



A meeting of the Hart Schools Trust Board was held on Tuesday 6 December 2022 starting at 08.30 by videoconference.

## PRESENT

Kit Davies (Vice-chair) (meeting chair)  
Hilary Clifford  
Geoff Cleverdon  
Jonathan Ellam  
Socrates Karidis

Louise Lee  
Mark Lewis (Chief Executive)  
Vicky Parsey  
Sahreen Siddiqui  
Helen Stanton-Tonner

## IN ATTENDANCE

Paul Harte (Group Finance Director)

Robert Dale (Company Secretary/Clerk)

## ITEM 1A: APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

- Andrew Simmons.

## ITEM 1B: DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

- Kit Davies declared that he was a member of the Board of WENTA and the Board of the Hertfordshire Virtual School. Jonathan Ellam declared that he was employed by HFL Education (formerly Herts for Learning) as a governance advisor.

## ITEM 1C: MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

- The minutes of the meeting held on 28 September 2022 were agreed as an accurate record and would be signed accordingly.

## ITEM 1D: MATTERS ARISING/ACTIONS

- These had been addressed as follows:
  - Consider how to use lessons from the ETF evaluation process in reviewing the effectiveness of the Trust Board. **Action under way.** This will be further followed-up in 2023.
  - Complete work on the revised Instrument and Articles of Association for the Trust and confirm ESFA approval prior to submission to the Trust Board in July 2022. **Action under way.** The revised Articles and Funding Agreement were currently with DfE and a response was awaited. An anomaly had been identified in respect of the 'capacity' figure for the Roebuck Academy – which does not apparently include the Nursery capacity. It may be necessary to submit a case for change – although this was an error in the records rather than a change.
  - Seek feedback from Buzzacott (external auditors) on the impact of the refusal of ESFA to approve the Related Party Transaction with the Hart Learning Group. **Action complete.** Full disclosures had been made in the Annual Report and Financial Statements discussed at the AGM.

- Arrange meeting with the Regional Schools Commissioner's team. **Action deferred.** It had been subsequently suggested that this take place when there was something specific to discuss.
- Review options for placing some cash deposits in interest-bearing accounts. **Action complete.** Appropriate savings accounts at Barclays would hold some cash deposits aiming to offset costs arising from the end of free banking.
- Facilitate contact between Trust leadership and best practice organisations (such as West Suffolk College). **Action complete.** Kit had provided contact information.
- Circulate the LEP Apprenticeship Strategy. **Action complete.** This had been circulated by email on 28 September 2022.
- Make contact with Mission 44 to discuss opportunities. **Action complete.** Mark had been in touch with this charity.
- Circulate details of the event to the Board. **Action complete.** A SEND conference had taken place on 5 November 2022.
- Report to next meeting about energy costs. **Action complete.** A paper had been presented to the recent TAA LGB meeting outlining the position.
- Board members to consider joining the visit to an Ivy Trust school. **Action closed.** Because of the increased level of activity in respect of potential local conversion opportunities, the merger conversation had been put on hold for now.

## ITEM 2: APPOINTMENT OF NEW BOARD MEMBERS

- Three new Trustees/directors had been appointed to the Board:
  - **Louise Lee:** currently an Executive Principal overseeing several primary and secondary schools within The Shared Learning Trust. She has worked in education for the past twenty-eight years and has worked as a Headteacher, School Advisor and Ofsted inspector during her career. Louise joined The Shared Learning Trust in 2016 as Principal of The Chalk Hills Academy and has spent considerable periods of time working in North London and for a large national multi-academy trust, with a focus on leadership development, curriculum, safeguarding and change management.
  - **Sahreen Siddiqui:** currently headteacher of a maintained Primary school in Ealing and in the role since 2016 having previously been the senior deputy headteacher from 2012. She has a Maths specialisation and recently completed (2020) a MBA with a focus on collaborative leadership and partnership working in education. She works for the University of Warwick as an expert practitioner in the development of curriculum, standards and teaching, and for Ofsted as an Inspector, conducting inspections, observations and reporting on standards of learning, teaching and welfare in schools, supporting schools with improvement strategies and quality assurance. She also provides facilitation for the National Professional Qualification for Middle Leaders (NPQML).
  - **Helen Stanton-Tonner:** currently the Director of Education and Inclusion for the Independent Schools Association, with over 10 years experience as a headteacher and within educational management. She has successfully

mentored and trained Heads and senior leaders within education and has experience of chairing boards and committees.

- **Trustees welcomed their new colleagues** to the Board.

### **ITEM 3: HST PERFORMANCE UPDATE**

- Trustees reviewed the report, noting that progress and forecast achievement data would be available in the new year from a programme of mock exams completed recently. A forecast for Y11 and Y13 would come to the next meeting. Attendance was good overall – with benchmarking from Arbor putting TAA near the top 25% of schools nationally. There was, however, a significant attendance gap associated with PP learners, as there was with engagement with the school's enrichment offer. This also correlated with progress and achievement gaps, reinforcing the importance of the schools' attendance strategy. Any fresh ideas were always welcome!
- There had been a small fire in the biomass boiler-house at TAA, possibly linked to a mechanical issue with the feed hopper. Currently, the school was using the back-up gas provision while the cause was being investigated. There had been little damage except from smoke.

**Question:** *Was the school experiencing staff vacancies?* Yes, several staff had resigned this term, mainly for 'cost of living' related reasons. It had been possible to retain a couple by moving them to other roles. There were similar issues in the post-16 sector.

**Question:** *What changes in the current plan for supporting PP learners were being considered and how much was the funding?* There was c£270k for TAA at present. Some went into meeting the cost of staffing structures that supported PP learners, and the priority was on driving up attendance. There had been a big push to secure 100% attendance on day one, and the school supported the second hand school uniform shop (and provided free uniforms where necessary. Phone calls home and home visits to encourage attendance, extra mental health support and pastoral team activity was designed to encourage students to attend. Trustees noted that c25% of the roll at TAA were entitled to PP support; this was a large proportion, but not so large as to allow the whole school to be oriented towards this group, nor so small that their performance had a limited impact on overall performance data. The proportion of white working class learners (generally recognised as the cohort whose performance was hardest to shift) was also high. The problem was much wider than the individual school. Trustees agreed that the school was excellent in terms of outreach and engagement with local programmes such as Educ8, Generation Stevenage, the Character Education theme and engagement with the local LEP.

**Question:** *Achieving the Character Education kitemark was a great step forward; what would come next?* There was ongoing engagement with the Association for Character Education, and the opportunity to see best practice in other schools. The Association had been impressed with the distribution of leadership on the theme across the management structure. As noted at the LGB, another key development was the articulation of a reading strategy to ensure that activity was coherent, impactful and directed.

**Question:** *How was the long term sickness absence at Roebuck being managed?* Currently, this was being covered from within the senior and middle leadership team, but this was not sustainable in the longer term. The challenge was finding a supply teacher of sufficient quality to fill the gap for the expected few months.

**Question:** *What review structure and impact measures are there for the pastoral and mental health provision?* This was expected to improve or maintain attendance, and was kept under review by the LGB.

- Trustees thanked the teams at both schools for their continuing hard work and wished them a restful Christmas break.
- **The Trust Board accepted** the report.

#### **ITEM 4: P2 (OCTOBER 2022) MANAGEMENT ACCOUNTS**

- The year-to-date (YTD) position was better than budget, but the year-end forecast remained the same as it was likely that the better position was a matter of the timing of receipts vs costs. The unfunded element of the expected teachers' pay award (the difference between the 3% assumed in funding and the average 5% actually offered) could be covered in 2022/23 – future unfunded awards would create significant challenge.
- Worries remained over the future cost of energy. For now, the position was manageable and there were significant restrictions on changing suppliers; for TAA, its heating was provided via a renewable heat initiative (RHI) commitment to a biomass system which had approximately 15 years to run. Other energy was provided through a group buying scheme that required two years' notice to leave. It was in any event not clear that better alternative arrangements could be achieved. However, the position was being monitored and the TAA LGB had received a detailed paper on utilities costs at its recent meeting.
- Three Capital Improvement Fund (CIF) bids had been submitted (requiring match funding, should all be successful, of c£90k. The projects related to a Heat Pump at Roebuck, further fire safety work at TAA and the replacement of an elderly mobile classroom at TAA which was beyond the end of its expected life. It was unlikely that all three bids would succeed, but the match funding would be affordable if they were.

**Question:** *Had a bid writer been engaged to support the CIF submissions?* Yes, the same one that had secured the roofing improvement and fire safety funding – one in each of the two previous years.

**Question:** *What were the values of the CIF bids?* For TAA, the two bids were valued at c£400k each and for Roebuck, the bid was c£270k. Because Roebuck's estate was comparatively new, there were fewer large value projects to bid for.

**Question:** *Had either school observed pupil well-being challenges from the cost of living crisis?* Anecdotally, there had been an increased number of logs on CPOMS (the safeguarding system) noting indicators of increased poverty and this was also being picked upon home visits. The schools were doing their best to provide support where possible – for example, providing shoe vouchers, continuing to offer free breakfast provision (with the support of local retailers). Cash advances had been made to staff colleagues a couple of times during the year. Times were difficult for many families in the community.

- **The HST Board was satisfied** with the latest financial position despite the challenges.

#### **ITEM 5: RISK REGISTER**

- The Audit & Risk Committee had reviewed the latest iteration of the risk register at its recent meeting, noting that two risks had been closed and one opened. The two closed risks related to:
  - **Risk 6:** the Roebuck wrap-around provision (Buccaneers) which had been operating at capacity and for which there was no immediate risk that it would become a financial drain on the school during the current year.

- **Risk 10:** The project to replace the schools' management account system (MIS) which had now been completed. There were minor niggles but no serious risk to operations. Implementation had gone well and at TAA, 94% of parents had signed up (Roebuck was maintaining its existing parent contact/payment system for the time being).
- The new risk (**Risk 12**) concerned the potential impact of industrial action (should it arise) on the schools in 2023. The CEO was more concerned about action short of a strike – as this would mean the loss of much enrichment activity, which depended upon staff goodwill.

**Question:** *Was there good communication with union representatives in the schools?* Yes. TAA released a member of staff for one day per week to undertake union duties for the NEU and regular meetings (usually monthly) took place. There were no other union representatives at either school. There was a good working relationship.

**Question:** *What feedback had been received about the new MIS (Arbor)?* Staff were using it and appeared content. Setting up for exams had been a bit 'clunky' but that might have been a function of the first time for this process. The parental engagement elements were very good. Further reports would be given as necessary through the CEO's Performance Report.

**Question:** *What was happening in respect of the cyber security audit?* Because of the need to complete the Arbor installation, this work had been delayed. Cyber connectivity was provided by HFL Education, which made the internal scrutiny activity more complicated but meant that there were greater levels of protection than could be managed internally. Ongoing staff training and awareness raising was continuing. Training provided by the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) had been used with staff and governors.

**Question:** *Could there be a higher level of risk because HFL Education could be a bigger 'target' for cyber criminals?* That was a fair challenge; NHC's IT team was supporting the internal scrutiny activity and had experience of working with a similar third party provider (JISC).

- **The Trust Board endorsed** the latest iteration of the Risk Register.

## **ITEM 6: AUDIT & RISK CHAIR'S REPORT**

- As well as considering material associated with the annual report and financial statements dealt with at the AGM, and the Risk Register discussed as part of Item 5, the Committee had received the regular fraud and whistleblowing report, and discussed progress with actions arising from the Safeguarding internal audit carried out in summer 2022. Actions to address nine of the 13 recommendations made had been completed and four were ongoing and on track.
- The Committee had noted that one of its members (a member of the TAA LGB) also attended monthly finance meetings at which the regular management accounts reports were discussed and developed to provide non-executive challenge.
- The previous meeting had been the last that Geoff Cleverdon would Chair; the Board was delighted that Jonathan Ellam had agreed to take over from 1 January 2023. Members thanked Geoff for his leadership of the Committee and his insightful and wise counsel.
- **The Trust Board accepted** the report.

## ITEM 7: LOCAL GOVERNING BODY REPORTS

### *The Roebuck Academy*

- The LGB continued to seek a new Chair but the vice-Chair had agreed to remain as interim for the remainder of the academic year if required. The committee was very engaged and supportive but could be more challenging during meetings.

**Question:** *How could student voice activity be developed?* There were regular opportunities for TAA governors to speak with students there. Possibly some training and support for Roebuck governors in respect of a questioning strategy could be considered. There was a standard format for this at TAA which could be adopted for primary use. Trustees also suggested involving Votes for Schools - also used at TAA as part of the Character Education strategy. Single sex pupil voice groups might also be considered and the use of maps to help pupils identify where they felt safe (or not) at school was another option. Encouraging a culture of debate for pupils was valuable in helping children feel confident about having these kinds of conversations with adults.

- The CEO noted that joint senior team meetings, which had taken place before the COVID-19 emergency, were now being restarted; both schools could learn from each other's practice in different ways.

### *The Thomas Alleyne Academy*

- The school continued to have active and engaged governors, who had last met on 1 December. Amongst other matters, the LGB had considered achievement gaps among different cohorts of learners including students with SEND and those entitled to Pupil Premium (PP). There were attendance and engagement gaps linked to PP learners despite the considerable efforts put into overcoming barriers to attendance by the school.
- The school's Reading Strategy responded to feedback from an independent adviser's visit which had identified a large amount of activity supporting a reading culture, without a clear over-arching narrative. The new strategy sought to add that element, with two parts – the first to do with supporting reading recovery for those needing it and the second to developing a reading culture in school and (if possible) at home.
- The LGB had reviewed sixth form development and support for SEND. This cohort constituted a large proportion of learners (around a quarter of the roll) which made it hard to support. Nevertheless, as a school with an inclusive ethos it was important to make sure they were a focus for effort.

**Question:** *Were governor vacancies being filled?* There had been no immediate response to a call for nominations as a parent governor, and a Trust governor had stepped down recently for work-related reasons. The forthcoming parents' forum event would be used to promote the opportunities.

- **The Trust Board accepted** the reports.

## ITEM 8: TRUST DEVELOPMENT

- Mark Lewis reported that conversations with six primary schools in the Stevenage and wider Hertfordshire area were ongoing and relationships were being developed over time. There was no immediate prospect of a school asking to join the Trust, and several of these conversations were possibly 'fact finding' exercises, but there was more interest in finding a like-minded MAT to join. Discussions with a local secondary

school also continued, but they were keen to resolve land and estates issues before making a change – with a two year timescale anticipated.

- The local authority had also put the Trust in touch with some double RI primary schools and conversations with a Hertfordshire girls secondary school were continuing – but they were locked into a complicated and costly PFI deal which restricted what they could pay for central service provision. In view of the increased level of interest and activity, the conversations with the Ivy Trust in respect of a possible merger had been put on hold for now.
- Trustees appreciated that all this activity took time and commended the CEO for fulfilling the Board's expectations in this area.

**Question:** *To what extent was the support being provided by Lynsey to the Ivy Trust's primary schools appropriate if merger conversations were suspended for now?* The discussions were fairly light touch but helped provide some fresh challenge. The position would be monitored.

**Question:** *How had the relationship with the local authority (LA) been improved?* The CEO's providing support via the Interim Executive Board for another local primary school had demonstrated capacity to facilitate improvement, as had the visit carried out to Roebuck by the LA representative, who had said that the school was unlike any she had previously seen in Stevenage with excellent leadership and management.

- **The Trust Board welcomed** the news of increased levels of interest in conversion and commended the CEO for developing a close working relationship with the local authority, who could be very influential.

## **ITEM 9: POLICIES REVIEW**

- The proposed Admissions Policies from both schools for 2024/25 had been circulated. Roebuck was consulting on a change to its existing policy, introducing a rule giving priority to children of staff working at the school. This was a criterion which most schools had (including TAA) and should not be controversial. The proposed wording for the rule was in line with the law and regulation governing school admissions.
- Final feedback would be received via the local authority which had undertaken the consultation on behalf of the Trust in the new year and the Trust Board would be asked to finally approve the draft policy at that point and before the deadline in February 2023.
- No consultation had been proposed in respect of the TAA admissions policy for 2024/25. However, members' attention was drawn to Rule 4, which gave priority to pupils from Roebuck. This had been the subject of an unsuccessful referral made by the local authority to the Office of the Schools Adjudicator in 2018/19. The issue is whether the rule unreasonably or unreasonably disadvantages children who live closer to the school. The determination in July 2019 found that the number of children affected (3) was not large enough to give rise to an unreasonable or unfair disadvantage; the direction did not consider that: "these children have been unreasonably or unfairly disadvantaged, as they have all been allocated places at schools closer to their home. They and their parents may well be disappointed not to have been allocated places at Thomas Alleyne, when children who live further away from the school obtained places under the feeder school criterion, but admission authorities are not required to use distance from the school as the sole means of allocating places."

- Since July 2019, the number of pupils from Roebuck who have obtained places at TAA has risen; in September 2022, it was 10. TAA has also become more popular with families. The number of first choice applications for September 2023 (199) now exceeds the school's Published Admissions Number (PAN) (180). Taken together, these developments suggest that the risk that the Rule would be found to unfairly disadvantage a sufficiently large number of children has increased.
- No consultation for the 2024/25 Admissions Policy has been proposed, but it is suggested that when the policy is reviewed again in the autumn term of 2023/24, the Trust should begin with the assumption that this Rule should be removed and consultation proceed on that basis.
- **The Trust Board agreed** to review the policies and any feedback received at its meeting in January 2023.

### ITEM 10: ANY OTHER BUSINESS

- None.

### ITEM 11: DATE OF NEXT MEETING

- Wednesday, 25 January 2023, starting at 08.00, by videoconference (Microsoft Teams).

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Signed as an accurate record: Chair Date

### ACTION LOG

Date	Item	What	Who	When
14/07/21	6.	Consider how to use lessons from the ETF evaluation process in reviewing the effectiveness of the Trust Board.	Robert Dale	30/09/21
25/05/22	2.	Complete work on the revised Instrument and Articles of Association for the Trust and confirm ESFA approval prior to submission to the Trust Board in July 2022.	Robert Dale	30/06/22