

PART ONE MINUTES

Meeting of the Trust Board of The Learning Partnership

Held on Thursday 18th December 2025 at 9:30 am

Venue – Crewe UTC, [45 Meredith Street, Crewe CW1 2PZ](#)

Trustees present:

Mr David Wootton CBE DL (DW)-Chair
 Mr Andrew Pear DL (AP)-joined at 9:45 am, left at 12:55 pm
 Dr Martin Ashcroft (MA)-left at 1:40 pm
 Mrs Helen Ranson (HR)-left at 1:50 pm
 Mr Robin McCluney (RMC)- left at 1:50 pm

Mr John Clough
 Mr Bob Armstrong OBE (BA)
 Mr Simon Kidwell (SK)- left at 1:50 pm
 Dame Kathy August (KA)

Apologies

Sean Houlston

In attendance

Mr Dan Thomas (DTh)-CEO
 Mr David Twambley (DTw)-DCEO-Operations

 Ms Kate Baddeley (KB)-DCEO-Education
 Dr Allan Howells (AH)-Director of Quality
 Mrs Margaret Cheshire, potential new Trustee, observing
 Mr Jon Dudley, Dains Audit Partners-left after item 7
 Mrs Sue Pomeroy, clerk

Agenda Item	Action
<p>1. Discussion regarding behaviours and what this means for Schools, Central Services, Governors and Trustees</p> <p>Purpose of Session This session aims to close the loop on previous work around revising the Trust’s mission, vision, values, and associated behaviours, ensuring alignment across governance and operational levels.</p> <p>Mission and Vision The Trust’s mission was updated to: ‘Transforming communities through education’, emphasising the impact on local communities through high-quality education. The approach focuses on place-based education, tailoring strategies to the needs of individual communities rather than applying a uniform model across all schools.</p> <p>Core Values Trustees previously agreed on three core values: Ambition Inclusion Opportunity</p> <p>Behaviours Linked to Values Behaviours were developed collaboratively with headteachers and central teams to ensure they are embedded in daily practice. Examples include: Ambition: High-quality target setting for every student, enhanced careers education, mentoring, bespoke pathways, and curriculum development to raise aspirations.</p>	

<p>Inclusion: Strengthened SEND provision, disadvantaged strategy, improved attendance, EAL support, and community engagement projects (e.g., White Ribbon initiative).</p> <p>Opportunity: Expanded personal development curriculum, employer engagement projects, parental involvement, and initiatives showcasing local career opportunities (e.g., engineering project linked to Welsh Railways anniversary).</p> <p><i>AP arrived at 9:45 am.</i></p> <p>Governance Perspective</p> <p>Trustees reflected on how these behaviours apply to their own role and the importance of modelling them through governance practice. Discussion included aligning behaviours with the Code of Conduct and considering whether revisions are needed to reinforce cultural expectations. Trustees highlighted the challenge of maintaining strategic oversight while ensuring confidence in operational delivery, given the size of the Trust.</p> <p>Key Challenges Raised</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The difficulty for trustees in translating behaviours into practical governance actions without overstepping into operational matters. • The need for better triangulation of information to assure trustees that agreed behaviours and values are being implemented effectively. • The importance of bridging the gap between strategic oversight and operational reality to avoid disconnect. <p>Agreed Actions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review and Simplify Code of Conduct: Remove statutory and generic content; focus on cultural aspects and behaviours that trustees should model. Ensure clarity on collective responsibility and expectations for governance conduct. (Review the revised Code of Conduct at the next meeting of the Trust Board in March 2026) • Develop Clear Dashboards and Targets: Provide trustees with high-level KPIs and progress updates at every board meeting to assure alignment with strategic priorities. Benchmark data across schools and report on progress toward agreed targets (e.g., attainment, inclusion metrics). • Consider the Introduction of a Closed Pre-Board Discussion Session: Chair and CEO to consider whether we allocate 20 minutes at the start of future board meetings for a trustees-only discussion with the CEO to raise strategic issues and strengthen board culture. • Operational Review: Conduct a review of operational structures and delegation to ensure alignment with governance expectations and address identified gaps. <p>2. Welcome and apologies</p> <p>The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting. Apologies were received and accepted from Sean Houlston. Sean has recently been appointed to the board and was unable to attend today's meeting due to personal circumstances. The Chair also welcomed Maragret Cheshire to the meeting, who is considering joining the Trust Board and was attending the meeting as an observer. Margaret outlined her background; she has worked in a variety of HR roles and has carried out charity work. She is particularly interested in community, social mobility and the role of schools.</p> <p>3. Declarations and confirmations</p> <p>There were no declarations of interest made concerning the items on the agenda.</p> <p>4. Governance Matters</p> <p>a) Trustee recruitment:</p>	<p>AH/Governance Committee</p> <p>DTh</p> <p>DW/ DTh</p>
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<p>DW informed Trustees that it has been challenging to recruit suitable new Trustees. A skills matrix has been used to identify any gaps, and potential new Trustees have been approached.</p> <p>b) Appointment of Member: Sharon Dempsey has been appointed as a new Member of the Trust to replace Vic Croxson who is resigning with effect from 31st January 2026. DW expressed the Board’s thanks and best wishes to Vic Croxson.</p> <p>5. Minutes of the previous meeting</p> <p>a. Trustees reviewed the part 1 minutes from the previous meeting held on 2nd October 2025. Resolved: Trustees approved the part 1 minutes as a correct record of the meeting.</p> <p>b. Trustees reviewed the part 2 minutes from the previous meeting held on 2nd October 2025. Resolved: Trustees approved the part 2 minutes as a correct record of the meeting.</p> <p>c. Matters arising The Chair reviewed the action log and noted that he had written to Cheshire East regarding special needs provision at DPS. DTh added that he is a member of the development board with Cheshire East and has been able to progress some issues. It was confirmed that all other actions from the previous meeting had been met or would be addressed on this agenda.</p> <p>6. Chair’s Report The Chair reported that there were no actions to note since the last meeting of the Trust Board. He had been involved in KIT’s, performance management and discussions around the proposed operational review.</p>	
<p>7. Financial Statements and Audit Findings Report</p> <p>Audit Findings Overview The Audit and Risk Committee had received a presentation from Louise Clark (Senior Audit Manager at Dains) and had scrutinised the financial statements and audit findings at their meeting on 09.12.25. RM reported that it was a clean audit with no significant issues raised. Jon Dudley, the external auditor, presented the high-level findings of the financial statements audit. The audit was completed in line with the agreed plan, and a clean opinion is expected on both the financial statements and regularity. No significant issues were identified.</p> <p>Key Points Reported</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Trust incurred an in-year deficit of approximately £1 million, primarily due to strategic investment in schools and cost pressures. • Closing reserves stand at £200,000, following a transfer between unrestricted and restricted funds to present a clear position. • Forecasts indicate a surplus over the next three years, with reserves projected to be rebuilt to over £2 million. Dains are satisfied in terms of the “going concern” assessments of the accounts and there is no modification in the audit report. • Cash flow remains robust, with a minimum projected cash balance of £600,000 through April 2026. • Pension liabilities have significantly reduced, with the Cheshire East scheme now in surplus; however, accounting standards prevent recognition of the full asset. • Two medium-level internal control issues were noted: missing receipts for staff expenses at one school and purchase authorisation not aligning with the Scheme of Delegation. Both issues have been addressed. • Several low-level audit points were noted, mainly relating to HR documentation (e.g., missing contracts, ID checks) and fixed asset register alignment. 	

<p>Challenges Raised</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concern about the ability to monitor progress toward the target reserve of £1.2 million by August 2026, given current deficits. • Questions on the impact of reduced expenditure on enrichment activities (e.g., school trips) and whether this affects pupil experience. • Discussion on the need for clear delegation of authority from the Board downwards, particularly for high-value decisions and senior appointments. <p>The Chair confirmed that there were no further questions on the audit reports and annual accounts and that he would sign the relevant sections in order for the accounts to be uploaded prior to the deadline of 31st December 2025.</p> <p>Resolved: Trustees approved the audit report and annual accounts for 2024-25.</p>	
<p>8. Reports from Committees</p> <p>a) Chair’s report- Governance Committee 21st October 2025</p> <p>JC provided an update:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confirmed that the streamlined process for appointing local governing body members is now in place, with clear criteria and delegated authority to The Director of Quality to improve efficiency. • Emphasised that regular reporting will provide assurance to trustees on appointments. • Suggested adding governance appraisals (including chairs) to a future agenda. • Recommended reviewing progress against the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (ERG) objectives at the next meeting. <p>Trustees challenged whether the Headteacher had a role in the approval of LGB governors. AH responded that recommendations from Chair of the LGB and the Headteacher are included in the governor selection process. AH would revert to the Governance committee if an appointment fell outside the agreed criteria.</p> <p>b) Chair’s report-Education, Standards and Performance Committee 23rd October 2025</p> <p>SK provided an update:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Committee had met twice in the autumn term 2025. • The primary schools continue to perform strongly, exceeding national averages in most metrics. • Secondary schools present a mixed picture, with attainment holding up but progress measures unavailable due to COVID-related gaps. • Highlighted two vulnerable secondary schools impacting overall performance. • Attendance strategy has been implemented trust-wide, showing improvement despite external challenges (e.g., illness and closures). • Sixth form development plans are underway, focusing on recruitment, retention, and quality assurance of teaching and learning. • Commended the coherent approach to school improvement and preparation for inspections across the trust. <p>Trustees requested an update on the work being carried out on Key Stage 5 provision. KB would share the PowerPoint presentation with Trustees which had been delivered to the ES&P Committee.</p> <p><i>(Post meeting note: the presentation was uploaded to Governor Hub following the meeting)</i></p> <p>c) Chair’s reports-Finance and Staffing Committee 24th October 2025, 19th November 2025</p> <p>BA provided an update:</p>	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Committee has stressed the importance of ensuring that any financial decisions are made in line with educational considerations and recognise the potential impact on pupils’ experiences and outcomes. • Expressed concern about financial position, noting historic depletion of reserves over the past five years and the need for greater transparency in resource allocation. • Stressed the importance of linking additional spending to measurable outcomes for school improvement. • Discussed the target to rebuild reserves to 5% over three to four years, while recognising potential impact on schools. • Raised risks around staff absence and supply costs, recommending a more systematic review and cost control measures. • Noted the collaborative budget-setting processes to improve alignment between education and operations. <p>d) Chair’s report-Audit and Risk 09.12.25</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The focus of the meeting was to scrutinize the financial statements and audit findings report. • Highlighted sector-wide financial pressures. • Discussed potential reputational risk from published school-level financial data where schools are in a deficit position. • Internal audit: Confirmed that 95% of internal audit actions have been closed, with remaining items linked to cyclical processes. • Noted progress on internal controls and adoption of a new health and safety system (Smart Log’). • Drew attention to the introduction of Martyn’s Law (anti-terrorism requirements), requiring enhanced evacuation and lockdown procedures across all schools. • Recommended that the risk register be included in the main board papers for visibility, noting five high-scoring risks (e.g., pupil numbers and financial sustainability). 	
<p>9. Appointment of Auditors-Recommendation to Members Dains were confirmed as the current external auditor for 2025-26. It has been decided to undertake a re-tendering process in the spring term 2026. A&R committee will oversee the process and make a recommendation to Members on the appointment of the auditors from the autumn term 2026.</p> <p>10. Reports from Link Trustees-Summary</p> <p>a) Sustainability MA informed Trustees that had met with DTW. There are no major changes to report due to restrictions in funding. However, there has been a reduction in carbon usage, and a focus on efficient energy usage.</p> <p>b) SEND/Safeguarding AP informed Trustees that he has joined the ES&P Committee and that Safeguarding and SEND reporting would be through that committee and any significant issues would be highlighted to the Trust Board.</p> <p>11. Strategic Update</p> <p>a) Trust Review DTh provided an update:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Four proposals for a Trust Operational Review had been discussed with Trustees and, following this, it had been decided to use Totus Solutions. The revised draft proposal had been uploaded yesterday to Governor Hub. 	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The review will examine how the organisation functions as an integrated system, including education-facing roles, central services, and school-level operations, to ensure the trust has the right operating model, the right leadership, and the right processes for long-term sustainability, compliance, and growth. • It is intended that the review will be completed by the February 2026 half term. • An updated version of the proposal had been received yesterday evening and DTh would circulate this to Trustees. ACTION <p>b) Cheshire Studio School</p> <p>DTh referred to paper 11b) which outlined the background to the decision to cease enrolling students into the Cheshire Studio School from Knutsford Academy in September 2023 and the proposal to relocate the provision to Crewe. Following informal consultation with the DfE and the Local Authority it had become apparent that it would not be possible to relocate to Crewe. Alternative options had been explored but these would not be supported, and the significant change applications would not progress for DfE approval. The DfE have informed the Trust that the URN cannot be held dormant. Therefore, the recommendation is to close the URN by mutual consent with the DfE.</p> <p>Resolved: Trustees approved the recommendation to close the Cheshire Studio School URN by mutual consent with the DfE. They commented that they regretted the loss of the provision and that the upcoming SEND White paper may allow opportunities to open new provision in the future.</p> <p><i>AP left the meeting at 12:55 pm.</i></p> <p>12. Education Update</p> <p>a) Ofsted Update</p> <p>KB provided a verbal update to Trustees on the changes to the Ofsted Framework. She highlighted the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is now a secure fit model, rather than a best fit. • Expected standard in the new framework would have been a strong “good” in the previous framework. • There will be no overall judgement, and it is expected that schools will receive a mix of grades. • Decisions on attainment will largely be made in advance of the inspection, based on the IDSR and published results. • Safeguarding will be judged as “met” or “not met” and schools will be allowed time to rectify minor issues. • The new inspections will be more collaborative, with an emphasis on well-being. There has been positive feedback from the schools involved in the pilot inspections. • All members of the SLT will be expected to articulate the school’s Quality of Education. • Inspectors will carry out case sampling, with a focus on disadvantaged pupils. • The Director of Primary who is an Ofsted inspector, has delivered training to Headteachers and senior leaders. • Quality assurance visits have been undertaken at DPS and KA as they are in the Ofsted window. • All governors on the LGBs need to be aware of the school’s priorities. • School improvement planning has been revised to match the new Framework. The SEF also needs to be aligned. <p>b) RISE Programme</p> <p>KB referred to Paper 12b) which contained the report from the monitoring visit November 2025 for SWS. She highlighted the following points:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SWS has been part of the RISE programme since September 2025. 	<p>DTh</p>
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The school is partnered with the Laurus Trust and is working closely with their subject directors. • The school has been asked to be a case study for the RISE Programme. • There has been a significant increase in capability and capacity at the school, but this has yet to translate into impact. • All objectives in the School Improvement Plan were RAG rated GREEN showing that improvement activities are on track and both short-term and end-of-programme changes are likely to be achieved. <p>Trustees challenged on when the school was expected to achieve “expected” standard at Ofsted. KB responded that this could take 3-5 years. The school did not have the leadership capacity in place for nine months following the last Ofsted to be able to start the improvement journey. Also, it is an entrenched school and difficult to move. The last Ofsted had found that there was no good teaching in the school. Another reset of Behaviour would take place in January 2026. Trustees commented that they would like to see evidence of improvements over a shorter period. KB explained that the Headteacher is leading the school well and is supported by the Director of Secondary to allow her to focus on her core role.</p> <p><i>MA left the meeting at 1:40 pm.</i></p> <p>Trustees also questioned whether the Accelerated Improvement Board (AIB) is effective in progressing school improvement. KB informed them that the board is well led by an experienced chair and the meetings are strategic. The last meeting had focussed on SEND.</p> <p>c) Exception Reporting and Schools Vulnerability Update-part 2 item <i>SK, HR and RM left the meeting at 1:50 pm.</i></p> <p>13. Operational Matters</p> <p>a) Management Accounts and latest forecast The Trust Reporting Pack P3 had been provided for information.</p> <p>b) Estates Management Trustees noted that discussion of this item had previously been deferred. They requested that these papers be added to the main body of papers for the next meeting, rather than to the Supplementary folder. DTw explained that further information is required to refresh the 5-year Estates Plan. Realistic assessments are required to determine which issues are in fact urgent. Additional internal capacity is required to address Estates Management which is a national issue.</p> <p>c) Communication Strategy SUP Papers 13c and 13c.a had been provided for information. Trustees noted the papers.</p> <p>14. AOB</p> <p>Away Day AH was requested to consider arranging a Trustee/exec Away Day in the summer term.</p> <p>Special needs provision at Shavington Primary School (SPS) Cheshire East have requested that the provision at SPS changes from Resource Provision to a SEN Unit. A consultation process will take place. The age range will be lowered and capacity increased. This will provide both educational and financial benefits.</p>	
<p>Date and time of next Trust Board Meeting Thursday 26th March 2026 09:30-13:00. Location Crewe UTC</p> <p>Trustees requested that the 2026-27 meeting calendar be reviewed to ensure that meetings are held to coincide with dates when relevant data is available and that the timings on the Trust Board are achievable.</p>	

The meeting moved to the part two agenda