



The Active Learning Trust
ACTIVE LEARNERS • ACTIVE LEADERS • ACTIVE CITIZENS

**MEETING OF THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS
OF THE ACTIVE LEARNING TRUST
held on Thursday 30th March 2023
1pm via online Video-link**

MINUTES

Trustees & Members
Present:

Mr J. Beswick
Mrs J. Cutchey
Mrs L. Holzer

Mr M. Cole
Mr V. Daniels
Mr. B. Stickleby

Officers Present:

Mrs K. Jarvis (clerk)

Invited Guests:

Mr S. Harper

THE KEY DECISIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE MEETING ARE SUMMARISED BELOW	
DECISION	Proposed re-structure of Committees approved
DECISION	Interim Chair delegated authority to appoint committee members pending Board ratification
DECISION	Board agreed to meet monthly for the remainder of the academic year
DECISION	Adopted Discretionary Leave Policy

ACTION POINTS

Agenda Item	Who?	Action	Timeline
2	SH	Review Register of Interests against Audit Management Letter	Next Mtg
3.5.2	SH	Rewrite Terms of Reference for Committees	Next Mtg
4.3	LH	Meet with CP to discuss Audit Programme (inc Scopes of Work)	ASAP
4.3	LH	Risk Register Review	July 2023
6	LH	Circulate Attendance & Exclusion guidance for schools to Trustees	ASAP
10	LH	Liaise with CP re format of Management Accounts	ASAP
13	SH	Review dates for future meetings	ASAP

MINUTES

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE, NOTICE & QUORUM

1.1. Apologies for absence had been received prior to the meeting from Mr P. Dabrowa.

1.2. Apologies were accepted.

1.3. Mrs Jarvis informed the Board of the resignation of Mrs Rosie Weaver due to ill health. She also informed the Board that Ms Lesley Adams will be retiring from her role as a Member on 31st March 2023. Trustees asked that the contribution of both be noted on record. Letters of thanks have been written.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

2.1. No new interests were declared for items on the agenda.

2.2. Mr Harper stated that, in light of the fact that it has been a recurring item on the Audit Management Letter, he would be reviewing the Register of Interests in the coming weeks.

3. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING HELD ON 9TH FEBRUARY 2023

3.1. The minutes of the meeting held on 9th February were agreed as a true record.

3.2. Matters Arising:

5.1. Mrs Holzer explained that behaviour policies in schools continue to be audited across the Trust. She added that resulting work will ensure resilience and consistency in policy and practise.

5.2. Mr Harper will be rewriting the committee terms of reference (should approval for the committees to be restructured be confirmed – item 7.4)

5.12. Information on coasting schools will be provided to Trustees when available.

4. BOARD COMMITTEES

4.1. Trustees confirmed that they had received and read the minutes provided. Mr Daniels invited Chairs of the Committees to give verbal updates.

4.2. Mr Sitckley reported on the work of the Finance Committee. He informed the Board of concerns surrounding the capital works plan, resulting in some decisions being deferred pending review. He spoke of the plans to link financial risk to educational risk and of recategorizing schools at risk against investment.

4.3. Mr Beswick informed the board that the last meeting of the Audit Committee was not quorate, however good discussions were held. A main concern for Mr Beswick is how the role of internal audit would be covered now that the Trust's Internal Auditor has resigned, and the interim plan presented to the committee was for external auditors to carry out the internal function. Mr Beswick expressed his concern that the interim measures would be conducted remotely, stating that this would not give him personally sufficient assurances and confidence that evidence had been seen.

Mr Daniels stated that an overall review of central and school finances is needed, and this would start with an office-based audit, which could be extended based on initial findings.. He noted that the Trust need to better focus on priority areas such as the Scheme of Delegation, Capital Works Expenditure, Management Accounts, Procurement and Cash Flow forecasting. The procurement process for this work will be run in the normal way by the Head Office team. Mr Stickley agreed that this is a sensible way forward.

Following a question from Mr Cole, it was confirmed that the aim would be to create consistency on reporting and processes across all schools. It is considered that there is too much differation at present, and Trustees felt that they needed greater assurance on what was happening financially on the ground.

Mr Harper reminded Trustees that the wider internal audit programme is not solely financial. He added that it is sensible for the work to form part of the internal assurance programme to allow Trustees to consider what the risks are. Mr Beswick agreed, adding that this links with the model for the Audit Committee to move to an Audit and Risk Committee, so that the areas are dovetailed.

Mrs Holzer stated that the Internal Audit Programme is behind due to the changes. In line with the requirement for a minimum of three audits, she suggested the following audits be completed:

- Financial – systems, processes and ways forward
- GDPR –including Cyber Security by a specialist company
- Safeguarding – which has already started

Mr Daniels asked about the Trust Risk Register. Mr Holzer reported that the current register was under extensive review as there are issues over consistency and compliance. Key risks, however, have been identified and Trustees have been made aware of them.

Mrs Holzer stated that she will meet with Mr Paskell to explain the way forward, which will involve third party procurement and appointment, with appropriate scopes of work written and agreed. These will be sent to Trustees for consideration.

Mr Beswick updated Trustees on other matters discussed at the last Audit Committee meeting. These were:

- The internal audit programme was not able to be discussed properly as six items had been missed out. Trustees have now received the full programme.
- A policy for Discretionary Leave of Absence was presented, but Trustees felt that the Audit Committee was not the appropriate place for a meaningful discussion to take place. Trustees fell that Group HR needed to be confident that the policy was compliant in all respect, and noted that it had yet to be presented to Unions..
- Mr Beswick suggested that rather than update the Risk Register, it should be overhauled. Mrs Holzer confirmed that this was already being done.

4.4. Mrs Cutchey stated that the Quality of Education Committee meeting was a good meeting, with Trustees being given a clear picture of how schools are performing and progressing. All schools have had a review, and the subsequent reports are giving the committee confidence to provide the right amount of challenge.

5. CHAIR'S REPORT

Mr Daniels reported that he had not been called to approve any Chair's Actions since the last meeting.

5.1. Trustees confirmed they had read the content of a letter from the Regional Director, that expressed concerns over some of the schools in Trust. Mr Daniels asked for comments. Mr Beswick stated that he was surprised to see the letter as he understood there had been few communications from the Regional Director in the past. Mrs Holzer responded that she had never had any concerns of this nature, and had always been able to contact the RD when required. She added that the letter follows a standard meeting that the RD's office undertake with each Trust that have vulnerable schools and, since joining ALT, she has not found communication with the RD's office difficult.

Mr Daniels stated that he has spoken to the Department of Education and has been able to contact them at any time. He added that he does not anticipate any problems of this nature going forward, as the DfE are keen to help ALT to succeed.

Mr Beswick said that he felt reassured by the messages from Mr Daniels and Mrs Holzer.

5.2. Mr Daniels informed Trustees that the SMRSA return has been submitted to the DfE by the Executive, so the item was to note only. He stated that in future years this return of financial assurances should be brought to the Board before it is submitted.

6. CEOs REPORT

After confirming that all present had had the opportunity to review the CEO report, Mr Daniels invited Trustees to ask questions at relevant points.

Mrs Holzer opened by explaining that the report format was new to the Board, and was based on areas within the recovery plan, which was on track. She highlighted:

- Data available is accurate.
- Safeguarding audits are ongoing, with external verification taking place.
- The three strategic areas were explained:
 - Area 1: Strategy & Governance
 - Area 2: Core Business – Education
 - Area 3: Enabling Operations
- Clarification was sought on some acronyms – these were provided.
- The report data supports assurance of various elements of the 'golden thread' strands.

Mrs Cutchey asked how many schools have in-house alternative provision. Mrs Holzer explained that most schools have some form of AP, but it is not consistent. She added that an in-depth audit of AP will take place, with the aim of regulating provision for vulnerable students.

Mr Stickley asked for a further explanation around exclusion data, as he recognised that some schools have a high level of suspensions. Mrs Holzer agreed and pointed out the correlation between schools with high levels of exclusions and schools of concern. She also explained the inconsistent system of BAIP in Cambridgeshire. Mrs Holzer informed Trustees that she had met with all heads that have shown vulnerability in this area and explained the plans put in place to reduce number of suspensions alongside reducing the levels of student absence. She added that Trustees will start to see a downward trend in future reports.

Mr Beswick asked why the exclusion data is given in fractions. Mrs Holzer agreed that percentages would be easier to interpret, but the data provided is in its most accurate form at present.

Mr Beswick asked why the attendance data for Reydon is not considered a risk. Mrs Holzer explained that it is still below the national average, and the national average has been used as a defining factor starting point. This will change as national averages are met and inspirational targets are set. Mrs Holzer stated that she hoped to see a shift in attendance data towards the end of the Autumn term.

Mr Beswick asked about Persistent Absence (PA) data. Mrs Holzer explained the data and how it is monitored across the Trust. She also informed Trustees of the actions being taken to drive improvement and consistency. Measures include targets, letters, whole school initiatives, minibuses, improved systems and tracking and legal intervention such as penalty notices, and Family Workers work with families of concern. Mrs Holzer agreed to circulate a guidance paper recently distributed to schools that outlined the measures in available for attendance and exclusions.

Mr Cole noted that the current number of learners on roll at some Academies was declining. He asked if any work had been done on why numbers are dropping. Mrs Holzer replied that nationally pupil numbers are declining. She added that admission numbers for September 2023 should be available for the next meeting. Mr Stickley raised a question about the viability of sixth forms. Mrs Holzer agreed that this should be considered and the same question should be asked of Nurseries. This will form part of longer-term work.

Mrs Cutchey praised the new reporting format and suggested that a similar version be used for LGBs, which would ensure accurate, consistent information is provided to all areas of governance. Mrs Holzer replied that a template for headteacher reporting is already being drafted, and will allow LGBs to deeper dive at school level. She reported that governor training has taken place during the Spring term on Attendance, Exclusions and Safeguarding – particularly on how to monitor from a governor perspective.

Mrs Cutchey asked how confident Mrs Holzer was that schools listed as 'medium risk' will be able to rapidly improve. Mrs Holzer replied that she was confident of all listed, with concerns for Neale-Wade Academy, which is being heavily supported. Regular reviews are supporting this view. Mrs Cutchey commented that the Albert Pye School was assessed as Requires Improvement, when the last inspection was graded as Outstanding. She stated that she realised it had been ten years since the Outstanding inspection outcome, but asked if a drop in grading would be considered a reputational risk. Mrs Holzer stated that, because of the length of time since the last inspection, the risk for this school is less than the risk for schools that have been graded double RI. However, she also gave details of the support package in place.

Mr Cole stated that he was pleased to see the appendix listing areas for the Trust Improvement Plan as on track. He asked if there was an end date, or target date for areas to be finalised. Mrs Holzer agreed to add target dates to future updates. Mr Daniels supported the 'on-track' assessment, adding that much work has already been completed to ensure pupils are safe. Mrs Holzer picked up this point by explaining that each school has been risk assessed since the Trust Safeguarding Lead joined the central team in November 2022, and dip testing of systems continues alongside other work to ensure schools are safe and compliant. Schools are monitored fortnightly. Mrs Holzer added that an intensive project to improve recording through the SCR Tracker system continues, with internal experts being seconded from schools to support safer recruitment. Significant risks are referred to the Education Team and systems are securer now, with a true picture being available in all schools.

Mrs Holzer informed Trustees that a HMI monitoring visit has been carried out at Burrowmoor Primary School. Whilst unable to share details prior to the report being

published, Mrs Holzer did report that the visit was positive. Full feedback will form part of the CEO Report at the next meeting.

Mr Daniels commented on the detail within the report, asking if it is expected that the Quality of Education Committee will have access to Safeguarding and Standards reports. Mrs Holzer confirmed that it is the expectation that reports will be scrutinised at committee level, with the full Board receiving a summative level of information going forward. However, she stated that all Trustees will receive detailed information in the interim period.

Mr Daniels asked for assurance on the number of complaints being reported. Mrs Holzer replied that the complaints listed are ones received by the Central Office, and showed a clear correlation with schools of concern. She added that the process of recording complaints at school level is being reviewed.

Mrs Holzer was thanked for the content of her report, and Trustees were pleased to note the work being carried out across the Trust.

7. GOVERNANCE

Mr Harper was invited to take Trustees through the key points of his report, which had been distributed prior to the meeting.

Composition of the Board. Due to resignations, it is necessary to recruit new Trustees. A skills audit has been carried out to assess areas of vulnerability. Up to four new Trustees will be sought, and NuRole have been recruited to assist in the recruitment process.

Mr Beswick suggested that expertise should be sought for IT and data.

The Board noted the progress on the composition of the Trust Board and Trustee recruitment.

Committee Structure. The following committee structure was proposed. The committees will form the first level of scrutiny and, once more Trustees are on board, will allow separation of duties.

Standards Committee – Interim Chair to be Mrs Cutchey
Committee to merge previous Quality of Education and Safeguarding Committees.

Resources Committee – Interim Chair to be Mr Stickley
Committee to cover Previous Finance and Employment, Performance & Reward Committees, plus premises, capital and operational matters.

Audit & Risk Committee – interim Chair to be Mr Beswick
Committee to be refocused to cover internal and external audit, Compliance, GDPR and Risk Registers.

Pay & Performance Committee
Committee to be established when necessary.

The report proposed that the Board give delegated authority to the Interim Chair of the Trust Board to make appointments to committees, subject to ratification of the Board itself. Mr Cole suggested that the delegation should be temporary due to the current circumstances and asked whether the authority to appoint would include members co-opted

to committees. Mr Harper agreed that it would be a temporary arrangement, and stated that co-option to committees would normally remain a matter for the committee members.

Trustees present agreed unanimously that the proposed Committee Structure be adopted, and the Interim Chair be delegated authority to appoint to committees, subject to ratification by the Board.

Board Calendar. The report proposed that Trustees meet more regularly for the remainder of the academic year. Trustees will be asked to confirm their availability for both Board and committee dates (once committee membership has been confirmed). Mr Harper stated that he is conscious that Trustees are volunteers, and a cycle of business will be considered against availability. There will be a clear schedule for the next academic year.

Trustees confirmed their willingness to meet more regularly as required, and asked that dates be circulated as soon as possible.

Members. Mr Harper reminded Trustees that the role of Members is to oversee the governance of the Trust. A Members meeting has been planned for mid-April to review understanding of the role and separate the duties of Members and Trustees. Additional Members will be recruited.

Further Work. Mr Harper explained the plans outlined in an appendix to his report. He explained that these are constantly changing, but areas listed are a clear schedule of work for the next few weeks. He added that quality assurance will be reported.

Mr Daniels asked that Trustees agree to implement and support all areas within the report. This was agreed.

8. WELL-BEING OF HEADTEACHERS & SENIOR STAFF

Mr Daniels explained that he had asked for this item to be on the agenda considering recent media coverage, to establish reassurances on how the Trust manages and supports staff and senior leadership. Mrs Holzer outlined support in place, stating that it is considered and consistent:

- Three-weekly meetings are held with headteachers – feedback is good, with particular emphasis on stronger lines of communication, openness and transparency.
- Review outcomes are reported with care and consideration before and after reports are issued, and in a supportive team approach.
- Connecting language is used e.g. “we”.
- Wrap around the school teams are in place for vulnerable schools.
- An annual well-being survey is planned as part of the Trust People Strategy.
- Reports on change will be available for Trustees to monitor.
- Headteachers leaving at Easter have been supported through the process by internal and external colleagues.
- Benefit packages such as BUPA and mental health support are offered to key personnel.

Trustees reported that they felt reassured by the level of support being afforded to staff.

9. SCHOOLS BEING RE-BROKERED

9.1. Mrs Holzer reported that the transfer of Littleport & East Cambs Academy is going ahead with the aim of a transfer date of 1st September 2023. Complications regarding the premises and campus are being worked through with the help of an external project manager. Mrs Holzer thanked Mr D’Cunha for leading this project.

10. MANAGEMENT ACCOUNTS

Mr Daniels explained that the reports presented had been discussed at the Finance Meeting held on 27th March 2023, but the Trustees, as a full Board, retained the overview of the Trust’s Management Accounts. Mrs Holzer stated that she will liaise with the Finance Team and ensure a complete and transparent report is presented in the future.

11. IDENTIFIED RISKS

Mrs Holzer reminded Trustees that risks had been identified within her report. She highlighted the two main areas of risk as being the Audit Plan, and the Risk Register itself. She reassured Trustees that both items are of a high priority in the Summer Term Trust Improvement Plan.

12. POLICIES & STATUTORY DOCUMENTS

- A) Audit Programme.** Mrs Holzer reminded Trustees that she had been allocated an action under item 3 to revise the audit programme and liaise with Mr Paskell.
- B) Discretionary Leave Policy.** Mr Stickley stated that he felt the policy made sense with a consistency of application. Mrs Cutchey commented that the ‘specific number of days’ listed might be considered as a target by some staff. It was agreed that Mrs Hammond should be asked to reconsider the wording on this, and agree any changes with the CEO. It was confirmed that the policy will now be put before trade union colleagues.

Trustees agreed to adopt the Trust Policy for Discretionary Leave

13. TIME & DATE OF FUTURE MEETINGS

As agreed under item 7, a revised schedule will be circulated when available.

14. ANY OTHER URGENT BUSINESS

No other urgent business was raised.