



CORPORATION BOARD Finance & General Purposes Committee

Minutes of a meeting held on Tuesday 1st October 2024 at 6pm

Present

Alan Bark (Chair)
Jacqui Canton, Principal
Edward Collett
David Walker

In attendance

Kash Barlow, Vice Principal
Michael Chiyasa, Head of Estates and Capital Projects
Olivier Cognard, Vice Principal
Kelly Haddrell, Head of People Services
Penny Challans, Head of Finance
Mark Lay, Finance Director
Ben Rose, Head of Health & Safety
Howard Stamp, Clerk

1. Opening Comments

1.1 Apologies and matters to be raised under AOB.

Apologies had been received from Mackenzie Nordal-Howe. There were no matters raised for AOB.

1.2 Declarations of interest

No declarations of interest were received.

2 Minutes of the meeting held on 20th June 2024

2.1 Public Minutes

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 20th June 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 was one matter arising from the previous meeting which had been completed.

4. Annual Reports

4.1 Annual Committee Report to the Board

The Clerk presented the Annual Committee Report, which summarised the committee's activities and key decisions over the past year. The report provided an overview of significant discussions, including those related to estates, health and safety, and major financial decisions.

The committee discussed the balance between strategic oversight and operational detail, agreeing that the report accurately captured the year's activities and that no amendments were required.

The committee recommended the report to the Board.

4.2 Review of Committee Effectiveness & Self-Assessment

The Clerk presented the results of the committee's self-assessment, highlighting that all members had agreed or strongly agreed on the committee's effectiveness. The Chair noted that, while overall feedback was positive, there were suggestions for enhancing the clarity and timeliness of financial reporting, particularly concerning major capital projects.

The committee briefly discussed the importance of refining how self-assessment outcomes were integrated into broader Board evaluations, with particular attention to ensuring consistency across all committees.

The committee noted the report.

4.3 People Services Report

The Head of People Services provided an in-depth update on recruitment, staff retention, and legislative changes affecting the college. It was highlighted that, while some KPIs related to recruitment had been met or exceeded, key areas such as engineering, construction, and health and social care continued to face recruitment challenges.

The committee discussed ongoing issues with staff retention, with members raising comments about the retention of staff hired within the past year, particularly in light of the reported shortfall in staff costs.

The Head of People Services agreed that, while recruitment numbers had improved, retaining talent remained a challenge, particularly in a competitive employment market. The committee also discussed the benefits of providing clearer data on probation-period completions and the need to break down vacancy figures by department.

- Do we know how many people we recruit and then retain?
 - *Currently, we do not track this, but it is something we have discussed including within our KPIs.*
- Is the percentage turnover of staff typical for the sector?
 - *It is lower than the sector norm; generally, our retention is good.*
- Are we using agencies to fill recruitment gaps?
 - *We have used some agencies to help fill recruitment gaps, but this is to source permanent staff rather than for temporary staffing.*
- Do the 35 vacancies impact teaching? Is this a particular issue?
 - *Not all recruitment gaps are in teaching roles. Where there are gaps, we look at ways to cover them, such as combining groups or providing cover, to ensure there is no impact on students and teaching.*
- Could the recruitment gaps be presented in a table for the next meeting?
 - *Yes, we can provide a breakdown of vacancy figures by department for the next meeting.*
- The PDR completion percentage seems low; should we not be aiming for 100%?
 - *We are trying to raise the profile of PDR completion with the college management team. Reporting can be challenging, particularly with hourly-paid and term-time-only staff. Hourly-paid staff may only teach at a remote venue for a few hours each week. We could look at reporting with hourly-paid staff separated out.*
- Regarding progression measurement, is this measured as promotion or just a change in role?
 - *We include various elements in the measure: promotion, role change, and additional roles, as some staff may hold two roles within the college.*
- What training is provided for an LSA progressing to teaching?
 - *They would start with an entry-level teaching qualification and progress to higher levels with us.*

The Head of People Services also outlined upcoming employment law changes, with a particular focus on new legislation regarding sexual harassment. She reassured the committee that the college's existing policies were compliant but emphasised the need for a proactive approach to preventing harassment, particularly in cases involving third-party interactions.

Action	By Whom	Deadline
Head of People Services to include retention data in future reporting	HoPS	November 2024
Head of People Services to include a more detailed breakdown of vacancies by department in future reports	HoPS	November 2024
Head of people services to separate out hourly paid staff for future reporting on PDR's	HoPS	November 2024

The committee noted the report.

4.4 Estates and Capital Development Report

The Head of Estates and Capital Development provided a comprehensive update on current and upcoming estates projects. It was reported that the Creative and Design T Level project was completed on schedule and is now operational. However, the Animal Care project has faced delays due to the discovery of bats in the Equine building. This issue required significant mitigation, including additional surveys and specialist consultation, which has pushed the project timeline back. Despite these challenges, work is continuing, and the first phase of the Animal Care project is expected to be completed by the end of October.

Committee members discussed the increasing costs related to this project. It was explained that ongoing value engineering efforts are aiming to reduce costs by reassessing materials and construction methods without sacrificing project quality.

The committee also discussed the RAAC building at the Witney campus, where serious structural issues, particularly involving reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete (RAAC), have significantly increased the project's scope and cost. Early cost estimates had been exceeded due to the extent of the damage, with the project now forecasted to cost over £1 million. Discussions are ongoing with contractors to explore cost-saving measures and ensure the building is made safe for long-term use.

- Regarding the RAAC repairs, would they consider giving us the funds to carry out the repairs as we see fit?
 - o *We do not believe that will be an option. We can ask, but they are very insistent that funding must specifically address RAAC repairs.*
- What is the timescale for receipt of the funds?
 - o *We have been advised that funding will be received in April 2025.*

The committee also expressed concern over ongoing delays with Thames Water regarding the water connection at Abingdon. It was confirmed that, although the delays continue, the issue does not prevent the building from being used.

The committee noted the report.

4.5 Health and Safety Report

The Head of Health and Safety presented the Health and Safety Report, which showed a decrease in the number of reported incidents, down from 482 to 390. Most incidents involved minor injuries typical of vocational courses, such as motor vehicle and engineering. It was noted that there had been a significant reduction in verbal aggression reports; however, this was attributed to changes in categorisation, with more incidents now being classified as behavioural or physical aggression.

The committee discussed the need to increase awareness around reporting near-miss incidents, as the number of such reports had decreased. It was acknowledged that under-

reporting of near misses was a concern, and it was confirmed that promoting better reporting practices would be a key focus for the upcoming year.

Committee members also discussed benchmarking the college's health and safety performance against other institutions. It was explained that efforts were underway to collaborate with other FE colleges to establish common metrics and improve benchmarking data.

The committee noted the report.

4.6 Marketing Report

The Commercial Director presented the Marketing Report, highlighting successes in social media engagement and an increase in website traffic. The recent recruitment of a social media specialist had significantly improved the quality and reach of content. However, the committee expressed concern over the decline in higher education (HE) enrolments, which had decreased from 127 to 77 students.

It was explained that this decline was part of a national trend, as universities had become more competitive in attracting students who were previously enrolled in FE-based HE programmes. The committee discussed strategies for addressing this decline, including the potential for offering more specialised Level 4-6 qualifications, such as Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs) and Higher National Certificates (HNCs), which have seen increasing demand.

The committee noted the report.

4.7 Annual Business Continuity Report

The Principal presented the Annual Business Continuity Report, which outlined the college's risk management strategies, emergency preparedness, and contingency planning for potential disruptions.

- Does the Rapid Response Plan get tested?
 - *It is not formally tested, but we have conducted scenario planning exercises with the college management team.*

The committee discussed various scenarios and were assured that processes are in place to enable an appropriate response as needed.

The committee noted the report.

5. Finance Matters

5.1 Management Accounts to Period 12 (2023-24)

The Head of Finance provided an in-depth analysis of the management accounts for the year ending in Period 12. The committee was informed that income was ahead of budget by a significant margin, with revenue growth primarily driven by increased 16-19 enrolments and high-needs funding. Pay and non-pay costs had risen but remained proportional to income, resulting in a stronger-than-expected surplus for the year.

- How much of the surplus is attributed to the unfilled staffing vacancies?
 - *Approximately £1 million in savings had been made due to ongoing recruitment gaps, particularly in key teaching areas such as engineering and health and social care.*

It was noted that while some of these gaps had been covered by agency staff, the overall use of agencies was being reduced as recruitment processes improved.

The committee also discussed the increased spend on capital expenditure. The Senior Management Team (SMT) confirmed that additional funds had been allocated to address backlog maintenance, particularly for estates projects that had faced delays. It was also noted that a significant portion of accrued costs from the 2023-24 financial year had been allocated to ongoing projects.

The committee recommended the report to the Board.

5.2 Update on 2024-25 Budget

The Finance Director provided an update on the 2024-25 budget, which forecasted continued growth in income from key areas such as apprenticeships and high-needs funding. However, it was cautioned that staffing costs were expected to rise, driven by the need to fill critical vacancies and support the projected growth in student numbers.

The committee discussed potential risks to the budget, including inflationary pressures and increased costs associated with major capital projects. It was noted that, while the budget remained robust, it allowed for less flexibility than in previous years, particularly given the uncertainties surrounding some of the larger estates projects.

The committee also discussed the timing of income recognition, particularly in relation to grants and government funding. The SMT reassured the committee that the college had adopted a more conservative approach to income forecasting, with closer monitoring of cash flow to ensure any variances could be promptly addressed.

The committee noted the report.

5.3 Major Capital Projects and Grants Update

The Finance Director provided further details on the status of major capital projects and grants. They confirmed that, while most projects were progressing according to plan, the increased costs associated with the RAAC building remained a concern. The SMT reiterated that value engineering efforts were ongoing, with contractors engaged in discussions to minimise the financial impact.

The committee noted the report.

5.4 Enrolment Update

The Principal reported on enrolment figures for the new academic year, explaining that 16-19 enrolments had exceeded projections, contributing positively to the college's financial outlook. However, higher education enrolments continued to decline, as discussed earlier in the Marketing Report.

The committee discussed the importance of closely monitoring enrolment trends, particularly in light of the potential impact on staffing and resources. The SMT confirmed that detailed projections would be provided at the next meeting, including a breakdown of the financial implications of both the positive and negative trends.

- What is our capacity in terms of student numbers?
 - *This depends on the faculty area and campus; currently, we have the capacity to grow across both days and sites.*
- How does the growth compare to the FE sector?
 - *We don't have any formal announcements on this; however, anecdotally, the sector is experiencing similar growth to last year.*

The committee noted the report.

6. Policies

6.1 Tuition Fee Policy 2025/26

The Finance Director presented the revised Tuition Fee Policy for 2025/26, noting that the policy had been updated to reflect changes in government funding, specifically the replacement of the community learning grant with tailored learning. The policy included provisions to ensure that most learners could continue to access services free of charge, despite the introduction of higher fees for certain tailored learning programmes.

The committee discussed the impact of these changes on access and inclusion, with members agreeing that the revised policy struck an appropriate balance between maintaining financial sustainability and ensuring education remained accessible.

The committee recommended the report to the Board.

7. Confidential Item

[Staff members present with the exception of SMT left the meeting at 19:45]

This item was discussed separately and will be recorded in a confidential minutes.

The committee made a recommendation to the Board on this item.

8. General Purposes

8.1 Freedom of Information Requests Update

The Clerk presented an update on Freedom of Information (FOI) requests, noting that the number of requests had remained stable over the past quarter. The nature of requests was consistent with those typically received by the college, mainly concerning agency staffing and IT. One request related to student exclusion was answered after the 20-day deadline due to conflicts with summer leave and the complexity of the information requested.

The committee noted the report.


9. Any Other Business

No additional matters were raised.

10. Future Business

The Chair reminded members that the next meeting was scheduled for 19th November 2024, at the Abingdon Campus.

A Bark
26/Feb/2025 13:08:28

Signature 



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