

**MINUTES OF BOARD MEETING HELD AT THE KINGSWAY CAMPUS ON 21ST MARCH
2022**

Present:	Michele Bacon	External Governor
	Jayne Edwards	External Governor (attended remotely)
	Andrew Macmanus	External Governor
	Neil McGrath	External Governor (Chair)
	Tom McInerney	External Governor
	Mary Murphy	Principal
	Lynn Pegler	External Governor
	Chris Sikorski	Staff Governor
	Susan Smith	External Governor
	Ryan Turner	Staff Governor
	In Attendance:	Ben Barton
	Thalia Bell	Deputy Principal
	Leeann Bellfield	Assistant Principal
	Alan Brown	Assistant Principal
	Julie Holland	Deputy Principal (Finance & Resources)
	Lesley Venables	Clerk to the Governors

PART ONE

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

186 Apologies for absence were received from Karen Banks (External Governor), Wesley Rourke (External Governor) and Molly Whittle (Student Governor).

DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

187 A declaration of interest was received from Ryan Turner (Staff Governor) in respect of any matters relating to the College's higher education provision.

CHAIR'S UPDATE

188 The Chair gave a verbal report on activities he had undertaken since the December Board meeting. These included attending a College visit by the Mayor of Halton, the HE Graduation ceremony and the latest open evening at the Kingsway Campus. Discussions had been held with the Principal and the Clerk on strategic issues and the new Association of College's Code of Good Governance and a further meeting on the latter had been scheduled for 20th April.

UPDATE ON STRATEGIC ISSUES

189 The Principal provided governors with an update on current strategic issues.

190 There had been a total of 811 COVID-19 cases since January 2022, the majority of which were students. Compared to the total of 356 for the 2020/2021 academic year this was a significant increase and had impacted on College operations. Processes and risk assessments had continued to be refined in line with the latest guidelines which centred around the Government's strategy of "Living with COVID-19".

191 A governor asked about the effect on learning and was advised by the Deputy Principal that there was no overall pattern to the impact across the organisation. Staff provided cover for sickness absence and there had been no requirement for additional agency staffing. Although this had enabled student not to miss lessons, delivery of some subject specialisms had been affected by not being taught by the regular teacher. Catch-up sessions were offered to all students, supported by the Department for Education's funding, and the College continued to provide students with the high quality experience they should expect from a further education institution.

192 The measures being undertaken to support the Ukrainian crisis were outlined. In response to questions as to whether any refugees had already travelled to the Borough the Principal reported that the College would work with the local authority and other agencies when required but had not yet been contacted to provide assistance.

193 A governor queried whether the risks associated with the increase in COVID-19 cases and the Ukrainian situation was likely to impact on asset values of the Local Government Pension Scheme. The Deputy Principal (Finance & Resources) advised that this was being monitored, but that any outcomes were highly unpredictable at this stage and could not be quantified.

194 Further Government guidance was awaited on the possible transfer of energy supply contracts from Russian companies and the Board was advised that this could involve a substantial increase in annual costs for the College.

195 As discussed at the recent Finance & Resources Committee meeting outline bids to the T Level Capital Fund had been developed and submitted to the ESFA by the deadline of 11th March and required retrospective approval by the Board. It was recognised that the timings for capital bids was extremely short and that at this stage any application was speculative, with the final proposal and any expenditure plans to be brought back to the Board for approval.

196 At the Kingsway Campus the project consisted of an expansion of the College's green technology provision and the refurbishment of the external facades of the buildings (at a cost of approx. £4.5m). At the Cronton Campus the project was for the replacement of temporary classrooms and the music hub for the delivery of Animal Management, Health & Science and Creative & Design courses from 2024/2025.

197 The approximate cost had been estimated at £3.6m, with the College contributing £2m from reserves (which had already been included in the financial plan approved by the Board in July 2021). However, following increases in global prices for materials such as steel and concrete, this figure was now £965K higher. The final costings for the project would be submitted to the Board for approval, once the outcome of the bidding process was determined, and would include a further £0.5m in contingency funding. The College was under no obligation to proceed with the project if the Board felt that this would be too risky. The revised mid-year review (minutes 240-242 refer) had been updated to include the additional costs and it was noted that the operating surplus for 2021/2022 was now forecast as £1.491m against an original budgeted surplus of £1.152m.

198 The Principal reported that the Levelling Up White Paper had now been published and expected colleges to act as 'anchor' institutions within their local communities and provided opportunities for further development. Halton had been designated as one of 55 Educational Improvement Areas (together with the other boroughs in the Liverpool City Region). The White Paper encouraged the establishment of 16-18 free schools, subject to there being a robust educational rationale (and it was possible that this would be considered in Knowsley), a further wave of Maths schools and a national adult numeracy programme. Governors were advised

that the Skills Bill was now in its final stages through Parliament.

199 It was likely that examination gradings and assessments for 2021/2022 would be pitched between levels for 2019/2020 and 2020/2021. Additional funding was available for 16-19 Study Programmes (which had effectively increased the base rate for this income stream). Following the Augar Review of post-18 education there would be greater flexibility of course delivery for HE programmes, some of which would comprise units of study rather than long courses.

200 A governor asked whether the College's curriculum plan included courses on electric vehicles and was advised that the new Motor Vehicle T Level studied by 16-19 year olds did not feature elements relating to hybrid or electric vehicles (which the sector had highlighted to the DfE). However, the College had ensured that the enrichment programme covered the repair and maintenance of light vehicles and adult courses in this area already featured a basic introduction.

201 The Government had recently announced a review of Level 2 qualifications and it was likely that this would result in funding for some courses being withdrawn and the rationalisation of provision (as had already happened for Level 3 programmes).

202 The College had participated in the development of the Towns Fund bid to establish a health and education hub in Runcorn town centre, in partnership with the NHS and Halton Borough Council. Any proposals and associated expenditure would be brought back to the Board for approval.

203 Governors were advised of the appointment of a new Chief Executive at Halton Borough Council, following the retirement of David Parr.

204 The College's priorities remained as safeguarding and security, quality, efficiency and growth. Performance against all elements of the QEG was strong. The strategy of promoting staff well-being had been received positively. The College's "Great Teaching" initiative had been re-introduced at the recent staff development day and quality processes and the internal leadership programme had now been reinstated. A further priority for the remainder of the academic year was to improve the social and emotional development of students.

205 The Local Skills Action Plan for 2022/2023 had been submitted to the LCR for approval on 4th March and colleges would play a critical role in the delivery of this strategy. Through the Association of Liverpool City Region Colleges (AoLCRC), collaboration between further education, local universities and the Combined Authority continued to strengthen and could be evidenced through projects such as Talent City and the Skills Accelerator.

206 Governors were advised that the College's funding allocation for 2022/2023 had increased by 101 FTEs compared to 2021/2022, making a total of 3688 learners. In-year 16-18 growth funding of £121K had also been received in the current year.

207 As a result of the recommendations from a recent internal audit visit and the College's strategy of continuous improvement, a strategic review of apprenticeship provision would be undertaken in March. The results would be reported to the next meetings of the Audit and Finance & Resources Committees (June 2022). All remaining internal audit reports had been classified as providing 'substantial assurance' on the College's systems of internal control.

208 School leaver applications were currently 3,005, which was slightly ahead of 2021/2022. The 'Raising Riverside' strategy had been effective and applications had increased by 223 compared to last year and had been boosted by the "mini-links" programme,

which enabled Year 10 and 11 pupils to sample trade areas. In-Borough application had increased by 101, which was balanced by a reduction of 97 for out of Borough applications. The Principal advised that the conversion rate was higher for in-Borough students, and there may be a slight increase in enrolments in September, however this would be an unpredictable year due to the pandemic.

209 The initial funding target for apprenticeships for 2021/2022 (£1.8m) had now been exceeded and increased to £2.1m. A total of 220 enrolments had taken place to date against the target of 300 and the College was confident that this would be met by the end of the academic year. Higher education applications were lower than in 2021/2022 and the current emphasis was on ensuring that as many learners as possible progressed to higher level courses. As discussed earlier, there would be opportunities in the future for further expansion of HE numbers following Government reform of this provision.

210 A governor asked whether there had been any grade inflation in terms of GCSE results received from schools and the appropriateness of programmes of study for these learners. The Assistant Principal (Cronton) reported that this was not a significant issue and that all such individuals had been identified through the mock examinations. A more prevalent problem was the level of mental health, anxiety and behavioural issues.

211 Governors were reminded that the majority of the College's Adult Education Budget was channelled through the LCRCA (£2,345k in 2021/2022, including £99K of growth). Achievement of the AEB target was always challenging but enrolments in January had been buoyant, particularly in Engineering, Construction and Counselling and the College was confident that the overall target for the year would be met. Recently-announced educational reforms should provide further opportunities for adult to engage in college courses with greater flexibility or removal of financial barriers.

212 The Principal presented the Quality-Efficiency-Growth dashboard, which classified most areas as either 'amber' or 'green' at this point in the year. Foundation Studies had been graded as 'red' and governors were advised that the College had advertised for a new manager for this area, with specialist interim support provided by a consultant. Progress would be monitored by the Quality & Standards Committee.

- 213 **Resolved -**
- 1 That the College's application to the ESFA's T Level Capital Fund be approved retrospectively
 - 2 That the final proposals and costs for the T Level projects be submitted to the Board for approval once the outcome of the bidding process was known

QUALITY & STANDARDS COMMITTEE – 8TH MARCH 2022

214 The Chair of Quality & Standards Committee provided a summary of the meeting held on 8th March 2022.

215 The Committee had recommended for approval by the Board an increase to the threshold for household income below which students could apply for bursary funding. This would raise it from £18.6K to £21K.

216 Governors received a presentation from Jo Burton (Head of School) and Rachel Wilson (Programme Area Leader) on the department's strategy and areas for improvement.

217 Although there had been less disruption to teaching and learning, the number of COVID-19 cases increased significantly since January 2022. However, management reported that staff were now able to focus on future planning rather than just dealing with the consequences of the pandemic. It was felt that there had been an impact on learning and this was evidenced in comments from the student governor, but the majority of students had indicated that they felt well-supported by the College in their studies (including examination preparation) and in the pastoral care provided.

218 Attendance levels were lower than the overall target of 90% in 2021/2022, partly due to COVID-19 issues. Governors questioned whether any comparator data was available from other colleges but were advised that it was difficult to identify organisations of a similar size and complexity.

219 Retention was a concern at the moment, with a proportion of learners finding their courses difficult due to being awarded higher grades than their performance at College suggested under the Teacher Assessed Grade system in operation in schools. Together with students not having been in learning for a considerable time, this had led to some behavioural issues (which were replicated nationally), but these had now reduced.

220 Under the report on the Close Monitoring Process governors had asked about performance levels in Foundation Studies and what actions had been taken to recruit a new head of school. Assurances were given that an advert for this post would be published this week and arrangements were in place to cover this role on an interim basis. The Committee had requested that a progress report on the implementation of the action plan for this area be brought to a future meeting.

221 Building capacity with employers to provide work placements remained a particular challenge for the College and was a key part of its T Levels Strategy.

222 Governors asked whether the extension of apprenticeship timescales had adversely affected retention and the ability of employers to support these learners. Some end point assessments had been delayed due to COVID-19, which meant that students were on programme for longer and this could also increase the caseload for assessors. Staff were working through the backlog and it was anticipated that the majority would be cleared by the end of the academic year.

223 No significant gaps had been identified between retention rates of BAME and White British learners or in terms of gender and disability/learning difficulty at this point in the year. For 19+ students there was a retention gap of 4.6 % between learners accessing financial support and those who do not. The Committee had asked whether some gaps had narrowed due to student withdrawals as a result of the pandemic and were advised that an analysis of the underlying reasons for retention gaps would be undertaken at the end of the academic year when the data was finalised. It was noted that many students experienced high levels of anxiety and were not as resilient to adverse conditions as previous cohorts.

224 Large numbers of students had applied for examination access arrangements, which was resource-intensive for the College.

225 In 2021/2022 to date, a total of 775 health and well-being referrals had been made and 336 concerns, which aligned more closely with previous years.

226 Governors had commended the work of the safeguarding team in completing a mid-point safeguarding check on which issues most affected learners and whether any changes to current practice were required. The main areas identified were suicide, domestic abuse

and sexual assault (SA)/sexual violence SV)/sexual harassment (SH). A baseline investigation had been carried out into SA/SV/SH and learners had been asked about their feelings and awareness of these issues through a survey. It was surprising to note the number of students who 'normalised' this type of behaviour, particularly when tutorials had covered the topic in November. Actions had been implemented, such as additional tutorials and raising awareness, bespoke training for apprentices and employers and staff training.

227 Governors had noted the significant increase in the number of neglect cases, which was replicated across the Borough and has prompted the development of a Halton-wide Neglect Strategy, which would be launched in April.

228 Curriculum safeguarding champions had been introduced to help ensure that the College's safeguarding culture pervaded all areas and raised awareness amongst staff and students.

229 The Lead Safeguarding Governor (Tom McInerney) had met with the Head of the Safeguarding Team prior to the Committee meeting and had been assured of the robustness of the College's processes and the extent to which these were embedded throughout the organisation. The Clerk had advised that all governors had completed the recent on-line session on Safeguarding.

230 The Committee had received a report on the curriculum areas that were undergoing the College's close monitoring process and on the outcomes of recent surveys of learner views. There had been a good response rate from apprentices on 'hard to reach' programmes, all of whom felt that they were making good progress and received constructive feedback that enabled them to improve. A total of 231 students had completed the part time survey and the results indicated that 99% of learners would recommend the course to a friend, all felt safe in College and were satisfied with the teaching on their course.

231 **Resolved -** That the increase in the household income threshold for the bursary fund from £18.6K to £21K per annum be approved

FINANCE & RESOURCES COMMITTEE – 9TH MARCH 2022

232 The Chair of the Finance & Resources Committee presented a report on the meeting held on 9th March 2022.

233 The termly report on HR issues had been noted, including the overall sickness absence level of 6.32%, which was significantly higher than at the same point in 2020/2021 (3.93%) and above the national average of 2.4% and was mainly due to the level of COVID-19 cases and some staff undergoing hospital treatment which had been delayed due to the pandemic.

234 The Committee had asked whether the recent improvement in the economy had impacted on staff retention and recruitment and was assured that the College was in a strong position, given its Ofsted rating, financial stability, ability to make pay awards in each year and attractive terms and conditions.

235 Following a recent review of Business Support Benchmarking Costs by the Internal Auditors, further analysis had been undertaken to determine whether there were any significant issues. This had concluded that the College had fewer support staff than in other organisations, but they received higher levels of pay and were deployed in areas where they would have the greatest impact on learners. Satisfaction rates remained positive and the response rate in the latest survey had been high.

236 The College's Gender Pay Gap report would be published on the website by 31st March 2022. This set out that the mean gap had risen by 1% to 8.59% and the median was now 23.17%. Management had concluded that there was no systematic bias and that the situation was likely to be replicated in the FE sector.

237 There had been a total of 96 accidents, compared to 52 in 2020/2021. This was due to increased footfall within College sites and the fact that most students had not been in education for the last 2 years, which had led to some behavioural issues. Governors were advised that mental health support was available for students and staff and management would continue to monitor levels of well-being, with further measures introduced as required. There had been 22 near misses and one RIDDOR reportable incident.

238 The Committee received a report on Environmental Sustainability and was reminded that the College had adopted the Association of Colleges' Climate Change Roadmap. The Senior Management Team was progressing a number of actions in relation to the Green Agenda. Governors had asked how the College was obtaining information on good practice within the sector and were advised that staff were members of key networking organisations (such as the Association of Liverpool City Region Colleges). The College was also actively participating in 2 projects in association with local universities (Talent City and Level 4/5 unitised qualifications on green issues). Management felt that the College was ahead of its peers in terms of the development of a green action plan.

239 The need to demonstrate a direct link between visible strategies (such as tree planting to offset carbon consumption) and a change in the culture of the organisation to focus on green issues was discussed. It was agreed that it was difficult to determine what measures of success could be used by the College to assess performance in this area; a similar scoring system to that used for BREEAM may be appropriate.

240 The Committee had received and scrutinised the Management Accounts to December 2021 (Item 6.2.1) and an updated Financial Forecast for 2021/2022 was recommended for approval. The latter indicated an operating surplus of £1.974m against the previous forecast of £1.152m.

241 Income levels were more favourable (+£1.265m) than anticipated in July 2021 following positive recruitment for 16-18, HE and Apprenticeships and an allocation of growth funding in-year from the ESFA. The Adult Education Budget remained challenging and the revised forecast included an element of mitigation should the tolerance levels applied by the ESFA change.

242 The allocation for 2022/2023 had increased by £200K due to additional T Level funding. Cash balances had remained positive and the minimum amount of reserves was £16.8m throughout the period of the Forecast.

243 The Committee had received a detailed report on property issues and current bids for capital funding, the main elements of which were discussed under an earlier agenda item.

244 The Committee received a report on partnership provision and noted that the majority were progressing satisfactorily, but one partner remained under close scrutiny due to performance levels below the identified target. This was due to the fact that attendance on courses by individuals referred by the Job Centre Plus service were not mandatory.

245 Revised policies on Fees 2022/2023, Supply Chain Fees & Charges 2022/2022 and Higher Education Fees & Compensation for 2022/2023, Apprenticeship Fees and Charges for 2022/2023, Freedom of Information and Staff Grievance were recommended for approval by the Board. A further policy on Environmental Sustainability was received, but it was agreed that this needed to be amended to incorporate the Board's responsibilities in this area and to align the policy with the new requirements of the Association of Colleges' Code of Good Governance.

- 246 **Resolved -**
- 1 That the revised Financial Forecast for 2021/2022 be approved
 - 2 That the following policies be approved:
 - Fees 2022/2023
 - Apprenticeship Fees and Charges
 - Higher Education Fees and Compensation 2022/2023
 - Freedom of Information
 - Staff Grievance

APPOINTMENT OF CHAIR AND VICE-CHAIRS 2022/2023

247 Governors were reminded that this meeting was the point in the year at which they should consider the process to be used for the nomination and election of the Chair and Vice-Chairs for the following academic year.

248 The Clerk advised that there were 2 possible routes for the appointments: a) formal – where nominations were invited and an electronic ballot undertaken if there was more than one candidate; or b) informal – where nominations would be made verbally at the July Board meeting.

249 The Board's Standing Orders allowed for the formal process to be waived for a maximum of 2 years, but then required that the formal process was operated for the third year. The appointments of the Chair and Vice-Chairs had been undertaken through a formal nomination and election process for 2021/2022 and informally for 2020/2021.

- 250 **Resolved -** That the informal process for the nomination and election of the Chair and two Vice-Chairs be implemented at the July Board meeting for the 2022/2023 academic year

MINUTES

- 251 **Resolved -** That the minutes of the meeting (Parts 1 and 2) held on 13th December 2021 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

MATTERS ARISING

252 Governors received a progress update on the actions identified at the previous meeting and noted that this had now been completed.

