

MEMBERS

Minutes of the Annual General Meeting held on 14 February 2025 at 2pm

Present physically: N Wingfield-Digby

Present virtually: A Maltpress J Bloomfield
A Mathur S Howard, WSC's representative member

In Attendance: A Brewster, Group Head of Finance
A McGarel, CFO
D Bicker, EEGT Trustee (part)
D Wildridge, EEGT Trustee
N Kellett, EEGT Trustee (part)
N Savvas, CEO
S Gales, Governance Professional

Apologies: J Gazzard

Absent:

Note: the AGM meeting was rescheduled from 5 February 2025 to 14 February 2025.

Action

1. **Election of Chair**

The Members elected Sarah Howard to Chair the meeting.

2. **Declaration of Interests and Apologies for absence**

N Savvas and S Howard declared their roles as Governors of West Suffolk College. No other conflicts of interest were declared.

Apologies for absence were received from J Gazzard.

The Chair welcomed Ankit Mathur and Alan Maltpress as new Members and members introduced themselves.

3. **Minutes of the meeting held on 4 December 2024**

The minutes of the meeting held on 4 December 2024 were **agreed** as an accurate record.

4. **2023/24 Financial Statements and Annual Report**

Members received and considered the Trust's Financial Statements and Annual Report and A McGarel summarised the key information.

Members commended the financial health and sustainability of the Trust, especially given the challenging national context.

Members noted an inaccuracy, on page 1, which is missing West Suffolk College as a Member, with Sarah Howard as the WSC's representative Member. The CFO informed that the document, following external audit, was submitted to the DfE and to Companies House, so it may not be possible to amend, but agreed to investigate.

CFO

5. **Update on Trust Board's Governance inc. Dear Accounting Officer letters**

Members received and considered the update report which included analysis of current membership and diversity information, and the 'Dear Accounting Officer' letters from the DfE.

The Governance Professional informed that S Healey Pearce resigned due to personal circumstances, which has resulted in a vacancy on the Trust Board and for Chair of our Finance Committee. The Governance Professional informed that, with the CEO and Trust Board Chair, we are working to develop a proposal to fill this vacancy, for consideration by the Trust Board after half-term.

Members queried if the parent Academy Council vacancies had been filled. The Governance Professional informed that five of the six parent vacancies have been filled and the final vacancy (for a parent representative from Duke of Lancaster School) will be re-advertised in the summer term.

The Governance Professional informed that to improve governance oversight of our specialist SEN schools we have appointed additional Trustees to the SEND Educational Excellence Committee which have significant experience of curriculum and quality, safeguarding and leadership. The Governance Professional informed that, with the CEO and Trust Board Chair, we are working to develop a proposal to restructure governance to further strengthen oversight of our specialist SEN schools, for consideration by the Trust Board after half-term.

Members challenged that some Trustee's attendance in 2023/24 (as disclosed in agenda item 4) were too low and queried what action is planned. The Governance Professional confirmed that some of those Trustees have since resigned and that the Trust Board Chair had individual discussions with each Trustee each January to reconfirm attendance expectations and that attendance is considered as part of re-appointment consideration and succession planning.

The Governance Professional informed that succession planning is underway and was part of the Trust Board Chair's annual 1:1 conversation with each Trustee and is regularly discussed by the Nominations and Governance Committee.

The Governance Professional informed that, as part of succession planning, we are considering advertising externally, within our local networks and to governance members within the wider Group (as they have suitable skills and experience and might wish to become a Trustee).

6. Trust's performance so far in 2024/25

Members received and considered the strategic update report which included a strategic update on post-election priorities, the government budget, the education sector, national pay negotiations, changes to Ofsted and the ESFA, new government initiatives and white papers, devolution, qualification reforms and changes to social care and early years. As well as an autumn highlights report which included updates on student achievements, developments, trips and experiences, shows and exhibitions, updates on how we support our communities, businesses and partners, updates on staff and sustainability, and the newsletters of each college.

The CEO informed that Stone Lodge Academy was inspected by Ofsted in January 2025 and was found to have 'serious weaknesses' (graded inadequate for three of the four judgements, and with ineffective safeguarding arrangements). The CEO summarised the weaknesses found and explained how the Trust and school leadership teams are working to implement rapid improvements.

The CEO informed that we are conducting deep dives at each specialist SEN school to identify if the issues were localised to the school or if there were broader, systemic issues across the specialist SEN schools which transferred from SENDAT. The CEO informed that we have started to collate an action plan for the school and for the specialist SEN schools which transferred from SENDAT, with both support and specific interventions to rapidly improve standards.

Members queried why these issues were not identified as part of due diligence. The CEO advised that we had limited access to the specialist SEN schools data and the published Ofsted reports were historic, so did not reflect the current practices. Moreover, many of the areas for improvement relate to support and training for staff, to set an effective high-aspirations, high-quality culture – and culture is hard to evaluate in due diligence.

Members queried whether we have confidence that students at the specialist SEN schools are safe. The CEO informed that our highly experience safeguarding team are

working to conduct audits at each school to create detailed action plans, with timelines, and are taking leadership of the safeguarding arrangements including line management of the DSLs, training for the DSL teams and staff, policies and procedures, systems and reporting. As such, we feel highly confident that we will be able to rapidly strengthen the safeguarding arrangements to ensure safeguarding is effective at each school.

The CEO explained that Ofsted recognised that the poor standards at the school and the serious weakness of safeguarding arrangements were longstanding and had been in place under the leadership of SENDAT, and that there had only been a short period of time since the school joined EEG, and that EEG had identified and started to implement actions to improve quality, safeguarding and governance arrangements. The 'serious weaknesses' judgement reflected the inspector's confidence in EEG's ability, capacity and experience to rapidly address the areas for improvement.

Members queried the time between the school's joining EEG and the inspection. The CEO informed that it was 3 months, however due to our agreement to observe current practices for the autumn term, the inspection occurred weeks after we had started making changes.

The CEO summarised examples of the types of issues and concerns uncovered at Sunrise Academy and Duke of Lancaster Academy, and the actions we are taking.

D Wildridge confirmed that the Trust Board were fully aware of the situation and the Finance Committee (which she is a member of) is prepared to support the CEO with additional resources, if needed, to rapidly address the areas for improvement.

Members queried if the Trustees and Members who were part of SENDAT, were aware of these pre-existing issues. The CEO informed that they weren't aware as there was insufficient reporting and transparency from SENDAT's executive to its governance. A Mathur, as a former Member of SENDAT, confirmed that he was not aware of the issues.

Members queried what support will be provided to parents of students at Stone Lodge Academy. The CEO informed that the Ofsted report has not been published and so we are using this time to prepare a stakeholder communication plan to coincide with its publication, and part of this will be the leadership's support of parents. The CEO confirmed that he will be onsite to meet/support concerned parents.

Members queried the response of leaders who were previously senior leaders of SENDAT and of school staff following the Ofsted outcome. The CEO informed that they did not anticipate the Ofsted outcome, so it had been a surprise. The CEO outlined the support put in place for staff including mentoring for the Head of School, the support of our highly experienced specialist Group staff, etc. and confirmed that there will be re-organisation of responsibilities to support the rapid improvements needed, and to provide leadership and support to school staff.

Members queried what KPIs will be used for the specialist SEN schools and the aligned to the objectives set for the Heads of School. The CEO informed that we have developed the KPIs based on the Ofsted framework and best practice and part of the action plan is communicating these to the senior leaders, and agreeing how often they will be measures and how they will be quality assured. These KPIs will also be used with governance so they have transparency of data and assurance that we know what is going on, and that we are having the intended impact.

Members queried how progress against the action plan will be measured/tracked and the plans to keep Members informed. The CEO informed that the SEND Educational Excellence Committee will be responsible for the detailed oversight, however we will continue to keep the Trust Board and Members updated of progress.

Members reflected on the history of EEG and its proven track record of strengthening and improving institutions, and voiced support of the CEO and thanked him and the staff for their hard work.

The CEO informed that, aside from issues with the specialist SEN schools which transferred from SENDAT, the Trust and Group is performing very strongly. Exning Primary School has integrated very well and has created additional executive capacity to support improvements at the specialist SEN schools. Both Abbeygate Sixth Form and One Sixth Form continue to perform very well and are Ofsted Outstanding. The Trust remains financially strong and stable, and our students are supported by a strong curriculum and wrap-around support.

Members commended the strong performance of the Trust, though queried if the CEO has sufficient support and capacity to maintain the strong performance while focussing on the specialist SEN schools. The CEO informed that he has a team of highly experienced and capable senior leaders who are empowered, via devolved leadership, to lead their areas.

The CEO summarised the national and local context, the changes on the horizon in terms of government policy, devolution, funding, etc. and opportunities in the medium to long term. The CEO confirmed that our short-term focus is on improving the specialist SEN schools.

Members reflected that the number of children with diagnosed SEN has significantly increased and queried the reasons for this. The CEO advised that this is a national trend, and the reasons are not clear.

Members reflected that nationally there is insufficient specialist SEN placements to meet the quantity and variety of SEN needs and queried whether our specialist SEN schools have sufficient placements to meet and match local need or if there is a mismatch. The CEO informed that the admission body for children with SEN are the Local Authorities, and noted the scarcity of placements can result in inappropriate placements where the school is unable to meet the child's needs. The CEO confirmed that there are children at the specialist SEN schools whose needs do not match the current specialism of their school placement and confirmed that we are working to review every child's ECHP to clarify their needs and identify what changes are needed at each school so they can meet the needs of their children. Moreover, we are working to improve our admissions process to work more effectively with the Local Authorities so that we match the right child with the right placement which can support their needs.

The CEO informed that government policy is heading towards SEN placements embedded within mainstream schools (rather than stand-alone specialist SEN schools) and informed that we are looking to expand specialist SEN capacity within Exning Primary School and at other primary schools which may join the Trust.

D Bicker and N Kellett left the meeting at 3.01pm

Members reflected that the number of students enrolled at Abbeygate Sixth Form is slightly less than we forecast and queried the reasons for this. The CEO informed that this reflects the national trend and trend at One Sixth Form, whereby greater numbers are opting for a vocational (rather than A-Level) course and are seeking to progress into a job or apprenticeship, rather than to a costly university course. The CEO informed that the number of students at Abbeygate Sixth Form continues to increase organically and annually by c50-100 students and explained that, given the DfE's lagged funding model, this is more financially sustainable for the Trust.

7. **Any Other Business**

None.

The meeting closed at 3.07pm