



A meeting of the Hart Schools Trust Board was held on Wednesday 12 July 2023 starting at 08.00 in the Conference Room, TAA, Stevenage and by videoconference.

PRESENT

Andrew Simmons (Chair)
Hilary Clifford (by videoconference)
Kit Davies (Vice-chair)
Jonathan Ellam (by videoconference)
Paul Extance

Socrates Karidis (by videoconference)
Mark Lewis (Chief Executive)
Vicky Parsey (from Item 5) (by videoconference)
Helen Stanton-Tonner

IN ATTENDANCE

Paul Harte (Group Finance Director) (by videoconference)

Andrew McLeod (Chief Finance Officer)
Robert Dale (Governance Professional)

ITEM 1A: APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

- Louise Lee and Sahreen Siddiqui.

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.
- Andrew Simmons declared that he had joined the governing body of Ashtree Primary School.

ITEM 1C: MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

- The minutes of the business meeting held on 24 May 2023 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.** With apologies for the delay, a Board effectiveness review survey would be issued after this meeting.
 - 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.** Approval had just been received for the Deed of Variation to the Master Funding Agreement and the individual Supplementary Funding Agreements for the two schools and these were being circulated for signature via DocuSign by Eversheds shortly. Eversheds was also seeking formal confirmation from DfE that the revised Articles had been approved.

- Prepare letter of support for the Ashtree Primary School submission to the Regional Director to join the Hart Schools Trust. **Action complete.** The letter was prepared and submitted.
- Add a risk or risks associated with the proposed Ashtree conversion [to the Risk Register]. **Action complete.** A risk had been added to the risk register.
- Ensure there is a separate agenda item for considering Ashtree conversion risks on the next Audit & Risk Committee agenda. **Action complete.** The Audit & Risk Committee had considered a detailed report on financial due diligence and other risks at its recent meeting and supported the approach taken.
- Add a presentation on the PSHE curriculum to a future Board agenda. **Action complete.** This matter was on the draft agenda plan for the September meeting.
- Update the proposed calendar of meetings for 2023/24 and issue diary appointments. **Action complete.** Diary appointments had been issued.

ITEM 2: TRUST DEVELOPMENT INCLUDING ASHTREE DUE DILIGENCE

- The CEO reported that he was providing considerable leadership support to Ashtree Primary School, helping the headteacher resolve a number of long-standing challenges, including reaching a settlement with a caretaker who would now be leaving the school, creating a development plan to improve standards and developing the senior team. After some initial wariness, staff were responding very positively to the new direction and support.
- The quality of financial information provided by HFL had been poor but the work being carried out by the CFO and Hart Learning Group finance team was addressing this gradually. The estates risk identified via due diligence had been mitigate by dealing with the caretaking situation. The need for boiler replacement was not as urgent as had been perceived. There were risks associated with confidence in the previous school leadership, but time needed to be allowed to see whether these could be overcome. There were risks of in-year departures of children and families who had lost confidence in the school with the worst-case projection being 20 pupils; parental dissatisfaction was a major worry and needed to be addressed. Knowing the future school direction would be major contributor to this. The Trust's Chair had joined the Ashtree governing body and confirmed that there had been a positive reaction to the clear leadership support being given by the Trust CEO.
- It was frustrating and disappointing, therefore, that the Regional Director had made a directed Academy order without naming HST as the Trust to which the school would transfer. This meant that other Trusts could submit expressions of interest and might be chosen. Trustees acknowledged that, having substantially addressed the immediate improvement needs at the school, it would be hugely disappointing not to get the opportunity to take this further.
- Conversations with other primary schools were continuing, but none were at the same stage as with Ashtree. Discussions with Barnwell secondary school were also ongoing. These had been taking place over a number of years, but there was now more interest in conversion and a number of the previous property risks had been resolved. Taking on another secondary school would be a major opportunity for the Trust and would likely change the relationship with the Hart Learning Group as it would be possible to develop a Central Services team for the Trust itself.

Question: *How would sixth form arrangements be affected by taking on Barnwell?* This would be part of any discussion about Barnwell joining the Trust, but was not likely to be a fundamental issue.

Question: *Would taking on Barnwell take the Trust over the 3,000 pupil threshold?* Possibly, though it might also be just below that level.

Question: *Why would taking on Barnwell change the relationship with the Hart Learning Group but not Ashwell?* Because Barnwell already employed several people directly to provide central services and the primary school did not.

- Another discussion with a diocesan trust had been in progress but Trustees agreed that because the school was outside the HST's principal geographical area of focus, and would require considerable senior leadership support, while ultimately HST would probably not be favoured to take the school on, the opportunity should not be accepted.
- The Board congratulated the CEO on the progress being made despite the frustration experienced in respect of Ashtree.
- **The Trust Board welcomed** the progress being made.

ITEM 3: PROPOSED 2023/24 BUDGET

- The proposed budget had been reviewed by both local governing bodies at their recent meetings and was recommended to the Board. The forecast for 2023/24 was for a surplus of £120k.
- Charges for Buccaneers wraparound provision at Roebuck had not been increased at this stage as the school wanted to avoid adding cost on families already facing cost of living pressures. However, the option of doing so during the year needed to be retained as the school's costs were also rising.

Question: *Was the assumption on pay growth a reasonable one and how could this risk be further managed?* The assumptions had been based on guidance from sector bodies, but it was appreciated that this was a significant area of risk if higher pay awards were decided on in future and were unfunded in whole or part. The amounts involved would rapidly exhaust reserves.

Question: *Were staff resources at the right level?* Yes, there were no vacancies and a stable senior leadership team at both TAA and Roebuck; the proposed budget included an assumption that the Deputy Headteacher at TAA would move up the leadership pay scale. The disadvantage of having a stable staff was that it become more expensive over time. Ashtree had cut staff more deeply to achieve a balanced budget and would be challenged by falling rolls – although the decision had been taken to reduce the PAN to a one-and-a-half form entry with the expectation that this would fall further to a one form entry as local demographics saw the number of primary age children decline. The school might be stretched, especially in respect if TAs and midday supervisory staff.

Question: *How much risk existed in respect of utility cost assumptions?* The forecast was based on better monthly tracking of consumption with a small percentage cost assumption year-on-year; no substantial spike in energy costs was expected for 2023/24 (but no decline from current levels either).

Question: *Were there revenue opportunities from lettings?* Some investment in facilities (eg improved changing rooms and an all-weather pitch etc) and in staff (a lettings manager role, for example) would be needed. This might be possible in a larger Trust context.

- **The Trust Board approved** the proposed 2023/24 budget.

ITEM 4: P9 (MAY 2023) MANAGEMENT ACCOUNTS

- The circulated report covered the financial position to the end of May, which was consistent with the previous reports shared with the Board. The position year-to-date remained slightly better than budget, but the full year forecast had been kept at budget, with the expectation that any small additional surplus could be used for additional summer works. The reserves position was significantly improved and cash was strong as well.
- In respect of the potential Ashtree conversion, a draft Balance Sheet had not yet been received.

Question: *Was the difficulty in finalising financial due diligence arising from poor quality data or analysis or both?* Maintained schools followed simpler financial accounting processes, but the quality of analysis provided to the school had been weaker than would have been expected.

Question: *Why were there large month by month fluctuations in utility costs?* The latest total was correct, but because consumption had not been tracked monthly, there were periodic 'catch-ups' in the bills. Readings were now being taken monthly and this anomaly should be removed in future.

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

ITEM 5: HST PERFORMANCE UPDATE

- Vicky Parsey joined the meeting during discussion on this item.
- Both schools would have full intakes in 2023/24 and the TAA Sixth Form would probably have more than 100 students.
- School performance data from primary SATs was now available. 57% of pupils had achieved the combined Y2 SATs outcome (and the reported national average was 59%). It was slightly disappointing to see this gap, but there were also good results as well, with SPAG and Maths higher scores rising to 23% and 25% (from 13% and 18% in 2021/22) respectively. Phonics and Multiplication testing data had also been very good. Ashtree had achieved a combined score of 50%. National data was also showing a decline versus 2021/22. Y6 data was not yet available. A clearer Reading Strategy was required (as anticipated).
- Attendance and behaviour was generally good; both schools had higher attendance than national data; there had been a relatively high number of exclusions this year at TAA, but no additional cases since the previous report. The leadership team was developing proposals for managing more challenging behaviour internally as external support was increasingly hard to obtain.

Question: *Was attendance increasing or declining?* Post-COVID, average attendance levels had fallen below pre-COVID levels. More capacity to support attendance had been put in place for 2023/24.

Question: *Were mental health issues be continuing to be a challenge?* Yes, although term-time holidays were also significantly affecting attendance. Persistent absence was a further issue.

Question: *Were absence levels higher in upper years?* Yes, that was the case. Industrial action was not helpful in encouraging attendance either.

Question: *What was the Stevenage demographic context for pupil numbers?* Primary numbers were currently declining, but secondary numbers would continue to be broadly at current levels for the next few years.

Question: *How had attendance levels at summer examinations been?* Very good. One student effectively refused attendance, and a couple missed a couple of exams.

Question: *What impact had staff development made on performance?* Staff participation in learning and development was very positive. It had ensured that there is strength in depth across both schools.

- Trustees noted that TAA would be participating in the Mission 44 Life Science Academy project. This would provide bursaries for Y9 and Y13 students studying STEM subjects, with around £20k provided by Lewis Hamilton's charity. This was a pilot programme but it was intended to be a five year project. Funds had also been secured to support the same programme at Barnwell.
- A small number of complaints had been received but were all believed to have been resolved at this point.
- Trustees expressed appreciation for the efforts undertaken by teams at both schools and recorded their appreciation for the excellent leadership from the CEO. The Trustees also wished the departing headteacher at Roebuck good luck for her new role in the North West.
- **The Trust Board accepted** the report.

ITEM 6: RISK REGISTER

- The Risk register had been reviewed by the Audit & Risk Committee and both LGBs at their recent meetings. No risks have been closed since the Board's last review, but two had been added. The added risks were:
 - **Risk 6** - That a failure to recruit and retain exceptional staff impacts on each school's ability to meet targets in the schools' development plans. That remaining staff capacity is stretched and results in further absences and resignations.
 - **Risk 13** - CIF Roofing works on A & B Blocks present a risk to the operations of TAA.
- Following discussion at the Audit & Risk Committee, it was proposed to add **Risk 14** ("That current and future senior management support for Ashtree Primary School diverts attention unduly from the Trust's other schools"). There are various mitigations in place for this including the presence of experienced senior and middle leaders in both schools.
- **The Trust Board accepted** the report.

ITEM 7: AUDIT & RISK CHAIR'S REPORT

- A written report from the most recent meeting (22 June 2023) had been circulated. The Committee had considered the latest iteration of the risk register and proposed in future to take a couple at each meeting for more in-depth review including exploration of the mitigations in place. At this meeting, the risk associated with the ongoing roofing works were considered – they included health and safety risks associated with the erection and access to scaffolding, operational risks associated with the availability of classroom and parking facilities, and safeguarding risks (eg in respect of the craftspeople working on site). The mitigations described had all been considered appropriate and proportionate.
- The Committee had also explored the current risks associated with the Ashtree application for conversion and shared the CEO's frustration with the approach being taken by the Regional Director. It would be particularly galling if the work done by HST to begin the turnaround process for Ashtree ended up benefiting another Trust. Members had noted that the local authority was paying for this support which might make it easier for the decision-makers to dismiss our contribution. Trustees recognised that there would be occasional 'bumps in the road' en route to growth and that resilience was key.
- The Committee had been pleased with the positive outcome of the EDI audits at both schools, which indicated that there was a strong commitment to equality and action ongoing. The small number of recommendations was a good sign.
- The Academy Trust Handbook had just been revised; the latest edition had recently been published. It was smaller than the previous edition. The changes and implications for Trust practice would be considered at the next meeting.
- The Trust's Business Manager (Kate Prince) was now joining these meetings 'in attendance' which was helpful for members.
- **The Trust Board accepted** the report.

ITEM 8: LOCAL GOVERNING BODY REPORTS

The Roebuck Academy

- The LGB had said farewell to the headteacher at its last meeting, although Lynsey had not, unfortunately, been able to attend in person. A new Chair (Nadia Hodges) was taking over from the autumn term; she would be asked to encourage more discussion at meetings. Nonetheless, the school was performing strongly and there was good engagement from all governors.

The Thomas Alleyne Academy

- The school had made good progress during the year. Scrutiny and challenge from local governors had been enhanced through participation in regular governor in school mornings at which governors had the chance to speak to staff and students and to develop awareness and understanding of key school issues – including achievement, attendance and progress gaps, pupil premium spending and impact, sixth form arrangements and so on. The current approach was expected to be followed again in 2023/24.
- Three new governors had joined the LGB (although two had also stepped down, including our Trinity College governor). The Chair had held individual governor

conversations with all LGB members (except the latest appointments) which had provided some ideas for further enhancing the effectiveness of the LGB.

- Trustees welcomed both reports – it was really important for progress that both LGBs continued to cultivate and support a culture of enquiry in their schools.
- **The Trust Board accepted** the reports.

ITEM 9: ANY OTHER BUSINESS

- None.

ITEM 10: DATE OF NEXT MEETING

- Wednesday, 27 September 2023, starting at 09.00, in the Conference Room, the Thomas Alleyne Academy, Stevenage and by videoconference (Microsoft Teams).

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Signed as an accurate record: Chair

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Date

ITEM 11: INFORMATION PAPER

Academy Trust Handbook

- The latest edition of the Handbook had just been published and a detailed paper on the changes would go to the next Audit & Risk Committee meeting.
- A change of immediate significance for the Trust is that prior written approval is no longer needed for related party transactions between a Trust and its Sponsor where that Sponsor is an educational establishment - a college, university or school.

THANKS

- The Chair thanked Trustees for their support and commitment during the past twelve months and wished them and the executive team a restful summer break. It was hoped that next year would see the Trust beginning to grow again.

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