



# **CORPORATION BOARD**

## **Finance & General Purposes Committee**

Minutes of a meeting held on Tuesday 11<sup>th</sup> March 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  
Ben Rose, Head of Health & Safety  
Michael Chiyasa, Estates and Capital Development Director  
Jude Brown, Clerk

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 Penny Challans. Mackenzie Nordal-Howe had not replied. The meeting remained quorate. There were no matters raised for AOB. It was noted that there would be a slight change to running order and 5.2 Estate report would be presented at the end of section 5. The Committee Chair welcomed the new clerk.

### **1.2 Declarations of interest**

No declarations of interest were received.

## **2 Minutes of the meeting held on 19<sup>th</sup> November 2024**

### **2.1 Public Minutes**

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 19<sup>th</sup> November 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.

## **4. Policies**

### **4.1 Reserves Policy**

The Finance Director gave the background to the Reserves Policy which is that it provides the rationale for why the College holds reserves. There have been no changes to the policy as there are no drivers for change in the approach currently. There is no indication that the Government will look at reserves held by FE Colleges in the near future.

Governors queried whether the College held an overdraft facility with the bank which the College does not. Ringfencing of funds for EFSA within the reserves was also queried but as money for projects is paid in arrears, there is no ringfencing and such monies are not paid from reserves.

The Committee recommended the Reserves Policy to the Board.

### **4.2 Relationships at Work Policy**

The Head of People Services outlined the importance of this policy and that a number of additions had been made for clarity and definitions tidied up. The team believes that the policy now reflects how this policy is managed.

- ***How do you define a 'close personal relationship'? People are relied upon to be open with People Services or their manager and asked to declare any relationships as early as possible. There is a wish to treat employees like adults and an expectation that they will declare any relationships. A number of types of relationship could be covered by this definition but the key thing is to be able to manage any conflicts of interest that could arise due to the friendship or relationship. It is key for employees to make their manager aware when a relationship extends from work to outside of work, so they can be aware of such conflicts. There has been no material change to the policy.***

The Chair noted that policies coming forward to committee could benefit from seeing where the changes had been made, or a short cover paper to outline the changes if they are substantial in future.

The Committee recommended the Relationships at Work Policy to the Board.

## 5 Term 2 Updates

### 5.1 People Services

The Vice Principal, People & Culture welcomed the new Head of People Services, who has joined the College a few weeks ago, who then provided an overview of the People Services report. The two primary areas covered in the overview were the KPIs to show progress and areas of challenge, and a commentary on what People Services are putting in place to support improved outcomes.

In terms of KPIs, the recruitment KPI of 6 weeks from advert to offer had shown progress having gone from 55% to 68% in the last period. It was noted that this had come a long way, and it was encouraging to see the team's effort resulting in a positive outcome, but there was more to do to embed the process.

- ***What is being done about retention in the probation period as 15% of new recruits leave during probation? It is key to ensure the right quality of people are recruited and to ensure that onboarding is good.*** It was agreed that the College wants to recruit high quality people who then stay and add value. The team are keen to make a step change in onboarding to ensure people have a positive experience and stay. It was noted as positive that systems and equipment access was in place from day one when the new recruit arrives to enable them to get started in their new role. The team are looking at improving how people's expectations around what their role will look like in reality are met and managed, for example by better preparing them and ensuring induction is consistent.

In terms of concerns for the future, the KPI around people off with work related stress is a concern, albeit the numbers are not high in absolute terms. The team acknowledged there was more to do in terms of culture change and activity to manage the issue. The number of people affected is not concentrated in any one area of the organisation.

It was highlighted that People Services team are well established and processes are embedded, however there is an opportunity to improve processes to better enable policies. The team want to simplify policies and ensure ownership of processes to deliver better outcomes. Work is ongoing to ensure that the focus and ownership is in place, and this will be the focus of work through to the summer. In terms of case work, there have been quite high volumes coming through the help desk. The team have been reorganised in terms of

handling casework and help desk calls - they are a single team now and there is more confidence that issues and cases will be owned from start to finish. This provides more clarity for the team and, while they are in the early stages of adapting to this new way of working, the progress is positive.

- ***The help desk has two hundred calls open, what is the monthly average?*** There are 350 calls per month new calls per month.
- ***Is that just from staff?*** Yes, the new calls are just for employees and managers. There are some external queries into HR, although only 5 or 10% maximum of the total call volume, so this is mostly internal activity.
- ***What percentage of the day is spent on the help desk?*** it is 100% for a manager and three employees on the help desk and casework. It is a challenge, and the team have made progress on closing call volumes, but there is a degree of pressure. A lot of calls are administration-related, and historically the team has been focussed on administration, but People Services are trying to funnel everything through the Helpdesk to gain visibility. There is confidence that if recent changes are embedded, and further confidence is instilled within the team, that the call volumes will be managed. Automation is also an area of focus which will assist in managing call volumes.
- ***Would automation require new software?*** Automation could be done through new software or through existing systems and the team need to decide best how to tackle this. The current HR system is not used to its full capacity, although it is a common system in further education colleges. In terms of rolling out automation, it will not be just about people services staff, it will be taking everyone in the organisation on the journey to understand new processes. The Principal noted that everyone wants to see a successful HR team and she feels that there are green shoots in terms of the progress that has been made.
- ***Do you think the staff progression target at 9% is too high as an average? You beat this last year but to think that you will get 9% progression year on year could be ambitious.*** The college has been growing and so has had apprenticeships and opportunities for staff in terms of promotion, this might not be sustainable in the future, but the team will reflect on this.
- ***In terms of personal development plans, is it worth considering a two-tier approach with one for senior or teaching staff, and a simpler approach for business support staff, instead of one-size-fits-all?*** The People Services team agreed that the one-size-fits-all approach could be looked at, particularly in terms of applicability to different types of roles, to see if the approach could be improved.

The Committee noted the report.

### 5.3 Health and Safety Report

The Head of Health and Safety highlighted some areas from the health and safety report. The 'Driving College Vehicles Procedure' had been updated to clarify how drivers were assessed and authorised and a new training course that covers what is required for staff to drive college buses safely. The team are about to launch the new courses in next few weeks and will encourage sign up.

In terms of Near Miss Reporting (NMR), the team have continued to see an increase in NMR reporting which was down to a new procedure and better training so that staff understood the definitions more clearly. This training has been rolled out through Wednesday afternoon

staff training. The Head of Health and Safety is happy to see the increase in near miss reporting as this is key to making the workplace safer and avoiding accidents and injuries in the future.

The safety management software in use by the College is being reviewed. The team intend to move accidents and incident reporting and risk assessments into Smartlog. It will be key to ensure that integration between iTrent and Smartlog is better so that staff data is consistent and enables correct reporting.

- **Do you have a system to review the live task-based risk assessments of which there are 425 live?** The process is that an e-mail goes to the raiser of the risk for review and then this goes to the Head of Health and Safety for approval. The Head of Health and Safety will send back to the raiser if there is irrelevant or inadequate information within the risk assessment, or if more detail is required. The Head of Health and Safety consults with other staff, for example curriculum managers, to understand the risk more clearly when necessary. It was clarified that some risk assessments are kept on paper but reviewed by the Head of Health and Safety through auditing.

Recent near miss reports relating to the building works at Common Leys were discussed by the Committee and the Head of Health and Safety confirmed that the contractor's risk assessments had been reviewed.

The Committee discussed recent behavioural events, and the Head of Health and Safety confirmed that trends in behaviour reporting had been recognised, and staff had been reminded to raise incident reports where relevant. The relevant staff are aware of the situation and continue to actively review whether the correct support is in place for particular students, and whether the provision continues to be appropriate where behaviour is a concern.

- **Have we got enough Fire Marshalls and First Aiders?** The college has 120 staff as First Aiders across all sites, which is approximately 20% of staff. This is a high level of participation, and the People Services team have helped with promoting the associated training to staff. The College also has sufficient Fire Marshalls.

The Committee noted the report.

## ***5.2 Estates and Capital Development Report***

The Estates and Capital Projects Director updated the committee on current projects. While the colour of the KPIs was not where he would like them to be, they were under control. Weather has delayed the project at Common Leys, but the project is now expected to finish at the end of April and move in during May.

Previously reported delays in addressing RAAC and roof repairs at Witney persisted, with the DfE having asked for a review of designs. The DfE's design consultant had made suggestions regarding the designs and excluded some aspects which the College's team believe to be necessary. The team have replied with queries on the consultant's advice and are still waiting to hear the outcome. They have also tried to estimate the size of the gap between what is required and what work may be approved. The potential impact of continued disruption, the continued cost of portacabins, and inflation in construction costs during any delay has not been reflected in the consultant's value for money assessment. It was agreed that the College would continue to push for the right facilities for our students.

The overview also highlighted that expanding car parking provision at Common Leys was being considered, that LED lighting had been rolled out at Abingdon, Bicester, and Witney

campuses, but that there had been no progress regarding the fire hydrant issue discussed at the previous meeting.

The Committee discussed future potential capital projects and the impact on provision of facilities. The Estates and Capital Projects Director was comfortable that any challenges could be managed.

The new regulations regarding recycling would require only limited additional work and communication to staff, and the College would continue to comply with regulations. The supplier of waste services to the college had done a gap analysis to assist with this assessment and it was confirmed that this contractor covered all the College's campuses.

- ***Are the EV chargers just in Abingdon?*** No, each campus has EV charger provision.
- ***With regard to the help desk, for the majority of calls what percentage are furniture or broken IT, or have we not got the data?*** The Estates and Capital Projects Director confirmed that the report usually covers the KPIs rather than the category breakdown. It is shared with IT.
- ***Can you deal with calls internally or do you need contractors?*** It is a mix. Sometimes the College need specialists, e.g. for some electrical work, so a contractor is used. The team was reshuffled last year to try to reduce dependency on external contractors, but it was a challenge to fill some of the new roles.
- ***Regarding the Climate Change dashboard, it is hard to gauge whether the figures show the College as being above or below target.*** The College are still in the data collection phase and has a lot of data with regards to energy use on site, but trips and deliveries onto site etc. have not yet been worked out. Targets are not yet included. There may be a separate sustainability report in future.
- ***Do the heat decarbonisation plans give us payback figures and show positive return on investment?*** Reports do show the estimated return on investment, and the team intend to apply for funding as well as obtaining estimate costs. However, the team needs to get to the detail of the design to understand the potential costs better, and to understand any underlying works which might be required. Such works could affect the return on investment, for example roof repairs could be required before installing solar panels and this would affect the calculations.

The committee noted the report.

## **6. Finance Matters**

### **6.1 Management Accounts**

The Finance Director presented the management accounts for the first six months of the year, i.e. to the end of January 2025. The operating surplus was below budget primarily due to higher than budget pay costs. The headlines are that income was on track, pay costs were slightly above budget, and non-pay costs were below budget.

The reasons for above budget pay costs are in part due to higher use of agency staff and a different mix of staff. People Services were already looking at how to replace agency staff with employed ones to tackle the use of agency staff. FTEs were overall on budget but there had been a change in the mix of staff, i.e. fewer Learning Support Assistants, and more teaching staff whose average salary was higher.

The balance sheet is as expected, and the Head of Finance has added more detail in the appendices with regards to the types of costs. Cash flow is in a reasonable position with an expectation of a slight dip in March before some major funding comes in during April. There was discussion of the loan position given the positive cash position, but the loan would require paying off in its entirety and will be taken over by the Government anyway in 2026. Reserves are considered to be at an appropriate level with a significant proportion held in a high interest-bearing account.

- ***What is 'Professional Services – Other' as it was quite high last year?*** It is services like HR development training, building contracts advice and RAAC costs, the latter of which were not budgeted for, but for which the College should get reimbursed.
- ***HMRC IR35 rules are changing in April, are you prepared?*** The team are reviewing the supplier database regarding the impact of these changes to ensure compliance.

The Committee recommended the Management Accounts to the Board.

## 6.2 Mid-Year Budget Review

The Finance Director provided an overview of the mid-year position on the forecast budget, which is based on January actuals. The ESFA have not yet released details of the in-year funding the College will receive in relation to growth in student numbers, employers NI, and any additional Government funding that may be allocated, and this is the main area of uncertainty. Therefore, a cautious 'low income' forecast has been prepared although it is still expected that the College will achieve the budgeted grade of 'Good' financial health. No new material risks have been identified.

- ***What is the rating for Outstanding if 170 is good [regarding financial health grades]?*** Outstanding would be 230.

The Committee recommended the report to the Board.

## 7. General Purposes

### 7.1 Freedom of Information Requests Update

The Clerk provided an update on Freedom of Information (FOI) requests, confirming that the previous clerk had completed all FOI requests received to date before leaving. One request had gone outside of the required window and generated a complaint to the ICO. This has now been closed satisfactorily and the administrative error that led to missing the deadline had been resolved.

The Committee noted the report.

## 8. Any Other Business

No additional matters were raised.

## 9. Future Business

The Chair reminded members that the next meeting is scheduled for Thursday 19<sup>th</sup> June 2025, at the Abingdon Campus.

A Bark

Signature ..... 

19/06/2025



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