How do you deal with people attempting to circumvent approval limits by breaking down work into smaller packages under Supplier Strategy?*** The Finance Director felt that the finance team review monthly who the College is spending money with. The limits at the College are quite low so the team would probably pick up an increase in purchase orders if people were attempting to get round their limits. It was agreed some wording would be added to prohibit the splitting down of Purchase orders into smaller packages to avoid limits.

There was a discussion regarding gifts and hospitality and the review of the limit of £25 as a trigger for review. The matter had been discussed at Audit Committee, and it had been agreed to report some more detail there in terms of origin of gifts and previous year data to identify any trends. It had also been agreed at Audit to raise the limit to £50 as it had been £25 for the past ten years. It was agreed by F&GP Committee that the Financial Regulations be updated in line with the discussion at Audit.

The Committee agreed to recommend the policy to the Board.

5.3 Health and Safety Policy

The Committee agreed to recommend the policy to the Board.

5.4 LGPS Employer Discretions Policy

The Committee agreed to recommend the policy to the Board.

6 Finance Matters

The Chair noted that it was the Head of Finance's last committee meeting before leaving the College. He expressed the Committee's thanks and appreciation for her support and wished her well.

6.1 Management Accounts

The Head of Finance gave the overview of the management accounts to end of April 2025. In terms of trends the operating surplus was lower than forecast but the College was still in 'Good' financial health and still had substantial cash holdings.

The Committee were comfortable with the report which is consistent with previous reports.

The Committee recommended the Management Accounts to the Board to approve.

6.2 Budget for 2025-26

The Finance Director gave a detailed overview of the draft budget for the next financial year 2025-26 explaining key movements such as the estimated increase in income to just over £42m, the changes in pay and non-pay costs and the impact on EBITDA and surplus. The detail behind the estimates in income growth were explained to the Committee as well as the estimated decrease in cash reserves. In addition, there was a brief overview of the expected capital projects. The budget is expected to retain the College's financial health grade as 'Good', and all bank covenants are expected to be met. It was not considered that there were significant risks or opportunities within the budget.

- ***With the government saying they'll provide more funding, will this benefit the College?*** The Principal explained that the detail behind the recent announcements is still not available so it is felt that there will not be a significant impact on the College. The plan is to keep building growth sustainably rather than expecting large injections of cash. The College's planning is bottom up from both the curriculum and costs side, and it is evidence based using the work of the MIS team

- ***Regarding the proportion of costs that are recharged at cost, is this normal?***
The Finance Director explained that it is normal to recharge Element 3 funding at cost which is related to SEND provision and is a substantial number as the College has significant SEND provision. Other elements do contain contribution but not Element 3. If this is taken out of the calculations the College EBITDA changes from 4.6% to 5.6%. The DfE has a target of 6% but at a recent AOC Finance Directors meeting, it was clear that less than half of colleges were achieving above 6% based on 23/24 financial statements.

The Committee recommended the 2025-26 Budget to the Board to approve.

6.3 Staff Pay Award

The proposed pay award is based on the recommendation from the School Teachers' Review Body (STRB) for 2025-26. There was a discussion on the likely process with the unions based on previous years' experience.

The Committee recommended the Pay Award to the Board to approve.

6.4 Draft College Financial Forecasting Return (CFFR)

The Finance Director gave an overview of the CFFR covering the assumptions underpinning it. It is expected that the College will retain its financial health grade of 'Good' over the three-year period. The Committee felt the forecast was reasonable.

The Committee recommended the CFFR to the Board to approve.

7. General Purposes

7.1 Freedom of Information Requests Update

The Clerk provided an update on Freedom of Information (FOI) requests outlining the general nature of the requests and explaining the one FOI request that had gone over the deadline. The support of the IT and Finance teams in providing the necessary information was acknowledged.

The Committee noted the report.

7.2 Review of the Underpinning Strategies in support of the College Strategic Plan

The Principal gave an overview of the rationale for the new approach to reviewing the underpinning strategies to ensure that they were strategic rather than simply operational.

There was a discussion about disaster recovery planning and crisis management, the former is for SMT review not Board. Internal audit is currently looking at business continuity. The aim of the approach is to be clear about the strategy and the operational or department plans that then support that.

7.3 Signing of the AOC EDI Charter Public Statement.

The Clerk gave an overview of this item which was to ensure scrutiny and proper approval of the Chair's signature. The paper had been brought to F&GP Committee as this committee is the review body for the Equalities Policy. The AOC Charter does not sign the College up to anything it is not already doing and over 110 Colleges have already signed up to it.

The Committee recommended the Chair's signature to this document to the Board for approval.

8. Any Other Business

The Finance Director noted that the FE Commissioner's office had reviewed the sector benchmarking measures but they had only been published the day papers were due for this Committee meeting. A paper outlining the changes would be brought to an autumn meeting of the F&GP Committee.

9. Future Business

9.1 F&GP Cycle of Business for 2025-26

The Clerk gave an overview of the proposed cycle of business for the Committee for 2025-26. It was agreed that the IT report (to include cyber security) should be annual and come to the October meeting and the Marketing report, which is also annual, should come to the November meeting. The FE Benchmarking paper outlined under item 8 AOB should be added to the October meeting.

The Committee approved the cycle of business for 2025-26 subject to the agreed amendments.

The meeting closed at 6.45pm.

The next meeting will be held in Abingdon on Thursday 9th October at 6pm.

A Bark

Signature 

15/10/2025



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