

**Minutes of the Operations Committee Meeting**  
**Held via Zoom on 11<sup>th</sup> February 2025 at 10am**

Invitees	Role	Attendance
Sarah Bellingham (SB)	OLT Governance & Compliance Officer	Present
Jodie Croft (JC)	Board Director and OLT CEO	Present
Carina Cuddington (CC)	CFO, Edufin	Present
Beth Gorsuch (BG)	OLT Chief Operating Officer	Present
Alison Hill (AH)	Board Director	Present
Tyler Jeffs (TJ)	Board Director – <u>Chair</u>	<i>Absent</i>
Nicola Poole (NP)	Board Director	Present
Arjun Thiru (AT)	Board Director	<i>Absent</i>

**Minutes**

- 1. Welcome, identify items for AOB/Confidential & declare conflicts of interest with agenda items or updates to OLT Business Interests Register, & declare receipt of any hospitality**
  - 1.1 JC would take on the role of interim Chair for this meeting in TJ's absence. She welcomed everyone and the meeting was declared quorate (noting the requirement for at least three Board Directors). Apologies had been received from AT.
  - 1.2 All documents referred to had been circulated to the Committee prior to the meeting, unless stated otherwise.
  - 1.3 No conflicts were declared with the agenda items and there were no updates or receipt of hospitality to declare for the Register of Business and Pecuniary Interests.
- 2. Receive previous Committee minutes and discuss actions not on the agenda elsewhere**
  - 2.1 The Committee unanimously approved the Operations Committee minutes of 26<sup>th</sup> November 2024. SB would organise for the approved versions to be signed by the Chair and uploaded to the website together with this meeting's agenda, and Committee attendance. **ACTION – SB**
  - 2.2 The actions from the last meeting were either completed, in progress, or within the current agenda.

**3. Review and make recommendation to the Board on appointment of External Auditors & review and approve appointment of Internal Auditors**

- 3.1** This was an annual review process. Kreston Reeves ('KR') were the Trust's external auditors. JC, BG and the team had confirmed to the Members at the AGM that they were very satisfied with their performance. BG noted the timely production of the accounts, the reasonable management points, and the firm's experience in the sector. The Members had been comfortable for the appointment to continue for a fourth year.
- 3.2** **Q:** Was there a limit on the number of years a firm of external auditors could remain appointed with an Academy Trust?  
**A:** Best practice was up to five years. A firm previously engaged by the Trust as external auditors had not performed adequately and had not been reappointed after the first year with the Trust. In general auditors had become better at providing a remote service with more sophisticated methods of sharing and collating information. The Trust had got better at this as well.
- 3.3** The Committee confirmed it was comfortable to recommend that KR remain appointed as the external auditors for a further year.
- 3.4** The internal auditors were a firm called UHY RB. The Trust was currently going through one of its two internal audit cycles with them. The Trust had no concerns about their performance and were very happy to continue with them. The second audit cycle took place in the summer term, with KR providing the external audit each autumn term. The scope of the internal audit cycles was decided by the Board Directors (excluding JC noting her CEO role), so the process was objective.
- 3.5** The Committee had no concerns and was happy to approve the continued appointment of UHY RB for a further year.

**4. Receive annual report on effectiveness of web-filtering processes at each school (KCSiEd 2024)**

*Securus Report for each of DPA, SHPA, TPA, & WPA from ICT123*

- 4.1** There was software in place at each of the schools, which monitored web-filtering processes. The Trust was required to report back to the Committee each year about the effectiveness of this. Each report provided a snapshot of what the children and staff were searching for online in every school.
- 4.2** Each school's report was different, but had some similarities. One school had a higher number of search terms reported than the others. That was being monitored closely with the school Principal, to include examining what internet safety protocols were in place especially in lessons. The Principals were expected to take appropriate action through Prevent, the school behaviour policy, or an alternative relevant channel.
- 4.3** **Q:** Did the data show the ratio of search terms reported to the total number of students? How was the Trust measuring whether one school had a higher percentage of search terms reported than another school?

**A:** Where schools were a similar size, such as DPA and TPA, it was easier to make an assessment about the comparative frequency of alerts.

**4.4 Q:** Did the software record the specific log-ins linked to the alerts, enabling the individuals to be identified?

**A:** That was the case. However DPA did seem to have some false positives where words or phrases had been misinterpreted, so these needed to be weeded out.

**4.5 Q:** Could the Trust ask its IT provider to remove these, for example if the phrases were predictable based on the lesson type or content?

**A:** The Trust was working with them to fine-tune the software to make it less 'twitchy'.

**4.6 Q:** Had the schools found any safeguarding concerns needed investigation?

**A:** The alerts were sent to the school DSL, who worked out if there had been a false positive or not. If needed, interventions took place with the child initially, with further steps taken if required.

**4.7 Q:** How often were the Principals seeing this data?

**A:** The Principals were updated weekly, but the Committee saw the overview reports annually. Every alert was recorded on CPOMS to help join the dots.

**4.8 Q:** Would the Committee be receiving feedback from the Principals about steps taken in response to the reports, or any information about themes or patterns across the Trust to be aware of?

**A:** JC and BG needed to think about how to follow up including what information should be sought from the Principals about the response. JC knew that all of the school and Trust policies were being followed, but the bigger picture would be interesting to track. Potentially this was an item which should be brought as standard to the Quality of Education and Safeguarding ('QES') Committee meetings.

**4.9** The Committee members agreed that this would be useful, accompanied with a data dashboard showing alert frequency and severity, details of false positives, and details of alerts which resulted in any safeguarding action. JC and BG would review this and update the standing agendas for this and the QES Committee as needed. **ACTION – JC/BG**

**5. Receive estates conditions data and review strategic priorities; Review benchmarking data: annual spend on electricity and gas and annual spend on estates**

**5.1** The Trust reported annually on agreed key performance indicators concerning the conditions of its schools. It monitored the annual spend at each school on items such as gas, water, grounds work and premises maintenance. If costs spiked year on year, it might indicate an issue at school level.

**5.2** The data was all relatively 'spiky' because there were factors outside of the schools' control which affected, for example, the price of electricity. A concern at TPA was the fact of re-emerging problems with the roof, despite historic issues with it having been fixed by an external company. The amount spent in the previous months on this issue had been higher

than anticipated The school was working with an external SIF bid-writing firm to prepare a formal bid for funding to replace the roof and the gutters.

**5.3 Q:** The school had needed to spend £45k on the roof the previous year. What were the issues?

**A:** Minor cracks had come back and it was now mainly a guttering issue. The original company had come back and repaired the roof following an insurance claim. However the bid-writer would help TPA organise a report and help it work with a structural engineer to see if there were other issues.

**5.4** The expense incurred in the investigation process was being claimed through the RPA insurance policy, but that did not cover repair works. However spending in advance of the repairs supported the claim for funding as it was additional evidence of the additional funds the school had needed to spend to confirm that there was an issue.

**5.5 Q:** Were the leaks in the same places as before?

**A:** There were new leaks, and before Christmas work had been done to investigate the condition inside a classroom wall. A pipe had leaked inside that wall, potentially linked with the condition of the gutters, and this had not happened before.

**5.6** The latest external survey of the roof had resulted in a recommendation that the school apply for the project via one large funding amount.

**5.7** There were no major concerns at the other schools.

**5.8** DPA and SHPA had ongoing snagging issues, which were close to being closed off. DPA's items would hopefully be resolved by the end current academic year to include some issue with the gutters, which OCC had corresponded about. The school was obtaining more information.

**5.9** For the Committee's awareness, the benchmarking data showed that estate management costs per pupil were in the region of £638. The Trust's average was £349.

**5.10 Q:** Were there any other ongoing issues?

**A:** An external expert had come in to look at all of the schools' plant equipment, to report on life cycles and expected costs of maintenance, repair and replacement. The Trust was trying to maintain its property as best it could. It had commissioned a structural survey at TPA and the latest quote of £1500 was good value for money. More information was needed about the fabric of the building and the drainage. TPA was the most expensive of the school buildings to maintain as it had been inherited as a former office block. The other school buildings had been built from scratch, although that was not in itself a guarantee of quality.

**5.11** The Committee acknowledged that issues with builders and external companies was now an every-day matter.

**6. Receive Management Accounts & review of spending linked with educational priorities**

**6.1** CC joined at 10.42.

**6.2** The following documents had been circulated in advance of the meeting, dated December 2024, for the Committee members to review:

- Executive Summary
- Balance Sheet Summary
- Cashflow
- DPA Management Report
- TPA Management Report
- WPA Management Report
- Omnia Management Report

*Executive Summary*

**6.3** CC shared the Executive Summary on screen.

**6.4** She explained key information included in this summary document and in the other reports, which included an explanation of the Trust's and each school's consolidated in-year surplus or deficit scenarios, carry forward balances, reserves figures, outgoings such as staffing and energy costs, receipt of government grants and other income, as well as cashflow forecasts.

**6.5** Overall, the Trust was in a good position, with a reduced in-year deficit. Positive factors underpinning that included the increase in head office recharges, the returns from treasury management, and the increase in income from the school top slice percentages. There was a healthy buffer in reserves at Trust level.

**6.6** DPA, SHPA and WPA were each in a surplus position, and TPA was showing a much reduced in-year deficit. The reasons underpinning this were discussed. Each of the schools was in a healthy position.

*Balance sheet*

**6.7** This gave a snapshot of the position at the end of December 2024. There were only a small number of debtors but nothing to worry about here or overall within the balance sheet. The cash balance was identified and confirmed as healthy and payroll items were all normal.

*Cashflow forecast*

**6.8** The cashflow forecast showed the balances moving across the year. The lowest point was in December 2024, following which time the figures increased, and these were expected to increase further due to additional funding in April to June inclusive. The cash in the bank was continuing to be rotationally invested to earn the deposit income. There were no issues with cashflow here.

**6.9** The Committee had no questions at this stage.

## **7. Receive update about TPA Pupil Admissions Number for 2026-2027**

- 7.1** JC explained that at the previous Board meeting, she had raised the issue of pupil numbers falling at TPA. The entry point was in Reception and the context was falling birth rates locally.
- 7.2** First choice applications for entry into Reception in September 2026 had come in for all of the schools. JC ran through the numbers at each school, explaining how each was in a good position financially based on the per-pupil system of government funding. TPA had only received 36 first choice applications, which was the lowest to-date. Given the school's PAN of 60 places, TPA would have to take all 36 children if these places were accepted even though that would mean funding a whole teacher's salary for the year on the income received from 6 pupils. It would be the third year in a row for taking a financial hit from a Reception intake lower than PAN.
- 7.3** In total at the school there were 393 pupils on roll. The total number of places available was 420, meaning that the school was funding an entire teacher's salary based on the income from just 3 pupils. The school and Trust had looked at this every possible way. It had needed to assess the financial impact of this happening again the following academic year, for example the scenario where just 31 pupils put TPA as their first choice. There was as high risk of insolvency, if all the reserves were used up and the school could not afford to pay its staff.
- 7.4** One way to address the issue was to merge year groups. That might mean merging Year groups 1 and 2, 3 and 4, and possibly 5 and 6. However that would be extremely hard to manage and to plan for. Realistically it could only be done for one academic year at the most, in a scenario where it was expected that birth rates and pupil numbers were due to rise thereafter. That had been modelled and it still resulted in financial difficulties.
- 7.5** The next scenario modelled was one in which the school opened for one more year with 60 places, and deferred with PAN reduction for one more year. However that would have a very negative financial impact in one-two years – the school would go into actual deficit. The school would eventually break even as it moved to a completely one-form entry school, but it would need to save all of its reserves from now to then. It was a very difficult picture and did not work.
- 7.6** The Trust had consulted locally on reducing down to one class in Reception. No one was in favour of this. Everyone wanted a two-form entry school with reduced class sizes to help with education and with friendships. The Trust agrees that two-form entry is the preferred model, especially given that it would be the first school locally to move from two to one form entry.
- 7.7** **Q:** Were the other local schools in same boat?  
**A:** Yes they were. Several had cut their forms of entry from three to two. One was refusing to reduce their PAN. TPA would be the first school to propose the move from two to one form entry.
- 7.8** **Q:** Was there not a borough-wide agreement on this to try and balance out the numbers?

**A:** All of the schools had talked about that, although one school was not on board. The Labour government wanted to take control of PANs at schools now.

**7.9 Q:** Had every pupils got his/her first choice for this coming September? Might TPA benefit from taking applicants which had listed it as second choice for example?

**A:** That was a possibility but not likely, as every school was struggling with numbers so pupils were likely to get their first choice.

**7.10** TPA still had four full year groups which was great news.

**7.11 Q:** Had the Trust looked at sibling places needed based on older pupils at the school?

**A:** The school never received more than 15-16 places in terms of siblings. It had certainly never had 30. It was highly likely all siblings of a current pupils would get a place. JC was confident that they would get priority.

**7.12** JC confirmed that the Trust was committing to a review of the situation every year. The PAN would be returned to 60 places either in-year if warranted (via an application to the schools adjudicator) or at the end of year point if the numbers justified it.

**7.13 Q:** Was it correct that the school would continue with its two class intake with 36 pupils for the 2025-2026 academic year, but the following year, in 2026-2027, it would only take 30 pupils? That was the proposal?

**A:** Yes, that was correct, with year on year assessments based on applicant numbers. No consultation was needed to put the PAN back up for the 2027-2028 academic year.

**7.14 Q:** Looking at the 36 first choice applications, was there any possibility of having one class of 36 with additional support for the teacher?

**A:** Legally the maximum class size was 30 pupils per class teacher. The school could not simply add another class assistant to a larger group.

**7.15 Q:** What was the health and safety position?

**A:** The DfE ruled on that. From Year 3 upwards, there was a possibility of 31 or even 32 pupils per class in exceptional circumstances but not for younger year groups.

**7.16 Q:** What was Edufin's view on this?

**A:** This situation did happen and was not ideal. It would upset some parents. However there was no other option from a financial perspective, especially if the birth rate data was not just showing a blip. The school and Trust needed to protect themselves. This model of a reduced PAN of 30 gave the school a lot of flexibility. It enabled the school to retain its reserves and to provide both a good level of support to current pupils and to bring in the required staff on fixed term contracts. This was in contrast to struggling badly for money.

**7.17** The Committee agreed that the school and Trust needed to be clear on the information shared to the school community, with a view to providing reassurance. Namely, the school would rather spend money on the needs of the pupils it actually had, rather than on keeping places open for pupils which it hoped for but had not materialised. The Committee agreed that this would help to maintain the outstanding provision for those at the school.

**7.18** It was noted that many parents did not realise that schools were funded on a per-pupil basis rather than on how many teachers were needed. Once parents realised, it was likely to generate more understanding of a school's position.

## **8. Review outcomes of financial benchmarking exercise**

**8.1** BG shared the Omnia specific document on screen. Kreston Reeves, the Trust's external auditors, had carried out this exercise.

**8.2** In summary, the Trust was within the benchmarking area. There were a few anomalies, such as estate management costs, and teacher pupil ratios; 23 pupils per teacher, which was not as low as the Trust had thought.

**8.3** **Q:** Was it right that there was an expectation of birth rates rising?

**A:** The data showed that the birth rates were at their lowest point this year, and were set to rise, albeit gradually. These were interesting times for London schools.

**8.4** The document looked at the percentage top slice the Trust charged its schools for services provided by its four central team members. The Trust charged 4% for growing schools and 4.5% for school which were full. The largest comparable MAT with 20-30 schools in its remit charged 5.4%. Some trusts charged 7.4%. The Trust was in the lower end here. Currently there was no need to increase the percentage, noting that there had been an increase of a half percent the previous year to help fund the DCEO role. The Trust would need to keep a close eye on pupil numbers.

**8.5** CC commented that the Trust was very lean here, with no wastage at central Trust level. It was important to take benchmarking with a pinch of salt. Each Trust had its own demographics. The Trust's position appeared sensible. If pupil numbers fell further, the Trust would need to keep the situation under review to ensure sufficient funds were transferred for central team affordability.

**8.6** CC left at 11:06.

## **9. Receive COO Compliance Report dated February 2025**

*Report covering: IT/GDPR, financial audits, HR, H&S (external audits, WRA, FRA), Premises, Safeguarding (SCR audit & LADO audit), & Policies Review*

**9.1** BG spoke to the key parts of her 'RAG-rated' overview excel sheet, which contained comments tracking back to the detail within the main COO report.

**9.2** The picture looked positive overall, with only a few red points. Two of these linked to finances and estates; linking to the snagging and legacy items at DPA and SHPA. DPA had ongoing issues with its roof, but the only thing left to resolve was the gutters query. OCC was backtracking on earlier comments accepting that an issue existed, but the Trust was pushing back on this as it believed it was entitled to the funding for this which the council had indicated was available. It was currently seeking an update.

- 9.3** SHPA was facing a range of issues linked with an earlier stage of the legacy and defects process than at DPA, due to ISG having gone into liquidation the previous September. The school's OFM and JC were leading on that because the council was not giving it the attention it needed. Progress was gradually being made, for example with the automatic doors and the heating.
- 9.4** The items in amber were mainly finance and estate issues as well as people and safeguarding. WPA had seen a reduction in its in-year surplus. This had been due to the additional support which had needed to be put in place for pupils, that had not been anticipated at the start of the academic year. This had been approved by the OLT Board.
- 9.5** At DPA there were a high number of staff on fixed term contracts and a plan was in place to manage this. The EHCP income had increased, so the situation was more positive than it had looked at the start of the year.
- 9.6** The benchmarking data had already been discussed earlier in the meeting.
- 9.7** In terms of snagging issues, TPA and roof maintenance had already been discussed. There would be a SIF bid combined with a structural survey. The Trust wanted a clear picture of the state of the building and the priorities going forward.
- 9.8** On people and safeguarding, sickness absence was still an issue as was non-illness related absence. The Trust was taking action to manage this and to reduce the issue going forward, specifically in relation to non-absence related illness.
- 9.9** On health and safety, all school's compliance was good and they were working on closing off any outstanding actions on current reports. There were no red flags.
- 9.10** The Committee was asked if there were any questions?
- 9.11** **Q:** What was the picture in relation to safeguarding?  
**A:** There was an amber flag in the report because there were one or two contractor profiles in the SCR Tracker for the schools which were not yet Ofsted compliant. It was purely a record-keeping matter and there were no safeguarding concerns. Each school's external safeguarding audits had produced positive outcomes and the SCR Tracker was reviewed internally on a formal basis six times a year, with more regular checking in between.
- 9.12** All historic HR files had now been checked and were compliant with no gaps. BG had since been looking at newer files and had been suggesting tweaks to ensure minor record keeping points were addressed in a timely manner.
- 9.13** **Q:** Did the staff absences flagged mean that the school faced increased supply teacher costs? It seemed that there were quite a lot of days' absence overall.  
**A:** It varied by school. At DPA there was a larger staffing body so it was easier to cover absence internally. WPA was typically harder hit because it was smaller team. Overall the schools tried to cover absence internally as much as possible. Supply agencies also found it hard to provide cover on the same day. LB was covering at WPA today, for example, and BG was covering at the school office later in the day.

**9.14 Q: How did that work in terms of balancing the books?**

**A:** The school could claim back staff absence costs via staff absence insurance, but often the value of the claim was less than the actual costs incurred. The Trust was keeping a close eye on whether it was more cost effective to buy the insurance cover or to go without and keep that money aside in a pot for supply teachers needed from time to time.

**9.15 Q: How did the Trust manage non-illness related staff absence?**

**A:** The Trust had become much stricter. The policy allowed for one day's paid absence per term to deal with a child's sickness or with an emergency. The Trust tracked how much compassionate leave was being granted to any individual, so that as a threshold was hit, the staff member was warned that no further leave would be approved. That meant if the leave was taken in any event, it was unauthorised and that would trigger the disciplinary process. The Trust wanted to be supportive but it also wanted its teachers in if they were not ill. There were bigger issues at DPA than at other schools. The figures could sometimes be explained by one long-term absence.

**9.16** The issue was mainly linked to support staff rather than teachers. If a support staff member needed to cover a teacher absence on a particular day, he or she was given an 'acting up' allowance for the time provided. It avoided staff feeling resentment for the additional work involved in covering for colleagues. Cover was not brought in for support staff absences.

**9.17** Overall the metrics were comparable or better than the sector. The Trust was performing better if its teacher data was compared to the DfE's benchmarking. However the DfE did not produce support staff metrics.

**9.18 Q: Was the day rate for a supply teacher higher?**

**A:** Yes, it much higher than the cost of the teacher employed by the school.

**9.19** The Directors were asked if they had any more questions on the report, but none were raised.

**10. Policies requiring Committee approval**

*OLT Directors' Expenses & Governors' Allowances Policy, OLT ECT Policy & OLT Investment Policy*

**10.1** These had each received only minor changes as needed for compliance purposes.

**10.2** The Committee had no questions and approved the updated policies. **ACTION – SB**

**11. Review of Trust Risk Register**

*OLT Risk Register February 2025*

**11.1** The number one item in the Risk Register was now the impact on TPA of falling birth rates in the borough and the planned reduction of the school's PAN to a one-form entry of 30 pupils.

**11.2** The Committee was asked if anything was missing. The Directors confirmed that they had nothing to mention for JC to add and had no questions at this stage.

**12. Agree confidential status of the meeting's documents: ATH 2024 (Ref: s1.50-1.51)**

**12.1** It was agreed by the Committee that other than the agenda, the approved minutes from the previous meeting and any approved final versions of policies, the remaining documents reviewed for this meeting were confidential to the Trust.

**Meeting Closed: 11.19**

**Dates of future meetings in 2024-2025:**

Tuesday 1<sup>st</sup> April 2025 from 10-11.30am

Tuesday 24<sup>th</sup> June 2025 from 10-11.30am

**Action list of 11<sup>th</sup> February 2025 Operations Committee Meeting**

Action Number:	For Whom:	Reference:	Action:
1	SB	Minute 2.1	Update the Trust website with the meeting's agenda and the approved minutes from the previous meeting. Ask TJ to sign the approved previous minutes via the Hub. <b>DONE</b>
2	JC	Minute 4.9	Consider what/if to insert into school data dashboards on theme of web filtering for benefit of QES Committee <b>DONE</b>
3	SB	Minute 10.2	Finalise, store and publish the approved policies as needed. <b>DONE</b>