

**Minutes of the Operations Committee Meeting**  
**Held virtually via Zoom on 30<sup>th</sup> April 2024 at 10am**

Invitees	Role	Attendance
Sarah Bellingham (SB)	OLT Governance & Communications 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>	Present
Arjun Thiru (AT)	Board Director	Present

**Minutes**

**1. Welcome, identify AOB, & declare conflicts of interest relevant to the agenda or updates to the Register of Business Interests to include hospitality**

1.1 JC welcomed everyone.

1.2 No-one declared any conflict of interest in relation to the agenda items or any updates for the Register of Business Interests.

1.3 The meeting was declared quorate (noting the requirement for at least three Board Directors).

**2. Receive previous committee minutes and discuss actions not on the agenda elsewhere**

2.1 The Committee approved the Operations Committee minutes of 20th February 2024. SB would organise for the approved version to be signed by the Chair and would upload it to the website, together with the current meeting's attendance and the agenda. **ACTION – SB**

2.2 The actions from the last meeting were either completed, in progress, or within the current agenda.

2.3 BG explained that for Action 3 (Minute 6.5), she had e-mailed the Principals about what was being planned in response to the web-filtering reports and would update the Committee as part of her COO Report later in the meeting.

- 2.4 BG also explained that in relation to Action 4 (Minute 8.15), she was able to confirm that SHPA planned to spend the rest of its FF&E capital budget by the end of the academic year.
- 2.5 In relation to Action 7, at Minute 12.2, JC confirmed that she had approached Oxfordshire County Council to request a one-year extension of its three-year funding guarantee for Sires Hill, based on the extent of the delay in the works on the site. JC was due to meet with the council the following day and would update the Committee at the next meeting.
- ACTION – JC**

### 3. Asset Management and Capacity Review

- 3.1 BG explained that external company Cambridge Maintenance had been instructed to produce a report for each of the schools, showing the asset management list, their asset conditions assessment, and life cycle data.
- 3.2 Two completed reports had been received, one each in respect of DPA and WPA. The assessment work had been carried out at TPA and SHPA and the reports were due back in May 2024.
- 3.3 The Trust was pleased about the level of detail in the reports, as this was helpful for the Trust's asset and estates management plan as well as budget planning for when maintenance work or purchasing of replacement equipment was likely to be needed.
- 3.4 **Q:** What was an example of an asset which had been identified within one of the reports?  
**A:** An example was that the report for DPA had flagged that the wiring in certain areas of the school was not up to scratch. The company had explained how long the current wiring was likely to last and what the cost of replacement would be. The report had also 'RAG' rated each asset at the school based on an assessment of its current condition and how soon it would need replacing.
- 3.5 **Q:** Did that issue concern the fixed wires in the walls?  
**A:** BG understood that this related to where fixed wiring was visible in the plant room. There had been comprehensive comments about this and the other assets assessed.
- 3.6 **Q:** How old was the Didcot building?  
**A:** It had opened in 2016. However it had been worked on by Carillion, which had since filed for insolvency. Newly opened schools did not always have the quality of workmanship one would expect.
- 3.7 BG agreed that it was odd to have an issue with the wiring at this stage. There were other issues identified by Cambridge Maintenance which were already on the snagging list for the council's attention. BG was due to discuss this snagging list soon at a meeting with the firm of contractors appointed by the council to carry out this work on their behalf.
- 3.8 JC confirmed that the Trust had set aside funds for plant refresh and replacement costs in the school budgets for future years. The reports would help the Trust assess if these funds were required or adequate given asset conditions. BG confirmed the amounts which had been set aside for the purposes of: ICT, furniture, and plant. The money set aside would

need to rolled forward if unspent in a given year, to ensure it was available in future years. That would be discussed with the school Principals.

**3.9 Q:** Was the Trust aware that these types of consultants were likely to be sensitised to finding as much as possible to report back on, in order to appear professional?

**A:** Cambridge Maintenance was already engaged by the Trust to help maintain its assets. The assessment and reporting work was a new piece work which the Trust had asked them to carry out for a separate fee. BG explained that after receipt of the reports, the Trust would always go to tender for the work required to maintain or fix the assets in question, to ensure value for money.

**3.10** The Committee discussed the arrangement and flagged to JC and BG that in future it would be worth considering engaging a separate company to carry out the asset assessment and reporting work to be sure that no conflicts arose and to ensure that matters were not being raised unnecessarily. It recognised however that the Trust were going out to tender for maintenance work which the reports identified as required. JC and BG acknowledged these points and confirmed that they would keep the situation under review.

**3.11** TJ and CC attended at 10.11.

#### **4. Review of EFA capital funding and procurement**

**4.1** BG confirmed that the capital funding for FF&E at SHPA would be spent within the current academic year, whilst the schools capital funding for IT would be spent in line with the plan in place to help avoid equipment going out of date too soon.

**4.2** TPA also had an amount of IT capital funding yet to be drawn down.

#### **5. Receive Management Accounts for March 2024**

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

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

##### *Executive Summary*

**5.2** CC shared the Executive Summary on screen. She explained the key information included in this summary document and in the management reports she had circulated, which included an explanation of the Trust's and each school's position in relation to in year surplus or deficit positions, reserves, carry forward balances, capital budgets, outgoings such as costs incurred in relation to staffing, premises works and contracts for services such as cleaning and catering, as well as receipt of government grants and other income.

**5.3** A copy of the table of information within the Executive Summary would be pasted into a confidential annex to these minutes for the Committee's reference, per audit requirements.

**5.4** JC explained that she had received a response from the insurers in relation to the Trust's claim for the significant cost of boiler works at WPA. The insurers had rejected the claim. Their view was that the issue arose from both installation and design errors. As a result, JC had since made a claim to the insurers for the costs incurred to the Trust in legal fees to make claims against those responsible for the faulty installation and faulty design work. Therefore the matter was ongoing.

**5.5** The Committee members were asked if they had any questions at this point but none were raised.

*Cashflow Forecast*

**5.6** CC referred to the Cashflow Forecast and explained that this was an overview document. Key elements to cash flow included salaries and the cost of capital projects. The document showed the healthy closing balance in cash at end of March 2024 based on the timings of money spent and received overall. CC confirmed that March always showed the lowest position for the closing balance, as various funding streams were received from April onwards.

**5.7 Q:** Following the previous Operations Committee meeting, JC had been investing the approved additional amount of Trust monies on a rolling three-week basis. Were CC's figures here showing this?

**A:** CC said that she was aware of the investment schedule and that it may simply be related to the timings of money going out and returns potentially not yet having come back in.

**5.8 Q:** Would the Trust cashflow forecast soon be ready to submit for 2024-2025? It would be useful to have this to assess what investment schedule to propose for approval for the following academic year, based on cash available for that purpose.

**A:** CC confirmed that this was prepared based on the three-year budgets previously agreed, or the working ones. As soon as these could be firmed up, they would be made available to the Trust.

*Balance Sheet:*

**5.9** CC explained that this document provided a snapshot of assets and liabilities as at end of March 2024. She confirmed that there was nothing of any concern to mention to Trustees.

**5.10** The Committee had no further questions and Directors confirmed receipt of these accounts.

## **6. Receive 2024-2025 budget parameters**

**6.1** BG referred to the document which she had supplied for the folder, showing what had been worked through with Edufin for 2024-25. It was hoped that it presented a realistic and balanced view.

**6.2** CC and BG spoke to the key points, which included the use of benchmarking data in producing the document, predictions used for teaching and support staff pay scales and inflationary increases, expectations on the type and amount of DfE funding due to help meet increased costs, and strategies under consideration in the event that current support staff levels became unaffordable.

**6.3 Q:** Would the budget for 2024-25 continue to have the teachers' pay grant and teachers' pensions as separate lines?

**A:** CC and BG responded that it would, as this seemed most sensible for the time being.

**6.4 Q:** When the Trust reported its finances, did it have to submit these to the DfE as well? Meaning that the DfE would get a picture of what the average school's finances were and see the whole bell curve?

**A:** The previous year, at CC's suggestion, the budget submitted to the DfE was not balanced and showed deficit budgets to show how unaffordable the position was. That was done by many other Trusts as well, in the hope it would prompt action. It had not helped, and funding levels were still low.

**6.5 Q:** Was this Trust in a better position than most schools? How were others managing the situation? Perhaps they operated in constant deficit?

**A:** JC said that many schools were facing redundancies. If a school's staffing bill outstripped the income received for that, then staffing levels needed to be reviewed to ensure a balanced budget. That might involve not renewing staff on fixed term contracts, for example. The worst-case scenario was making redundancies, but that scenario might need to be explored depending on funding levels.

**6.6** CC added that all of the Trusts and schools she worked with were now having to pay attention to every line of the budget and were having to strip out any cost which was not essential, such as cancelling subscriptions to resources, or retendering contracts early. A full-time teaching assistant in each classroom was no longer the norm.

**6.7 Q:** TPA seemed to be losing good quality staff, who were able to find easier ways to earn money elsewhere. Would this be a trend at TPA and across the schools?

**A:** Sadly, this was becoming more frequent.

**6.8 Q:** Were there ways in which the grants or funding available could be used to help make teaching more efficient, such as innovative ways to use technology?

**A:** The in-person requirement for the care of primary school aged children meant that there were seldom any realistic or safe alternatives to having adults in the classroom and in the school environment. The teaching assistants, for example, tended to be the practical, hands-on support for the teacher, such as when young pupils needed to be helped going to the toilet or with clothing for PE. There was also the matter of meeting the statutory provision of care and support required for pupils with SEN needs, such as those with EHCPs. The schools would open themselves up to legal challenge potentially if such requirements were not being met.

**6.9** It was a different scenario within the central team, where resources were obtained by the Trust and provided across the schools in a shared fashion, in the most cost-effective way

possible. Edufin was an example, as it provided assistance across all the schools and was more cost effective than having an internal CFO. The Trust's HR function had been outsourced so that the trust only used what it needed from time to time.

**6.10 Q:** In the context of helping reduce teacher workload to avoid staff leaving the profession, and also looking at sharing resources, did the schools collaborate on lesson planning and similar work?

**A:** Staff within year groups at each school already planned lessons together. However, from September, with the new Deputy CEO role taking effect, there was a plan to bring together staff members at each level, across all schools. It was worth noting as well that teachers already had access to resources such as basic lesson plan structures for a whole academic year in each subject taught, so that the work was more focussed on planning and delivering the fun and creative aspect of lessons.

**6.11** BG added that DPA and SHPA were already carrying out lesson and PPA planning together as part of collaborating on curriculum and related matters, due to operating as sister schools.

**6.12** TJ gave his view that the budget parameters presented looked sensible and agreed that the whole sector was struggling and that it was a bleak picture for many schools. It was also very challenging for Trusts and schools when different grants were not guaranteed year on year. He asked the other Directors if they were comfortable with the assumptions used in this parameters document, noting that he was happy with what had been presented.

**6.13** AH and AT agreed that they were comfortable with these, noting that the Institute for School Business Leaders' (ISBL) and CC's advice had been followed, and that there did not appear to be many choices available given the expected low levels of funding for the forthcoming academic year.

**6.14** The Committee had no further questions.

## **7. Review of spending linked with educational priorities**

**7.1** JC explained that the Trust was employing a system of 'ICFP' or 'integrated curriculum financial planning'. This system involved using established frameworks or parameters to structure budgets. Examples of these were:

- one teacher per class;
- setting the minimum pupil number threshold for affording one teacher per class without which classes would be merged;
- setting a maximum number of teaching assistants to work across the school;
- identifying key educational priorities requiring further investment;
- use of relevant benchmarking data from other schools and Trusts;

**7.2 Q:** What were the mechanics of accepting children? Did a school have to accept every pupil allocated to it by the council?

**A:** Each school was required to set a 'PAN' or 'published admissions number', agreed with the council, for the incoming Reception year for the September in question. That might be

60 places, with the maximum of 30 pupils permitted to be allocated to each of the two classes. The school would have to accept any pupils up to the maximum of 60. The worst-case scenario from a financial perspective was receiving 31 applications for a place, meaning that the school received the least (per pupil) funding available to fund both teachers' salaries and related costs.

**7.3** Setting a realistic and accurate PAN was critical and involved assessing birth rates as well as discussions with the council. Based on the latest birth rate predictions from Richmond and Twickenham council, it was seeming prudent to consider reducing the PAN at TPA for 2026-2027. This would be kept under review.

**7.4 Q:** If other local schools had already agreed to reduce their PAN, could the council then refuse to allow a cut in places at one of our schools, despite it wanting that, to ensure enough places in the future?

**A:** It took a lot of engagement and consultation before a school's PAN changed. It was not an easy situation. Council's also had different statutory duties to comply with in terms of parent choice and school places offered.

**7.5** CC left at 10.57.

## **8. Receive COO Compliance Report**

*Covering: IT/GDPR, financial audits, HR, H&S (external audits, WRA, FRA), staff absence, premises, safeguarding (SCR audit & LADO audit), & policies review*

**8.1** BG highlighted the key items from her report. These included:

- A description of the Trust's response to DPA's receipt of a fraudulent e-mail allegedly sent from its catering company, Edwards and Ward, requesting a change in recipient bank account;
- The decision to re-tender for the catering contract at two of the trust's schools, with reasons provided;
- Confirmation of completion of the Trust's second internal audit round on the theme of governance and the fact that nothing of significance had been raised;
- The teachers' pension audit, which was ongoing;
- The work being carried out to prepare the final set of budgets for 2024-2025 for the Committee to review at the June 2024 meeting, with a view to recommending them for Board approval;
- The large number of policies which had recently been updated and would be presented to the Committee for its approval later in the meeting;
- The ongoing work involved in managing staff absence per Trust policy; and
- The recent introduction by the Trust of the offer of up to three days' paid emergency leave for staff, to be used if required in increments of up to one day per term.

**8.2** TJ expressed his willingness to help BG with the work involved in the teacher pension audit. He would contact BG after the meeting to progress this. **ACTION – TJ**

**8.3** JC asked the Committee for their views on the updated emergency leave policy, after providing more details about this, to include the context of high levels of staff absence across the Trust and the desire to bring these levels down.

**8.4 Q:** Was the Trust keen to avoid any element of discretion in the application of this policy?

**A:** That was correct. The HR advice had been clear about the benefit of removing line manager discretion where possible, to avoid the risk of unconscious bias and the potential for complaints on that basis.

**8.5** The Directors discussed this in detail and agreed that the best approach might be to allow a year for the new policy to take effect, given that it had only been introduced two weeks earlier. That would allow time to assess the impact and gain more feedback from staff.

## **9. Review and Approve Policies in line with OLT Policy Scheme of Delegation**

### *OLT Whistleblowing Policy*

**9.1** Some references to current legislation had been added in and the document had been reviewed against the latest Juniper HR model policy.

### *OLT Flexible Working Policy & Request Form*

**9.2** This had been updated to reflect the latest legislative changes which took effect on 6<sup>th</sup> April 2024.

### *OLT Staff Finder Rewards Scheme Policy*

**9.3** The policy now stated that the financial reward for having helped to find an appointed new member of staff would be paid in one amount upfront, rather than in two instalments and based on conditions having been met.

### *OLT Disability and Reasonable Adjustments Policy*

**9.4** This had been updated to align with the current legislation.

### *OLT Line Management & Appraisal Policy*

**9.5** The wording had been updated as it related to the role of the line manager, for example adding in reference to the requirement to offer well-being meetings to staff. Overall, the current policy and practice here required that employees were being supported with their mental health and well-being throughout the academic year to include throughout the performance appraisal process.

### *OLT Capability Policy*

**9.6** JC had reviewed this to make it more streamlined and easier to use.

### *OLT ICT Continuity and Recovery Plan*

**9.7** The wording had been updated to show how the schools were meeting the DfE requirements for cyber security insurance purposes and to show what training staff were required to undertake.

9.8 The Directors confirmed that they had no questions and that they were happy to approve these policies. SB would upload the approved documents to Parago and the Trust website as needed. **ACTION – SB**

**10. Review of Trust Risk Register 2023-2024**

10.1 JC confirmed that the biggest item on the register currently was pupil numbers across the schools. She outlined how many applications had been made for places in Reception and how many offers had been made and accepted, at each school. The financial worst case scenario had been factored into all of the budgets for the following academic year, and these would be updated once more information was known.

10.2 The other risk to flag on the register was that TPA was now firmly in its Ofsted window. Behaviour at the school continued to be a big focus. The TPA Principal was receiving lots of support in advance of the inspection.

10.3 **Q:** Would JC say more about the fact of the SENCo having resigned recently at TPA?  
**A:** JC provided further details and explained that an advert had been sent out already for a replacement, requesting that applicants have experience and confidence to bring to the role. JC was visiting TPA each week for the remainder of term to provide support until the vacancy had been filled.

**11. Agree confidential status of the meeting’s documents: ATH 2023 Ref: 1.45**

11.1 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: 11.25**

**Date of final meeting of 2023-2024: Tuesday 25 June 2024 at 10am**

**Action list of 30<sup>th</sup> April 2024 Operations Committee Meeting**

Action Number:	For Whom:	Reference:	Action:
1	SB	Minute 2.1	Organise for previous approved minutes to be signed and attendance and minutes/agenda to be uploaded on the website <b>DONE</b>
2	JC	Minute 2.5	Update the Committee at the June meeting about progress in her conversations with the OCC on the Trust’s request to extend the funding guarantee for SHPA. <b>DONE</b>
3	TJ	Minute 8.2	Contact BG and discuss ways to help with the teacher pensions audit <b>DONE</b>

4	SB	Minute 9.8	Upload approved policies to Parago <b>DONE</b>
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