

**Uttoxeter Learning Trust
Finance & Audit Committee**

Minutes of a meeting of the Finance & Audit Committee held remotely (via Microsoft teams) on Wednesday, 24 June 2020 at 5.30pm.

Present:

Mrs V Bennett (in the chair), Mr S Harper, Mr S Slater – Trustees

Dr S Clark – Chief Executive Officer (CEO)

Mr A Storer – Chief Finance Officer (CFO)

Mr R Sheldon – Clerk to the ULT

194. Apology:

An apology for absence was received from Mr L Trigg (chair)

195. Declaration of Interest:

A declaration of interest was given from Mr A Storer (Business Manager at Thomas Alleyne's High School) in advance of discussions around the ULT redundancy scheme. (See Minute 201).

196. Minutes:

Minutes of a meeting of the Finance committee held on 6 May 2020 had been previously circulated and taken as read.

It was agreed –

That the minutes be received and approved.

197. Matters Arising:

a) Richard Clarke First School (Minute 189(a) refers)

The CEO confirmed that the application for Richard Clarke First School to join the ULT had been submitted to the Regional Schools Commission. The timeline for completing the process was expected shortly and trustees would be kept updated.

b) New School (Minute 189(b) refers)

The CEO reported that the decision to defer the opening of the new school to September 2022 had been conveyed to the local authority (LA) and Regional Schools Commission. The project board would continue to meet and the LA would work with trustees around the communication of this decision. A request had been made for release of some of the LA funding, as previously agreed, to develop the website for the new school. The project board was to next meet in September and the CEO also reported that trustees would have to confirm by February that the new school was still planned for September 2022.

c) PR & Marketing Strategy (Minute 189(c) refers)

The CEO reported that tenders had been invited for work on the ULT website and this had been awarded to SERO. Work would also include development of the ULT's vision and values and to showcase the work being undertaken by ULT schools in response to

Covid-19. Tenders for other areas of PR and marketing work would be invited during the next school year.

d) CIF Projects 2020/2021 (Minute 189(e) refers)

The CFO reported that a decision on the 2020/21 CIF bids was still awaited. Trustees would be informed as soon as information was received.

e) Staff Appraisal (Minute 189(g) refers)

The CEO reported that most schools had now completed mid-year reviews, as requested by trustees. Guidance around staff appraisal had not changed and the CEO informed trustees that they would need to communicate to schools their plans for staff appraisal for the new school year starting in September. Discussion followed and trustees recognised the need to make a decision for staff appraisal and consideration was given to what was happening in other multi-academy trusts. The CEO undertook to see what other MATs were proposing for staff appraisal and would report back to trustees at the next meeting.

f) Policy Approval (Minutes 189(f) and 192 refers)

The CEO confirmed that, as recommended by the Finance and Audit committee, the following two policies had been formally approved by the trust board at its meeting held on 13 May 2020:

- Gifts and Hospitality Policy
- Financial Policy and Procedures Manual

198. ULT Finance Report:

The CFO presented reports on the following ULT and school finance matters:

a) Academies Financial Handbook 2020

The CFO referred to the recently updated Academies Financial Handbook 2020 and outlined the key changes to which the ULT must comply as a condition of the funding agreement. These included:

- members must not be employees or occupy unpaid staff roles
- trustees must appoint a clerk to the board
- the accounting officer and chief finance officer (CFO) should be employees
- consideration of accountancy qualifications for CFOs in larger trusts
- internal scrutiny covers both financial and non-financial controls
- confirmation that trusts can use additional individuals or organisations to support internal scrutiny where specialist non-financial help is required

Discussion followed and the CFO confirmed that all the above conditions were being met but he would also look at all other detail outlined in the handbook to ensure that all other requirements were being met. Trustees would be updated as necessary.

It was resolved –

- i) That the updated Academies Financial Handbook 2020 be received and noted.
- ii) That the CFO be requested to clarify what is meant by non-financial controls and to ensure that any necessary action is taken to ensure that the trust board complies with finance regulations.

b) External Auditor

The CFO reported that both he and the CEO had met with the recently appointed external auditor, Mazars LLP, to begin preparations for the external audit. The impact of Covid-19 on ULT schools would be a key feature of the audit. A timeline for the audit had been agreed and would include an opportunity for the Trust Board to meet with Mazars at its meeting in September. The draft audit would be presented to the Finance committee in early December for the Trust Board to then give formal approval at its meeting later that month. Representatives from Mazars would be present for both meetings.

It was resolved –

That the timeline for the external audit be received and accepted.

c) Integrated Curriculum and Financial Planning (ICFP)

The chair of the trust board reminded trustees of the importance of fully understanding ULT accounts and that the ICFP document was key to benchmarking financial expenditure across schools. Individual school information would help trustees identify how schools benchmarked against each other to support discussions and challenge where necessary. Priority should be given to developing this. The CFO reported that most schools should be able to provide the necessary information but that a common reporting format would be required.

It was resolved –

That the CFO be requested to work with schools to provide trustees with all necessary information to support better integrated curriculum and financial planning.

d) 2020/21 Budget

The CFO reported that the ESFA had confirmed that, due to the impact of Covid-19, budget returns should be submitted by 29 September rather than 31 July as in previous years. The need to provide budget forecasts for 2021/22 had also been removed.

Discussion followed and trustees asked the CFO to update the income/expenditure accounts to ensure that the impact of Richard Clarke First School joining the ULT was shown, together with the increase of the top slice to 3% from April 2021.

It was resolved –

That the CFO be requested to provide the updated 2020/21 budget for approval at the next meeting of the trust board, together with the proposed 5-year budget modeller.

199. Covid-19 Issues:

The CEO was pleased to report that the partial re-opening of all ULT schools had gone well and positively received by parents. The CEO also provided an update on other matters including:

- September 2020 – guidance was awaited for schools to plan to re-open in September, whilst mindful of social distancing requirements.
- Funding – additional Government funding was to be provided to all schools to help offset costs incurred due to Covid-19 and to also develop a tutoring programme to support disadvantaged pupils in particular. This would be discussed in more detail at a future meeting of the Finance committee once received.

- Free school meals – these were to continue during the summer holiday.

It was resolved –

That the update on Covid-19 issues be received and noted.

200. Trust Capacity Fund Bid:

Mr Slater reported that there was a further opportunity for the ULT to submit a bid for funding from the Trust Capacity Fund and he was hopeful that, given the decision of Richard Clarke First School to join the ULT and other schools looking into the possibility of joining, the criteria for submitting bids would be met. There were two opportunities to submit bids – one in July and the other in December. Discussion took place and the possibility of submitting two bids was considered, with the first submitted in July to take account of Richard Clarke First School joining the ULT and a second in December to support the possibility of other schools joining.

It was resolved –

That trustees fully support any bid made to the Trust Capacity Fund and that the CEO be requested to look into the possibility of two bids being submitted.

201. Review of Redundancy Policy:

Mr Slater reminded committee members that the decision to change the redundancy scheme had been held in abeyance due to the impact of Covid-19 on schools and that consideration should now be given to implementing the decision. Discussion followed and no changes to the detail of the original decision were recommended.

It was resolved –

That this matter be included on the agenda for the next meeting of the trust board to enable a decision to be taken regarding the timing of the implementation of the decision to change the redundancy scheme.

202. Risk Register:

Trustees had been previously circulated with an updated risk register to reflect discussions from the last meeting of the Finance committee and to take account of the financial impact of Covid-19 on schools.

The CEO further reported that the current format, and wording for many of the issues, had been in place for a number of years. As such it was considered that the development of an updated register would be more effective to help monitor risks and progress being made against each of them. The CEO undertook to develop a new risk register in readiness for the start of the new school year.

It was resolved –

That the updated risk register be received and noted and that trustees look forward to receiving a new format for the register at future meetings.

203. Policy Approval:

a) Whistle-blowing Policy

A copy of the revised Whistle-blowing policy had been previously circulated and the CEO highlighted changes that had been made. Discussion followed and other minor amendments to the policy were identified.

It was resolved –

That the Whistle-blowing policy be received and approved subject to the identified changes being made.

b) Fixed Assets Policy

A copy of the Fixed Assets policy had been previously circulated and the CFO reported that although the policy had been reviewed no changes were being recommended.

It was resolved –

That the Fixed Assets policy be received and approved as presented.

c) Investments Policy

A copy of the Investments policy had been previously circulated and the CFO reported that although the policy had been reviewed no changes were being recommended.

It was resolved –

That the Investments policy be received and approved as presented.

204. Any Other Business:

a) Year 4 Pupils

The chair of the trust board referred to a recent meeting of the School Representation Board where headteachers had made a request to be given permission to admit Y4 pupils, where possible, for more than the one day that had been agreed by trustees. Discussion followed and trustees were informed that this matter had also been considered at the meeting of the Education committee held the previous evening. The CEO reported that members of that committee had agreed to consider supporting the admittance of Y4 pupils for one week before the end of the school year if a formal transition programme was in place. Headteachers had therefore been asked to provide details of their plans.

It was resolved –

- i) That the CEO be requested to ask headteachers to provide details of their plans for Y4 pupils and that these be circulated to all trustees for a decision to be taken through email rather than an additional meeting.
- ii) That the CEO also be requested to seek the views of the local authority and regional schools commission in the event of approval being given for the admittance of Y4 pupils.

b) Staff Holidays – Summer 2020

The CEO reminded trustees that current Government legislation was that anyone returning to this country from abroad would be required to self-isolate for 14 days and for any members of staff having to do this on their return from holiday in September would impact on their school's ability to fully re-open after the summer holiday. Discussion followed and trustees agreed that staff should be reminded of the consequences of having to self-isolate at the start of the new school year, whilst also recognising that some staff may have booked holidays well before the coronavirus pandemic. Where this was the case the holiday booking would be honoured, but other staff would be encouraged not to book a holiday at this moment in time that could result in 14 days self-isolation at the time of schools re-opening in September. A consequence of this could be for leave to be unpaid.

It was resolved –

That the CEO and chair of the trust board would prepare a joint letter to be sent to all ULT staff seeking their support in this matter and encouraged not to book any holiday that could result in 14 days self-isolation at the time of schools re-opening in September.

205. Date of Next Meeting:

As previously agreed, the next meeting of the Finance Committee was to be held on Wednesday, 30 September 2020 at 5.30pm. The venue for the meeting would be confirmed nearer the date, but if it was still necessary for the meeting to be held remotely, then the committee would continue to meet through Microsoft teams.

L. Trigg
Signed.....

30 September 2020
Date.....