



## Special FE Corporation Minutes

Meeting held on Thursday 10<sup>th</sup> September 2020 at 5.30pm via Zoom

*Governors:* Sam Beel (Staff Governor and Course Leader IT, Media & AAT), Stuart Blackett, Subhash Chaudhary, Phil Cook (Chief Executive and Group Principal), Louise Davies, Martin Gray, Ethan Harper, Russ McCallion, Richard Poundford, Dot Smith, Mark White (Chair), Norma Wilburn (Safeguarding Link Governor) and Gary Wright.

*Officials:* Phil Blewitt (MD NETA), Liz Boynton (Group Director of Quality), Jason Faulkner (College Principal, RCC), Lesley Graham (College Principal, SRC), Phil Hastie (Group Executive Director Planning and Infrastructure), Erika Marshall (Group Director of Marketing), Gary Potts (Group Vice Principal Business, Innovation and Partnerships), Ben Robinson (College Principal, Bede), Fiona Sharp (Group Executive Director Finance), Kay Taylor (Group Director of HR), Sarah Thompson (Clerk to the Corporation) and Sam Young (Governance Support Officer).

*Apologies:* Rob Mitchell, Aman Toor and Anne Vickers

*The Chair welcomed governors to the meeting and congratulated Liz Boynton on her full membership of the Senior Leadership Team and Gary Potts on his new title of Group Vice Principal Business, Innovation and Partnerships. He confirmed that two governors had recently resigned. James Ruddock would be leaving his employment with Etc. and the Chair confirmed that he would write to thank James for his valuable contribution as a staff governor. Kirk Siderman-Wolter had reluctantly resigned from the Board, due to health and family reasons; he had loved being a part of such a strong Board. The Chair had already responded to Kirk's email with the warm wishes of the Board. The Chair extended an invitation to governors to visit Group sites; he added that they were under no obligation to do so but could make arrangements through the Clerk or Governance Support Officer.*

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### **20/64 Agenda Item 1 – Presentation: The Future of the Group – One Perspective**

The Chief Executive explained that the presentation had been prompted by a discussion at a Search and Governance Committee meeting in which a staff governor had commented that working practices had changed due to COVID-19 and that the college group should not return to the 'old normal'.

The staff governor, also Course Leader IT, Media and AAT, emphasised that, although she approached this as an IT teacher, the presentation was based on the views of a range of staff. The presentation included headline results from the short staff survey held in May including the high proportion of staff who indicated that they were receiving the technical support needed and were treated fairly, with their health and wellbeing considered.

Anecdotally, the bike to work scheme and the wellbeing days had been well received and much appreciated. Between March and June 2020, Teams' use had increased by 1317%, across both curriculum and support areas. Staff had taken advantage of in-house training and Microsoft Educator CPD and the Technology Innovation Group (TIG) had been established, with 44 members from across the Group. TIG members shared ideas on new, effective practice with learners and it was expected that several members of staff would shortly be confirmed as Microsoft Innovative Educator Experts (MIEEs). The staff governor shared her own approach to student induction and her use of Flipgrid to record the learner journey from day one to the end of their course. Innovation in student recruitment had included virtual open days, telephone interviews and online payments, which had resulted in some efficiencies in the registration process. The use of Teams meetings had resulted in more time for staff to be productive and less time for travel, evidenced by the sharp decrease in mileage claims. Similarly, printing had reduced significantly and she highlighted the importance of staff not slipping back into old ways of working.

In terms of perception, the staff governor commented that, whilst there had been a change in culture, the Group's tone of voice had been maintained; there had been a positive impact on the student experience and teaching methods and on skills development for both staff and students. The reductions in travel and printing aligned with the Group's Green initiatives. She presented four recommendations on her final slide and invited questions from governors.

A governor agreed that there were time and cost saving benefits but asked if staff had felt any added pressure, perhaps due to the perception of having less control over their time or being constantly 'on call', and whether the health and wellbeing strategy needed to encourage staff to take breaks and exercise. The staff governor agreed that 'digital downtime' was needed to ensure that staff controlled their time in front of a screen; she added that support was also needed for those not as competent with IT. The Chief Executive confirmed that the Senior Management Team (SMT) had adapted their own working practices to mitigate this issue and that this had changed the way in which he himself worked.

A governor commented that he fully supported the idea of cost savings and, additionally, in his own organisation there had been a realisation that skilled staff could be recruited from and work outside the local area, although he was unsure whether some direct contact would always be necessary in an education setting. The staff governor explained how she could cover some students remotely via, for example, recorded Teams inductions, whilst simultaneously working with students in the classroom and felt that this had streamlined her work.

A governor asked whether SMT had also benefitted from reductions in travel. The Chief Executive agreed that, whilst some visibility of senior managers at Group sites was important to both staff and students, this should be needs-led with decisions made on a

departmental level; he added that there was now far less reason for college principals to travel between sites since the introduction of Teams meetings as the norm.

The Group Director of HR underlined the value of hearing a member of staff's own perspective and confirmed the Group's work on promoting wellbeing, new ways of working and improvements in efficiency and effectiveness. A governor stressed the importance of managers' visibility and cautioned that we should all be harnessing technology rather than being harnessed by it.

A governor asked about levels of confidence that systems of accountability were in place on learner hours and funding claims. The Group Executive Director Planning and Infrastructure explained that guidance on funding claims had not yet been confirmed and was still changing; once finalised, the Group would ensure the correct recording systems were in place.

In response to a governor's question about whether remote contact with external decision makers remained effective and well attended, the Chief Executive confirmed that virtual meetings were embedded in current practice and enabled easier engagement with stakeholders. He also commented on the high levels of governor engagement in Association of Colleges' (AoC) webinars.

Governors considered the recommendations on the final slide of the presentation:

- i) Technology Innovation Group (TIG) to report to the Board: It was **agreed** that TIG should report quarterly through the Standards Improvement Committee;
- ii) Aim to become a "Microsoft 'showcase' School": It was **agreed** that the staff governor would provide the Chief Executive with further information on the requirements for this and that a senior manager would then be identified to lead on this recommendation;
- iii) Staff qualifications (digital teaching, etc): It was agreed that the staff governor would explore this with the Group Director of HR as part of the development of the Staff Professional Development Plan for 2020-21;
- iv) Continue to move forward – keep the pace: Governors **agreed** this recommendation.

Governors **noted** the presentation.

## **20/65 Agenda Item 2 – COVID-19 Update**

The Chief Executive confirmed that the aim of his previously circulated paper was to give the Board assurance that processes were in place for critical enquiry through committees. As students returned, systems were being continuously refined, adjusted and modified, with risks mitigated through the visibility of senior managers and the Group Vice Principal Curriculum and Development's team. The timeliness of communication had been improved by regular verbal reporting, including a weekly meeting between the Chief

Executive and the Group Director of Quality. College principals had been monitoring social distancing among learners and were currently reviewing the introduction of face coverings; social distancing seemed to be better at NETA perhaps due to the strong health and safety culture. The Group had submitted a bid to the Tees Work Skills Academy and the NETA estates strategy was under development.

Recruitment was as noted in the paper and, at 5 to 10% more than the previous year, was on target but with a spiky profile; recruitment at Bede had been particularly positive. Some areas, such as performing arts, remained strategic priorities despite lower recruitment.

In response to a governor's question about the increase in full-time Higher Education (HE) applications, the College Principal SRC (also Strategic Lead for HE) explained that, as most part-time HE students were sponsored by employers, part-time applications were lower than target. However, new full-time HE students had a younger profile than in previous years; the Study Local campaign had promoted local university study to 18-year olds and the media had also been highlighting that university students might not be able to return home in the event of local lockdowns.

A governor asked if every college and independent training provider could submit bids for the Tees Work Skills Academy. The Chief Executive confirmed that the tender had been put out for public contracting and that Etc.'s bid was as part of a strong local consortium. The Group Vice Principal Business, Innovation and Partnerships added that tendering was not particularly aimed at individual Further Education colleges; he felt that the submission would be strong and Etc. had not been approached to be part of any other consortium.

A governor commented on the expected view that the health and social care (H&SC) sector would see a rise in profile and whether there had been evidence of this and if it presented any opportunities for the Group. The Chief Executive confirmed that the Group had expected to see an initial spike in applications in H&SC but that, without mitigating measures, there was a risk of withdrawals as learners realised the hard work required in the sector. The Group Vice Principal Business, Innovation and Partnerships explained that the anticipated spike had not yet materialised and that, although currently meeting the target for overall apprenticeship recruitment, H&SC was below expected levels. He added that a robust selection process for H&SC applicants had been put in place to mitigate the risks of withdrawals. A governor emphasised the importance of promoting full long-term career pathways to health care apprentices and the Chief Executive agreed that both the Business Development team and the H&SC teams at SRC and RCC promoted this route but, unlike the NHS, there were retention issues in the care sector. The College Principal RCC commented that 16-18 recruitment in health had exceeded target at RCC and that there had been a shift from early years to H&SC. Governors agreed with the Chief Executive that, as a society, we needed to place more value on the work of care home staff.

A governor outlined current developments in his own organisation and highlighted significant growth opportunities in the Life Science sector in the North East. He added that it would be useful for Etc., through TVCA, to initiate a dialogue around creating employees for the future and that this sector was of strategic importance to the UK economy and also in the Tees Valley strategic economic plan.

*Martin Gray left the meeting.*

**20/66 Agenda Item 3 – Careers Education – Information, Advice and Guidance Strategy**

The Group Director of Marketing gave an overview of the previously circulated Careers Education – Information, Advice and Guidance (CE-IAG) Strategy; the Careers Strategy previously developed by the Group Vice Principal Curriculum and Development had been supplemented with IAG objectives and an action plan. The Chair of the Standards Improvement Committee and the Careers Link governor had been involved in its development. The strategic intent of the strategy had been set out, with a direct impact on the Group’s strategic goal to deliver an outstanding student experience.

The Careers Link governor confirmed that he had welcomed the opportunity to have an input to the strategy and added that a key element was ambition and the need to raise aspirations in our school leavers. A governor asked how the Group ensured that advice given was current and informed and the Group Director of Marketing explained that Etc. had invested in platforms with current labour market intelligence and signposting jobs for the future.

Governors **approved** the Careers Education – Information, Advice and Guidance Strategy.

**20/67 Agenda Item 4 – Governor Workshop Proposals**

The Clerk had previously circulated a report on proposals for the Governors’ Workshop to be held on Thursday 24<sup>th</sup> September. The Chair commented on the valuable contribution Sir Frank would make and confirmed that he would not be attending the Workshop. The Clerk asked governors to submit any suggestions or comments in advance of the Workshop.

Governors **noted** the Governor Workshop proposals.

**20/68 Agenda Item 5 – Any Other Business**

There were no items of additional business.

**20/69 Agenda Item 15 - Dates and times of next meetings**

Governor Workshop: Thursday 24 September 2020, 5.30 pm

FE Corporation meeting: Thursday 22 October 2020, 5.30 pm

**20/70 Agenda Item 16 – Approval of Documents for Public Inspection**

It was **agreed** that the agenda and supporting documents of the current meeting be made available for public inspection with the exception of the report for Agenda Item 2 which was considered commercial in confidence. Minutes would be made available following approval and consideration at the next meeting.

**20/71 Agenda Item 17 - Key Themes**

- Kirk Siderman-Wolter's and James Ruddock's resignations noted;
- COVID-19 update noted;
- Agreed to follow up the four recommendations from the staff governor's presentation, *The future of the Group: one perspective*;
- Approval of Careers Education – Information, Advice and Guidance Strategy

*(The meeting ended at 6:50 pm)*

**Approved at a remote meeting**

**Date: 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2020**