

**Minutes of the Operations Committee Meeting**  
**Held via Zoom on 24<sup>th</sup> June 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
Alison Hill (AH)	Board Director	Present
Tyler Jeffs (TJ)	Board Director – <u>Chair</u>	Present
Nicola Poole (NP)	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 TJ welcomed everyone and the meeting was declared quorate (noting the requirement for at least three Board Directors).
  - 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 1<sup>st</sup> April 2025. 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 had either been completed or were within the current agenda.
  - 2.3 JC's outstanding action had been to align the latest definition of sickness absence with the triggers in the policy, and this had now been done.
- 3. Review of school funding priorities within the SDP**

**3.1** JC provided a verbal update, in advance of the budget discussion later in the meeting. The DfE had provided schools with a grant to pay for NI Increases, and this had been plugged into the budgets. In future that grant would be rolled up into the funding formula. DfE had partially funded staff pay rises for 2025-26. The Trust would need to fund approximately 1.3% of these pay rises from its existing budgets, with the DfE funding the rest, which was somewhat helpful.

**3.2** The government had changed its criteria for free school meals eligibility. The impact was that families no longer needed to register for these meals. However, schools only received funding for the meal provision if families registered. This would be a challenge for the schools if meal uptake did not match registration levels, but it was a welcome move for families on universal credit.

#### **4. Review of SEND spend 2024/25**

**4.1** JC explained the reason for this agenda item, based on the discussion in the previous meeting. LB shared her report which had been circulated in advance via the Governor Hub folder. There had been a sharp rise in SEND numbers nationally and at the Trust.

**4.2** This rise had been 71% in the previous seven years, mainly in cases of ASD/ADHD and cases of social and emotional needs. This brought lots of challenges both financially and in the day-to-day management of pupils' behaviour at the schools.

**4.3** In terms of the funding received, there was a general pot for schools and a very limited EHCP pot which was only made available after a lengthy application and assessment process. Some EHCPs had no funding attached to them despite the requirement for a high level of support.

**4.4** Nationally there had been a dramatic increase in the level of SEND and the numbers of EHCPs in the previous two years. The main area of need was ASD, which brought specific behavioural and curricular challenges, requiring significant funding.

**4.5** The figures in the document showed why the Trust was feeling pressure in its settings. There was not enough places at an alternative provision for these pupils, hence they ended up in mainstream inappropriately.

**4.6** SEN and SEN support pupils without EHCPs were expected to be looked after and have their needs met out of the standard GAG. No extra funding came in unless specified by an EHCP. Even with that additional funding, the school had to find the first £6k of any SEN funding for a pupil from its own budgets. The general per pupil funding was only around £4k. That meant even if a school spent £6k on a child who later received an EHCP, there was already a shortfall of £2k. On top of that, a child needing 1-2-1 care often received less than half the funding than the actual cost of that to the school.

**4.7** LB ran through the expenditure breakdown in the document for each school, detailing core actual spend, money received, the deficit resulting, and the numbers of pupils on the EHCP pathway. This year additional funding had come in for the increased number of children on EHCPs but there was still a clear deficit.

- 4.8** LB then discussed what the Trust was doing to mitigate against challenges. Examples were the clear modelling work carried out by SENDCos and the careful monitoring of the work required and being done. In addition, the 2-2-1 and 1-2-1 ratios were kept under careful assessment to achieve the optimal balance between best fit for meeting needs and best financial position.
- 4.9** The Trust was working with Heads and SENDCo's to carry out greater scrutiny of the EHCPs coming through. These often used woolly language, such as 'some work' needed. It was important to ask what that meant in terms of specific hours of support and with what ratio of adults to child. The Trust used a 1:2 or 1:3 model where possible.
- 4.10** LB referred to her list of the support planned for in the 2025-2026b academic year and how it was planned to do this at the highest standard for the lowest cost.
- 4.11** CC added that many years ago, the premise underpinning SEN funding was that the school should only spend 28% of a notional £6k. In reality the schools were far further 'under', because it cost far more to try and meet these pupils' needs. The local authorities did not understand the position schools were facing. The notional £6k needed to be spent on resources such as a SENDCo, not specifically spent on just the one child. It was important to know that every Trust was now struggling with the level of need coming in, which was not manageable for maintained schools.
- 4.12** **Q:** Was anyone at local council level or at government level engaging with this? How could they continue to pretend there was money available by referring to a notional spend, when this was money the schools had not received?  
**A:** The rhetoric was about mainstream education being 'more inclusive'. But this was now inclusion to the point of non-inclusion. A child could be in the same school as his mainstream peers, but doing something very specific and often not with his peers. No-one was talking about this. Where was the conversation matching schools' reality here? The DfE was carrying out a review of SEN, but the Trust was not holding out any hope of a positive outcome.
- 4.13** The Trust's goal was to make this spend sustainable via investment in a long-term strategy. That could not happen if it was running a 'two schools in one' model, without special school funding. The schools were getting better at recognising and evidencing when it had spent its notional £6k and it informed the council at that point, pushing back on any further spending.
- 4.14** **Q:** Was this the tip of the iceberg? The discussion seemed to be about pupils with extreme levels of need without accounting for all of the other needs presented by children without an EHCP?  
**A:** That was correct. Actual spending on actual need was a very different picture. The schools used to provide one TA per class to support the general level of SEND. That was becoming increasingly unaffordable, and TAs were being pulled out of the classroom to provide 1-2-1 or similar care ratios. Some children were almost entirely unable to access the mainstream provision.
- 4.15** **Q:** Were these TAs trained for this work?

**A:** The schools were getting much better at developing SEN specialists, but this was above the standard level of expectation for this. The schools were being forced to adapt in the manner of a specialist provision.

**4.16 Q:** Did the Trust have contacts at specialist provision schools?

**A:** Yes it did. There were good networks in Oxfordshire for example with the Mulberry Bush school which gave great advice and did outreach work to assess pupils' needs. Some of the other specialist schools had come out to advise and educational psychologists came in. The schools were doing everything they could to understand the needs of the child with a view to integrating and including. A plan would be set but it needed constant revision. The schools' exclusion numbers were rising, which generated criticism from the council due to the school having not met the pupils' needs in a scenario where the school had confirmed clearly at the outset that it could not meet these needs.

**4.17 Q:** Was anything being done in the short term to try and improve the situation?

**A:** The current strategy was that the moment £6k had been spent in relation to a pupil, the Trust pushed back extremely hard for additional funding for staff resources, and repeated the request for the child to be placed at an alternative establishment which was suitable. It took a very long time before the council accepted that the situation was not working.

**4.18 Q:** Please could this be its own entry into the Trust Risk Register?

**A:** Yes, that would be done. **ACTION - JC**

**4.19 Q:** At a national level, were all schools and Academy Trusts going through these same issues?

**A:** Yes, and some schools were further down the line in terms of running out of reserves.

**4.20 Q:** What happened at that point?

**A:** Any 'luxury' item needed to be cut, such as classroom TAs supporting the class teacher with the level of SEN. Flat funding was anticipated in the years ahead, despite teacher pay rises on a spine point basis

**4.21** On a positive note, JC noted that the overall the children and the majority of aspects of the schools were doing so well. The Trust was expecting Year 6 outcomes to be great across the board, in spite of all of these challenges.

**4.22** The Committee discussed and acknowledged how mainstream pupils could easily feel a sense of injustice about different rules applying to children, depending on SEND status.

**4.23 Q:** Could the Trust be better engaging with local MPs?

**A:** JC had joined the Confederation for School Trusts this year, which met regularly and received requests for help with lobbying. SEND was a massive issue across the sector and it helped negotiate on behalf of academy trusts. JC had also been in contact with both local council MPs.

**5. Recommendation of approval for Academy Budgets and Scrutiny of Forecast Pupil Numbers**

- 5.1** CC explained that the overview assumptions included an assumed increase in GAG of 2% for future years, teacher pay rises at 4% for September 2025, support staff pay rises continuing at 3%, and the rolling up of a further DfE grant into the general GAG funding.

*DPA 25/26 Forecast Budget*

- 5.2** Four years had been projected, whilst only the next three years needed approval. The Committee was referred to the built-in assumptions to income, showing the levels coming in. The amount of the reserves carry forward was flagged for this academic year, some of which would be spent the following year on additional support staff and fixed term contracts. The number of teaching staff required had been set out and the total number of support staff was being pared back going forward.
- 5.3** Overall, the reserves and the carry forward looked very healthy. At 2028-2029 the school would be overstaffed if the funding increased at the rate predicted. Hopefully this would not be as predicted. The Trust knew when it might need to take action such as considering redundancies. For some time now, there had been no automatic replacement of permanent contracts with permanent. The school was being as flexible as it could and the Trust held a central tracker of all fixed term contracts to monitor the duration of these per staff member.

- 5.4** **Q:** What impact did it have that teachers were being placed on fixed-term contracts? Did it make it harder to get the right staff?

**A:** Fixed term contracts were not offered to staff members who were the main class teacher for their class. Given that DPA was oversubscribed, 15 permanent teachers should be affordable. Sometimes the school became overstaffed at a senior level, which it needed to pay attention to. A school always needed the teachers if it had the pupils, and always needed the permanent PPA cover. The rest was managed on a fixed-term basis as much as possible. It sometimes helped staff to try a role on a fixed term contract. Many staff came via the supply route.

*SHPA 25/26 Forecast Budget*

- 5.5** The numbers were much smaller here, producing smaller reserves. There was a one form entry model, with classes going up to Year 1 at present and into Year 2 in September 2025. There had been a little bit of spending of the reserves to help with dis-economies of scale, and the school would look healthier as it went into future years. The staffing structure was lean, including just four teachers, one of which was the Vice Principal. There was a part-time Executive Principal and low numbers of support staff.

*TPA 25/26 Forecast Budget*

- 5.6** TPA had cut a class in Reception which had been reflected in its finances. There would be lots of spending of reserves coming up: the school would be relying on that for a couple of years to help fund its mix of existing permanent staff and those on fixed-term contracts with reduced pupil numbers. Three years groups were not full now, which was why the Trust had taken the decision to cut the PAN in half.
- 5.7** These non-full year groups had a long-term financial impact for the school. In 2028-29 the picture was not yet getting better. The position should improve by 2032 based on the data

available. There would be no merging of classes yet as that was the worst-case scenario. That would happen before any redundancies were considered.

**5.8 Q: How many places had been accepted for September?**

**A:** There had been 41 places accepted, over two classes, meaning that the school was short 19 children in relation to the cost of the teacher in the second class. CC noted that the Trust held the schools' reserves as a total amount in one central bank account, so there were options available. There were no concerns about payroll at this point. The documents were showing the worst-case scenario, not where the Trust would let things get to. There was also natural wastage across the Trust each year as standard.

**5.9 Q: At what point did this need to be given closer attention?**

**A:** It was given close attention at every resignation and every appointment.

*WPA 25/26 Forecast Budget*

**5.10** This showed a healthy picture. The school was fully subscribed at 60 places for September 2025. There were two more year groups of one form entry to see out. The position was positive with lots of reserves building up, even after a significant spend on SEN resources this year. The school had tried to make decisions which provided a sustainable and longer-term impact in terms of resourcing for future years in this context. Hopefully the school would hit the ground running in September 2025.

*OLT 25/26 Forecast Budget*

**5.11** The model going forward was based on a team of three full time staff (JC, LB and SB) with the addition of a part-time Governance and Communications Officer.

**5.12** The income was based on four schools, each of which were charged 4.5%, with the exception of SHPA which was charged 4% whilst still small.

**5.13** In terms of other income, the Trust was predicting that it would be able to invest the Trust's reserves again during 2025-2026 to generate returns, which helped with staff lunch costs. Advice would be taken from Edufin about this. If the returns generated were insufficient to fund staff lunch costs, the Trust would need to reconsider the best use for this money.

**5.14** The Committee had no further questions and the Committee members agreed unanimously to recommend the budgets for full Board approval.

**6. Receive the second (of two) internal audit reports for 2024-2025**

*Report from UHY-RB: Summer term 2025 – Cyber Security, Data and IT*

**6.1** This summer term the Trust had asked UHY-RB, its internal auditors, to look at cyber security, data and IT, per the internal audit schedule approved by this Committee earlier in the academic year. UHY had come back with their recommendations, one flagged green and three flagged amber, which the Trust had responded to in writing, and action had been taken straight away as needed.

- 6.2** The audit had been very thorough, although the Trust had shown itself to be significantly down the line in some respects, with the help of the Trust's external IT Consultants. JC had also developed a good understanding of the schools' position. There were no servers. All data was stored in the cloud and was backed up regularly. Reports could be run from the backed-up data. Most data was held externally.
- 6.3** The Committee were provided with more detail about the action points and responses to include plans for a simulated phishing exercise to assess responses in the event of being locked out of systems with no access to laptops.
- 6.4** The Directors had no further questions and confirmed receipt of the report.

**7. Receive Management Accounts dated May 2025 & review of spending linked with educational priorities**

- 7.1** The following documents had been circulated in advance of the meeting, dated May 2025, 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*

- 7.2** CC shared the Executive Summary on screen.
- 7.3** She explained key information included in this summary document as well as in accompanying 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. There was nothing of significance to note, such as variances from the previous reports.
- 7.4** Overall, the Trust was in a healthier position than the original budget had forecast and would end the year with a smaller deficit at Trust level. The amount of reserves was identified, which was a healthy position to be in and would help to cover the deficits in the budgets.
- 7.5** **Q:** Were the deficits and capital figures showing an overspend?  
**A:** The data assumed that the Trust had spent all of its capital. There had not been any overspend. This was just a timing issue.
- 7.6** AT TPA there was now a small surplus in contrast to the deficit originally forecast, due to self-generated income and staff salary savings plus some staff absence insurance income.

- 7.7 DPA had moved into a slightly increased deficit due to items such as agency fees and payment made under a settlement agreement. However there had been no significant movements month-to-month.
- 7.8 WPA had a small in-year deficit of £3k. The cost of its additional staffing had already been approved. There had been a small reduction in self-generated income but everything was as forecast.
- 7.9 **Q:** What was the explanation for this deficit given the large surplus previously?  
**A:** Back in November 2024 the Board had approved the spend, as an investment into the Year 5 classes, and linked with required SEN support.
- 7.10 **Q:** What did the figures for the universal free school meals show?  
**A:** The number of meals taken on certain dates influenced the figures budgeted for.
- 7.11 SHPA showed a positive variance and was just about balanced. There had been an increase in nursery funding. Premises spending had been included in the budget and was covered for the most part by grants received. OCC were asking the school to pay for defects work up front and then funding after the fact. The school's approach was not to pay for any work unless it had received confirmation that the funding was coming in.
- 7.12 **Q:** Was there yet a cashflow forecast which reflected the new budgets?  
**A:** That would come before the end of July and would inform the Trust's investment strategy for 2025-2026. JC would work on the longer-term strategy as soon as the information was available and would bring the information back to the next Committee meeting.
- 7.13 The Committee had no further questions.
- 7.14 CC left at 11.23.

## 8. Receive OLT 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 JC and SB had supplied the RAG rated summary sheet covering the above areas, and Directors were welcome to request more detailed information in writing or verbally either during or following the meeting. Each point with an amber or red rating had been allocated an explanatory comment in the report.
- 8.2 JC ran through the comments in the report. From an IT perspective the Trust had set up an IT/digital strategy with an action coming out of that to appoint a digital lead at each school. It now had a full picture for IT compliance which was positive.
- 8.3 There had been some inconsistency in the LGPS data held by the Trust's payroll company but the Trust was close to getting this cleared out.

8.4 Other matters discussed included staffing and recruitment, staff absence, premises and estate management, health and safety audits to include fire, water and fixed-wire testing, policy compliance, and safeguarding including single central register compliance.

8.5 Overall, the Trust was robust and up-to date on key matters. Very detailed reports sat underneath the overview sheet circulated for each Committee meeting, which were available to view at Directors' request.

8.6 The Directors had no questions here.

## 9. Review and approve policies in line with OLT Policy Scheme of Delegation

### *OLT Disciplinary and Dismissal Policy*

9.1 JC had already flagged the changes made to this policy earlier in the meeting. The Committee agreed that this had been a thorough review and approved the updated policy.  
**ACTION - SB**

### *OLT TPS Discretions Policy (for discussion)*

9.2 This policy was for discussion only and concerned teacher pensions.

9.3 There was a clause in the policy which stipulated that any staff member wishing to take their pension and return to employment afterwards, needed to have a genuine break in employment defined as a minimum of 31 days.

9.4 However, for eligibility purposes, the TPS only required a break of one day. JC had checked this with the TPS, which had confirmed that a staff member could have one day out of employment, take full receipt of their pension, and return to that employment the day after on a 'work and draw' basis.

9.5 It made no difference to the Trust financially if the staff member took their pension or not linked with a return to work. Some staff members had questioned the 31-day break wording, out of a concern around loss of benefits and employment rights. JC was unclear why this was still in the policy and needed further advice. Did any of the Directors know more about this?

9.6 **Q:** Could a staff member take their pension and at the same time contribute to it whilst working?

**A:** JC was not sure of the answer to that.

9.7 The Directors discussed this and questioned whether the 31-day break requirement had arisen from a now out-of-date pension scheme requirement, meaning that the Trust needed to match its wording to the current position as confirmed by the TPS. JC would seek advice and bring more information back to the Board. **ACTION – JC**

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

**10.1** 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: 11.38**

**Action list of 24<sup>th</sup> June 2025 Operations Committee Meeting**

Action Number:	For Whom:	Reference:	Action:
1	SB	Minute 2.1 & 9.1	SB to organise for the approved previous minutes to be signed, attendance to be recorded for this meeting and OLT website updates to be made. SB would also organise for the approved policy to be uploaded to Parago and the Staff Policies Library <b>DONE</b>
2	JC	Minute 4.18	JC to update the Trust Risk Register with the concern about the financial impact of rising SEN pupil numbers across the schools. <b>DONE</b>
3	JC	Minute 9.7	JC to take advice on the break in employment requirement in the TPS Discretions Policy. <b>DONE</b>