



APPROVED MINUTES OF THE

BOARD OF GOVERNORS MEETING

HELD ON WEDNESDAY 16TH DECEMBER 2020

Present: Anna Barnish, Lucy Barrow, Sue Higginson (Principal), Lorraine Jones, Tim Kelly (Chair), Joe McArdle, Phil McKeown, Paul Smith, Jayne Winders, Vix Wrigley

In attendance: Ste Bailey, Assistant Principal – Student Services (minutes 121 to 125)
Christine Carter, Vice Principal – Curriculum
Joe Finneran, Director of Estates
Pooja Furniss, Executive Director of People & Culture
Jade Gibson, Assistant Principal - Quality
Will Jerram, Assistant Principal – MIS
Phillip Jones, Vice Principal – Quality
Nikki Leising, Financial Controller
Sarah Norris, Student Engagement Manager (minutes 115 to 118)
Michael Norton, Deputy Principal
Max Saunderson, Student Union Representative (minutes 115 to 118)
Lesley Venables, Clerk to the Governors

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

84 Apologies for absence were received from Gary Doyle, Richard Mawdsley and Lisa Buxton. It was noted that, due to an administrative error, Ian Parkinson and Paul Askew had been omitted from the invitation to attend this meeting. The Clerk would follow this up and the attendance records for these individuals would include an appropriate commentary.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

85 The following interests were declared:

- Lucy Barrow - on secondment from Wirral Council to the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority.
- Tim Kelly - any matters relating to the Merseyside Pension Fund.
- Phil McKeown - in respect to his position as a partner of a local legal firm.
- Paul Smith - spouse is employed at the College and he is employed by Wirral Council.

APPOINTMENT OF STUDENT GOVERNOR

86 **Resolved** That Lisa Buxton be appointed as a student governor until 31st July 2021.

PRINCIPAL'S UPDATE

87 The Principal gave a verbal update on recent College activities. Governors noted that it had continued to exceed its enrolment targets and, as a result, the Senior Leadership Team would be formulating proposals as to how the growth in learner numbers would be accommodated.

88 There had been a total of 100 cases of COVID-19 amongst students and staff, but none of these had been caused directly through contact at the College. Governors noted that the guidance issued by the Department for Education changed on a regular basis and this had meant a significant increase in workload for all staff, but particularly for the Health & Safety and Estates teams. All staff and students had been provided with detailed training on expectations and behaviours in relation to COVID-19 measures.

89 A total of 70 additional 16-18 year olds had been enrolled in September, compared to 2019/2020. This was partly due to demographic changes in the locality but was also attributable to the College's reputation as a high-quality provider of education and training. The ESFA's lagged funding model meant that the College would not receive the income associated with these learners until 2021/2022.

90 Managers were also predicting an increase in adult student numbers, especially against the background of significant redundancies in sectors such as leisure and hospitality, together with retraining opportunities through Government-funded programmes.

91 The Principal reported that the College's business support functions had been restructured to meet the needs of learners with an emphasis on digital resources and delivery models. This would be effective from January 2021 and it was anticipated that the amendments would be accomplished without any compulsory redundancies.

92 Staff had adapted well to the implementation of blended learning for most courses. Activities that were previously undertaken face-to-face, such as learning walks, had been adapted to occur online, with a high degree of success and positive feedback from learners.

93 Governors received a progress report on the current range of capital projects. All the windows had been replaced at the Conway Park Campus, which should improve energy efficiency. Discussions with the local authority on the lease of the Hamilton Square building had now concluded and work had already commenced on its refurbishment. The Principal had led a bid to the national Towns Fund for improvements to the centre of Birkenhead, a decision on which was due on 8th January 2021.

94 COVID-19 testing at the College would commence in January 2021, in line with the latest Government guidance. The Merseyside Colleges' Association (of which the College was a member) was examining whether it would be possible to deliver this service through a partner organisation such as the army.

95 There had, as yet, been no confirmation from the Department for Education as to whether the summer examinations would continue as planned or would be replaced by centre assessed grades as in 2019/2020.

96 The Principal felt that the Autumn Term had been extremely challenging and recognised the outstanding contribution of the staff in supporting learners and meeting the needs of the organisation. Three days of training had been planned for the end of term, with a distinct focus on health and well-being.

SHARING RECENT SUCCESSES

97 The Board received the routine report on the College's recent successes. Governors commended the vast range of curricular and extra-curricular activities involving staff and students, together with the high level of positive coverage on social media.

98 Of particular note was the Principal's blog that had been published in the TES regarding the preparation by catering students and staff of meals for the homeless using the facilities of the Birches Restaurant. This activity had provided valuable opportunities for learners to give back to the local community and become aware of the impact of their efforts on the lives of others.

99 Governors were reminded that 68% of the College's students were from areas of deprivation within the Borough. Food hampers had been distributed to local families who received free school meals, funded by the local authority and a charity with which the College was involved. Staff had recently held an online charity auction and raised £2.5K for Clatterbridge Hospital and department teams continued to work in the community.

100 On behalf of the Board the Chair congratulated the staff for their efforts, which had provided stability and support for learners, contributed to the well-being of the local community and an increase in 16-18 learner numbers for 2020/2021. Governors agreed that the flexibility and creativity shown by staff and students was exemplary.

SELF-ASSESSMENT REPORT (SAR) 2019/2020 & QUALITY IMPROVEMENT PLAN (QIP) 2020/2021

101 The Vice-Principal (Quality) presented the Self-Assessment Report (SAR) for 2019/2020 and the Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) for 2020/2021.

102 The SAR aligned closely with the levels of performance reported to the Board at previous meetings. The process for preparing the SAR and QIP had been amended this year in view of the COVID-19 restrictions. The two Vice-Principals and Assistant Principal (Quality) had met individually with each curriculum manager and used the Ofsted Education Inspection Framework as a basis, resulting in a number of strengths and areas for improvement. The latter would be monitored throughout the academic year by the Quality & Standards Scrutiny Committee.

103 All areas had been graded as 'Good', with the exception of High Needs provision which had been judged as 'Outstanding' The Overall Effectiveness of the College was graded a 'Good', however, the Assistant Principal – Quality explained that it was felt to be at the high end of the spectrum.

104 The SAR also included the 2019/2020 Student Outcomes data (which had been reviewed by the QSS Committee at 14th October 2020 meeting) to support each grade. The Board noted that evidence gathered as part of the SAR process indicated that students set very high expectations of themselves.

105 It was felt that the results for English and Maths were good when considered against the relatively low starting point.

106 **Resolved** That the SAR for 2019/2020 and the QIP for 2020/2021 be approved.

BALANCED SCORECARD

107 The Deputy Principal presented the latest version of the Balanced Scorecard.

108 The College was under-performing against its target for Apprenticeship Income (£1.03m compared to £1.3m). It was agreed that a detailed report would be presented to the next meeting of the Quality & Standards Scrutiny Committee, following a review of this area by senior management.

109 The ESFA AEB funding for out of area learners was below the anticipated profile. Governors noted that this income stream was extremely inflexible and achievement of the target was being affected by the reduction in the number of learners travelling into the locality as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

110 A threshold of 68% of colleges' allocations for 2019/2020 has been set by the ESFA, below which there would be clawback. The College had successfully appealed against this decision, having submitted a full business case to explain the under-performance. Any future difficulties may have a longer-term impact on levels of funding allocated under this stream by the ESFA.

111 Commercial income levels had reduced due to COVID-19 and this would affect the pay to income ratio reported in the management accounts.

112 The Principal reported that the College was working with an organisation called "Wirral Change", which promoted a new 'kitemark' for educational organisations providing training to the refugees from BAME backgrounds. It had been suggested that the Merseyside Colleges' Association should review whether the city should become a "region of sanctuary".

113 Attendance levels were good and compared well to the rest of the FE sector. Management commented that learners were both present and engaged in their studies, which was a considerable achievement for those with a difficult home environment.

114 The College's quality processes had been adapted to cover new remote ways of delivery. It was now possible for managers to drop into classes and observe members of staff, which also enabled them to keep up-to-date with good teaching practice and maintain their skills. Monthly meetings of teaching staff took place to share such strategies.

Max Sauderson and Sarah Norris joined the meeting.

115 The newly-appointed Student Union President presented the exception report on Student Voice (C3). Governors were advised of a multitude of community-based activities being promoted and implemented by students and campaigns in which learners were actively involved, such as anti-knife crime and mental health support during the pandemic.

116 The Head of Student Engagement provided an update on student enrichment activities during the Autumn Term (C2). All course representatives had now received training on their roles and had met with the Chair of the Board and the Principal. Mental health support continued to be a key focus and the College was working in partnership with organisations such as Kooth and promoting events such as International Mens' Health Day.

117 Forthcoming events were advertised to the student cohort through a dedicated web/intranet page. It was noted that the type and quality of student talks had actually increased as a result of COVID-19 and holding these sessions remotely, with access to global figures such as NASA astronauts.

118 A governor asked whether any clubs had been established for students. The Head of Student Engagement responded that this process was underway and a small number of clubs would be set up through the Student Union to improve levels of participation.

Sarah Norris and Max Saunderson left the meeting at this point.

119 In relation to Balanced Scorecard D1 on progress against the Strategic Plan, the Principal reported that she was leading the Borough's bid to the Towns Fund on future skills provision. WMB Council had been invited to present proposals for the regeneration of Birkenhead town centre to the Student Council to seek feedback from potential users of the services being planned. On behalf of WMBC Paul Smith thanked the Principal and Deputy Principal for their outstanding work in preparing the Towns Fund submission.

120 Governors also received information on the College's COVID-19 Strategy and Health & Safety.

Ste Bailey joined the meeting for this item.

EQUALITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION (EDI)

121 The Assistant Principal (Student Services) presented the closedown of the 2019/2020 Equality, Diversity and Inclusion action plan and provided the Standards and Actions for Implementation for 2020/2021. Both documents had been reviewed recently by the College's EDI Committee at which the Chair was the governor representative to provide an additional layer of scrutiny.

122 A revised EDI Policy was submitted for implementation in 2020/2021.

123 A governor asked whether the work undertaken to combat social isolation was recognised in the Action Plan and how the College was continuing to support disadvantaged groups under the current blended delivery model. The Assistant Principal responded that the whole student support system had been adapted to the new way of working, using Teams or telephone calls to support individual learners on a regular basis. Counselling services were provided remotely and there were extensive links with partner organisations in the public and voluntary sectors.

124 Staff were aiming to improve students' own resilience to cope with unexpected issues, particularly during the Christmas period, and against the background of the pandemic.

- 125 **Resolved**
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| 1 | That the EDI Action Plan for 2020/2021 be approved |
| 2 | That the Equality & Diversity Policy for 2020/2021 be approved |

Ste Bailey left the meeting at this point.

AUDIT COMMITTEE

Meeting Held on 25th November 2020

126 The Board received for information the minutes from the Audit Committee meeting held on 25th November 2020.

127 The Head of Finance presented the Financial Statements for 2019/2020 and the External Auditor's Letters of Representation, which had been previously reviewed by the Audit Committee.

128 Governors noted that the College had made an operating surplus of £833K in 2019/2020 subject to an overall pensions liability of £826K. The financial and growth targets had been met or exceeded and the College's financial position continued to be graded as 'Good, which compared favourably to many others in the FE sector.

129 The Audit Committee had recommended the approval of the Financial Statements for 2019/2020 and the External Auditor's Letters of representation for both the Financial Statements Audit and Regularity Audit.

130 The Board also received for information the Audit Committee's Annual Report for 2019/2020, which summarised the work of the Committee and concluded that the Committee had discharged its responsibilities in accordance to the Terms of Reference.

131 **Resolved** That the Financial Statements and the Letters of Representation for both the Financial Statements Audit and the Regularity Audit for 2019/2020 be approved and signed by the Chair and the Principal and be forwarded to the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA).

MANAGEMENT ACCOUNTS

132 The Head of Finance presented the Management Accounts as at 31st October 2020. The College continued to be in a positive financial position and financial health remained at the lowest boundary within the category of 'Outstanding.'

133 Governors queried how likely it would be for the College to enter the 'Good' category due to the reductions in income reported under an earlier agenda item. The Deputy Principal felt that this was possible, but not inevitable, and advised that approximately one third of FE colleges were in financial difficulty.

134 The College was performing well both in terms of its financial stability and quality indicators, however, the Board could opt to moderate the financial health grading to 'Good' rather than 'Outstanding'. Governors agreed that 'Good' was a truer reflection of the situation, rather than the artificial calculation provided by the ESFA methodology. The College could not be considered as truly 'Outstanding' unless it made a substantial profit or surplus.

RISK MANAGEMENT

135 Governors received the latest Risk Register and were advised that no new risks had been added and no adjustments had been made to the scoring since the last meeting. The Audit Committee would continue to monitor to the risk register in detail.

136 Following his attendance at a recent Association of Colleges event, the Chair suggested that the Register should include more details on mitigations against cyber crime. The Deputy Principal responded that this was part of the Internal Auditor's work on key financial controls and regular reviews indicated that the College's processes in this area were suitable robust. However, it was agreed that a separate risk would be incorporated in the Register and that cyber-crime would be reviewed specifically by the Internal Auditors.

Governors also requested that management check whether the College's current insurance policy provided sufficient cover.

HEALTH & SAFETY UPDATE – TERM 1

137 The Director of Estates presented an update on the Health & Safety Risk Register for Term 1, with no significant issues to report.

HEALTH & SAFETY POLICY

138 Governors received a draft Health & Safety Policy for 2020/2021. This had been updated to include COVID-19 measures.

139 **Resolved** That the updated Health & Safety Policy for 2020/2021 be approved.

CHAIR'S REPORT

140 The Board received for information a report on the Chair's activities since the October 2020 meeting.


MINUTES FROM PREVIOUS MEETING

BOARD MINUTES – 28TH OCTOBER 2020

141 **Resolved** That the minutes of the meeting held on 28th October 2020 be approved As a correct record and signed by the Chair.

142 Governors received a progress report on the actions identified at the previous meeting.

DATE OF NEXT MEETING – Wednesday 17th March 2021

Signed: 
Chair

Date: 17th March 2021