

**MINUTES OF THE BOARD MEETING HELD ON WEDNESDAY 2<sup>ND</sup> APRIL 2025**

**PART ONE**

Present: Ali Amirkhalili, Gary Baines, Penny Haughan, Gill Banks, Paul Gaskell, Ian Evans, Paul Smith, Phil Vickerman, Simon Wrigley, Jo Henney, Lucky Ali, Debbie Wilkinson, Karen Lowe

In attendance: Christine Carter, Vice Principal – Curriculum  
Phil Jones, Vice Principal – Quality & Student Experience  
Kevin Williams, Vice Principal – Finance, Estates & MIS  
Lesley Venables, Governance Professional  
Ste Bailey, Director of Specialist Provision & Support

**APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

186 Apologies for absence were received from Phil Vickerman and Ethan Stewart.

**DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

187 Paul Smith declared a standing interest in relation to his employment by Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council and his spouse being a member of staff at the College.

**MINUTES**

188 **Resolved -** That the minutes of the meeting held on 18<sup>th</sup> December 2024 (Parts 1 and 2) be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair, subject to one minor amendment.

**MATTERS ARISING**

189 Governors received for information a progress report on actions arising from the previous meeting and noted that these were either under development or featured on the agenda.

190 A number of the identified actions were significantly beyond the expected end date. The Principal and the Governance Professional were asked to review each of these and, where appropriate, determine a realistic date for completion.

191 In response to a question about whether there was a risk of clawback of capital funding if the College did not deliver projects by the deadline of 31<sup>st</sup> March 2026, the Vice-Principal Finance, MIS & Estates reported that the 31<sup>st</sup> March deadline only applied to funding provided by the Department for Education (£7.7m) and this not to any projects funded by the College's own resources. This matter had been discussed in detail at the recent meetings of the Capital Transformation Working Group and the Finance & Resources Committee.

- 192 In relation to minute 61, governors questioned whether the 3% tolerance level applied to the whole capital projects budget and were informed that the College was working within the £14m envelope approved by the Board. Groundworks had been an issue on the Twelve Quays site, but this had now been resolved, and planning permission was no longer a risk as this had been granted by the local authority.

## **WRITTEN RESOLUTION**

- 193 The Governance Professional reported that a majority of external governors had recently approved increases to senior postholder pay for 2024/2025 through a written resolution.

## **PRINCIPAL'S UPDATE**

- 194 The Principal expressed her thanks to staff on the achievement of a Beacon Award for the College's High Needs provision, which had been presented at a ceremony at the Houses of Parliament.
- 195 Apprenticeship performance had improved by 10% compared to 2023/2024 and was 60.4%. The new National Apprenticeship Rates had now been published which set a target of 63.6%. The focus for the College would be ensuring that students were on-boarded effectively with good levels of advice and guidance, together with the quality of reviews.
- 196 Retention rates were high and compared well to national benchmarks. Governors were advised that, historically, the College had retained too many students on programme without them achieving their qualifications. There were still some inconsistencies in relation to interventions and a level of risk that some students may not achieve.
- 197 College staff were supporting students with good resilience practices during the examination period.
- 198 Pass rates for 2023/2024 had been RAG-rated according to level and were classified as 'green' for Levels 1 and 3 and 'amber' for Level 2.
- 199 The published NAR excluded GCSE English and Maths for some levels and ages, which recognised the impact of these qualifications on overall outcomes. The College's achievement rate was 85.2% compared to the NAR of 85.5%.
- 200 Current retention and the national pass rates of 86.5%, indicated an incremental progression which was felt to be sustainable. Retention for 16-18s was too low, partly due to legacy issues on Functional Skills courses that had now been addressed. Adult retention was higher than the national rate.
- 201 The Curriculum Plan for 2025/2026 had been completed. Specific rooms would be allocated to Heads of Departments to enable them to timetable effectively. English & Maths and Progress Coaches had also been assigned to particular curriculum areas, which should improve efficiency further and encourage a greater team ethos amongst staff.
- 202 Governors were informed of the Government's latest amendments to 19+ apprenticeship regulations, under which employers now had the discretion to determine whether students needed to study English and Maths to support them in

their apprenticeship. The Vice-Principal Quality & Student Experience reported that most employers with which the College currently worked were keen for their apprentices to continue studying English and Maths. However, it was felt that the shortening of some apprenticeships could impact on quality in the longer-term.

- 203 Income levels for High Needs and apprenticeships were above the identified target, but this was balanced with under-performance on T Levels and adult income. The College was still waiting for notification of the amount it would receive from the DfE to support the increase in Employer National Insurance Contributions, which was effective from April 2025. A further amount had been identified nationally to support pay and retention for staff, which was likely to be based on colleges' 16-18 cohorts.
- 204 Projects under development included a sensory garden at Conway Park, designed with input from students, the Premier Inn training facility to be launched in September 2025 which would provide supported internships across the Merseyside region. Students had benefitted from a variety of trips and visits, and the College had offered a range of activities to celebrate National Apprenticeship Week, National Careers Week and Colleges' Week.
- 205 On behalf of the Board the Chair congratulated staff for the achievement of a national Beacon Award for its high needs provision.
- 206 Ofsted was currently consulting the sector on its new inspection framework, which included a scorecard approach and a separate grade for teaching and learning. The Government had published a Curriculum & Assessment Review which aimed to improve standards and better prepare young people for life and work.
- 207 In terms of funding allocations, the College would receive £1.152m for capital expenditure (to be spent by 2028), a 3% reduction in the Adult Skills Fund budget from the Combined Authority and an increase of £0.5m for 16-18 provision. The June Spending Review would provide greater detail on other potential pots of funding. The Spring Statement had included the outline of a Construction Skills initiative to support the Government's housebuilding agenda.
- 208 Ten Technical Excellence Colleges would be established from a fund of £100m within Combined Authority area and there was an ambition to enrol 35k Bootcamp learners, together with an additional £165m to deliver Construction programmes nationally. [A governor questioned whether the CA would have some influence over the successful providers of the TECs and was advised that this was unclear at the moment, but the College would need to be ready to deliver on any of these initiatives at short notice to take advantage of any future opportunities.](#)
- 209 The Government had also announced a teacher industry exchange programme (but it was noted that FE colleges found it difficult to match pay levels offered by the private sector and that teaching was not an easy profession to enter). The recent £4.8bn reduction in welfare payments may push more young people into education and training. There would be 10k foundation apprentices with incentives of £2k per students.
- 210 Ten policy priorities had been set out, such as the Youth Guarantee on which the College was working with the local authority. There were significant opportunities but it was recognised that the College needed to be ready to pursue these and comply

with the associated criteria.

- 211 In response to a question as to whether there was a risk that the College's new facilities could be under-utilised by young people, the Vice-Principal Quality advised that any additional Construction courses could be filled easily. A number of local colleges within the North West had been approached by a national housebuilding association to deliver bricklaying training but it was likely that this contract would be delivered in Manchester or Liverpool due to the lack of land available on the Wirral and the responsiveness of local authorities. The Principal added that progress with the green technology retrofit academies had been slow due to delays in receiving planning permission.
- 212 The College was discussing opportunities in engineering with local defence contractors and there was still a high level of demand for business skills amongst students on programmes such as plastering and hair & beauty who often set up their own companies. A governor commented that the increase in the levels of ENIC and the Real Living Wage may encourage more students into self-employment.

#### **CHAIR'S UPDATE**

- 213 The Chair had attended regional networking meetings arranged by the Association of Colleges, regular meetings/contact with the Principal and the Governance Professional.

#### **STRATEGIC PLAN UPDATE**

- 214 The Principal presented an update on performance against the KPIs in the Strategic Plan. Progress against the financial indicators was consistent with the content of the Management Accounts. Adult funding required improvement to be able to draw down the full allocation from the Combined Authority.
- 215 Staff utilisation levels were in line with the target, but it was noted that the new Curriculum Plan should increase this further in 2025/2026. Staff turnover was 15.4% compared to 19.4% in 2023/024.
- 216 Governors were advised that the college had identified and corrected a legacy issue relating to reporting of student attendance. **Governors asked questions and satisfied themselves that all necessary work was being done to reach attendance targets going forward.**
- 217 In-year retention was high compared to the target. All members of staff, including had been allocated a group of students with low levels of attendance to ensure that they achieved and attended the forthcoming English & Maths examinations. Progress assessment boards had been completed and a whole-College approach had been implemented for the exams process. **In response to questions the Principal advised that the reduction in attendance was mainly in relation to Levels 1 and 2 for 16-18s and for adults, particularly those from vulnerable groups. There were no reputational or performance issues that could be identified externally and no funding implications.**
- 218 It was agreed that at the next Board meeting an update would be provided on projects resulting from the College's strategic priorities. Future versions of the report would include training activities in the workforce development section.

- 219 A staff governor commented that classes for Maths and English were sometimes only half-full, despite the best efforts of staff to encourage high levels of attendance. It was important that the College took a stringent approach to progression, including determining future actions for those who were unsuccessful in their qualification aims. The Principal reported that only Level 1 students who sat their examinations would be offered a place on Level 2 programmes or an apprenticeship. The whole progression process needed to be rigorous and aligned to the College's aim of being an organisation of high standards and appropriate support.

## **MEETING SCHEDULE 2025/2026**

- 220 In line with previous discussions the Governance Professional was asked to add the meeting dates for the Autumn Term 2026, to provide governors with a longer-term plan for their calendars. Meetings would continue to be a mixture of in-person and online, dependent on operational requirements and the matters under review.
- 221 **Resolved** - That the schedule of meetings for 2025/2026 be approved and that dates for the Autumn Term 2026 be added to the final published version.

## **GOVERNANCE & SEARCH COMMITTEE**

- 222 In the absence of the Committee Chair, the Governance Professional presented a summary of the meeting held on 5<sup>th</sup> February 2025.
- 223 Attendance levels had improved overall from 82% in 2023/2024 to 89% in the current year, but governors would continue to be reminded to maintain these for the rest of the academic year, particularly those who had not met the target of 85%.
- 224 The two current vacancies for external governors were discussed and it was agreed that an advert would be placed on LinkedIn, seeking skills in the areas of HR/EDI, AI/Technology and Estates. Information on terms of office was received and proposals for the staggering of the end-dates was recommended due to the large cohort of governors' whose terms would expire at the same time.
- 225 Some areas for improvement had been identified in the Board's diversity data and in future a wider range of data would be collected.
- 226 A revised schedule of committee memberships was recommended for approval, together with proposals for amendment of the Instrument & Articles of Government which had been reviewed in detail.
- 227 The Committee had received an update on the action plan resulting from the External Governance Review. Further work on this would be undertaken in order that these were completed as soon as possible.
- 228 A briefing paper on models of governance had been discussed, with additional work to be carried out.
- 229 The Committee was reviewing how the Board could ensure that it is compliant with training, development and skills updating for governors. The link governor scheme would be relaunched and a calendar of meetings/events would be circulated.
- 230 **Resolved** - **That the following items be approved:**

- 1 Revised schedule of committee memberships
- 2 Updated Instrument & Articles of Government

## **QUALITY & STANDARDS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

- 231 The Chair of the Quality & Standards Scrutiny Committee presented a summary of the meeting held on 12<sup>th</sup> February 2025.
- 232 The Committee had received a demonstration of the Century Tech software for English and Maths which provided a strong development and opportunity to stretch/challenge students.
- 233 Teaching, Learning & Assessment continued to be a key focus, with a high level of confidence in the areas for improvement in the QIP and the necessary support mechanisms in place and evidence of effective teaching practice.
- 234 Curriculum planning for 2025/2026 was on track. Plans for 10 curriculum areas had been developed to align with the new Strategic Pillars. The next stage would be resourcing. Governors noted the challenge brought about by the late notification of decisions around Level 3 curriculum reform.
- 235 Apprenticeships had a significant number of students and the current achievement rate was 56.9% (worst case scenario). Actions to address the issues highlighted by Ofsted were underway and the implications of recent reforms announced by the Government were being assessed.
- 235 There had been a significant increase in the numbers of English & Maths resits. [A governor asked whether the students undertaking resits had failed previously and was advised that this was generally the case. The College faced a logistical challenge in supporting examination access arrangements and accommodation but was confident that this would be addressed successfully.](#)
- 236 Attendance provided a further challenge, but the curriculum team continued to maintain its focus. Further actions centred around timetabling and a new Attendance/Punctuality Policy. The November 2024 resits had exceeded the benchmark for Maths, but further work was required on English programmes. Governors had noted the logistical and exam support challenges faced by the College in the summer.

## **AUDIT COMMITTEE**

- 237 The Chair of the Audit Committee presented a summary of the meeting held on 5<sup>th</sup> March 2025.
- 238 An Internal Audit report on Payroll & Agency staffing was received which graded the College's arrangements as providing 'reasonable' assurance, with 6 medium priority recommendations.
- 239 A total of 28 recommendations had been considered by the Internal Auditors as part of follow-up of previous audits, with updates on each provided to the Board.

- 240 The Committee received a report on progress against the Internal Audit Plan for 2024/2025 which showed that this was on track for delivery by the end of the academic year, with the remaining reports due to be submitted to the Committee's June meeting. Governors also received for information a copy of RSM's Board Assurance Framework.
- 241 The regular report on risk management had been discussed. One new risk had been added to take account of the additional workload of refining and streamlining the policy framework. The scores of 4 risks had been reduced since the December meeting due to changes in circumstances.
- 242 The Committee had recommended that the clawback of £150k for apprenticeship provision by the ESFA as a result of the recent funding assurance audit should be dealt with in the 2024/2025 financial statements, with an amendment to the Letter of Representation.

## **FINANCE & RESOURCES COMMITTEE**

- 243 The Chair of the Finance & Resources Committee provided a summary of the meeting held on 12<sup>th</sup> March 2025.
- 244 Policies on Environmental Sustainability and Tuition Fees had been recommended for approval by the Board. The Vice—Principal Finance & Resources reported that the former reflected the Association of Colleges' Roadmap on Climate Change and that the College would shortly be advertising for a dedicated post to support this agenda. [A governor asked when the College aimed to achieve 'Net Zero' and was advised that this would form part of the Sustainability Strategy. It was suggested that a statement on not trading with companies purchasing carbon credits should be added to the Policy as this was sometimes considered to be unethical. The Vice-Principal commented that this was linked to the Procurement and Social Value Policies.](#)
- 245 [In response to questions about the specific budget for sustainability initiatives governors were advised that this would be included in the 2025/2026 budget allocations.](#)
- 246 In terms of the Fees Policy the Board was informed that there would be a separate policy for Higher Education Fees. Section 7 had been revised to include a requirement for a 25% deposit from students, rather than the previous £100, and a 2-week 'cooling off' period.
- 247 [Following questions as to whether the College would permit students to pay for their courses after they had sat their examinations the Vice-Principal commented that this was a risk that students would not pay any outstanding amounts towards the end of the academic year, leaving the College with a potential shortfall. It was important for](#)

the College to follow up any arrears and a judgement would be made on debt recovery and any potential write-offs.

- 248 There had been updates on the production of a revised Estates Strategy (which was due to be submitted to the Board for approval in July 2025) and capital projects. It was noted that all current projects were on track with no projected overspends. The Committee had also discussed the possibility of using temporary knife arches to improve site security.
- 249 The Committee had received information on the funding assurance audit of apprenticeships and had recommended that the associated clawback should be included in Financial Statements for 2024/2025, rather than adjusting the draft accounts for 2023/2024.
- 250 Progress on signing the remaining legal agreement with one of the 'spokes' for the Towns Fund had been slow, but it had been agreed that a replacement organisation should be sought, which was underway.
- 251 A detailed report on Health & Safety issues had been received. The College was currently refining the number and content of its numerous H&S policies. A total of 43 accidents had occurred since September 2024, one of which was RIDDOR-reportable. Changes had been made to parking arrangements to enable emergency vehicles to be able to access all sites if required.
- 252 Governors received the management accounts for January 2025.
- 253 Pay expenditure was currently £731K less than the approved budget due to non-essential vacancies not being filled. The correction of depreciation charges in year had meant a variation of £1.15m. Governors were assured that this was a non-cash item which did not impact on the level of EBITDA.
- 254 All financial indicators were positive and cash balances were £24.91m. There had been 2 significant movements in the College's financial position. The first of these was a clawback of apprenticeship income of £155K following the recent ESFA funding audit. The second variation related to an increase in pension costs of £200K compared to the approved budget.
- 255 Both of these items meant that the College's financial health rating had moved from Outstanding to Good. The Principal advised that, due to the major capital investment financed partly from the College's own resources, expenditure was exceeding income. The College was in a fortunate position to be able to do this, but at some point in the future decisions on growth and increasing income would need to be made. The aim was to maximise resources for the benefit of students.
- 256 The emphasis on ensuring high levels of student progression was important as this would be one of the ways in which the College maintained and raised its income. The Principal commented that future recruitment would be targeted in areas where there was a shortfall in learner numbers. There was also an expectation from the Government that colleges should not maintain large cash balances, particularly those that had been graded by Ofsted as Requires Improvement, such as Wirral Met.
- 257 A governor questioned the amount of unbudgeted non-pay costs. The Vice-Principal

Finance & Resources reported that this was mainly related to the facilities department and higher expenditure on curriculum resources, which had been extremely limited in the past.

- 258 In response to a question about a reserves policy the Vice-Principal Finance & Resources reported that there was none in place currently, but the College had firmed up the security of its cash holdings at the bank. Once the suite of capital projects had been completed there would be approximately £9m remaining in reserves. Management would review the requirement for a reserves policy at that point.
- 259 The Committee had been advised of performance against a number of HR metrics. Turnover had reduced compared to 2023/2024; however, attendance had not met the identified target and was subject to improved monitoring through a new HR system. Levels of staff engagement had increased by 11% this year, with no significant areas of concern.
- 260 The College had been reaccredited for the Investors in People award.
- 261 Future reports would enable the Committee to monitor performance more robustly.
- 262 **Resolved -** That policies on Environmental Sustainability and FE Fees, Discounts & Payments Policy for 2025/2026 be approved

#### **DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

2<sup>nd</sup> July 2025, 4.30 p.m.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_  
Chair

Dated: