

**Uttoxeter Learning Trust  
Finance & Audit Committee**

Minutes of a meeting of the Finance & Audit Committee held remotely (via Microsoft teams) on Wednesday, 3 February 2021 at 5.30pm.

**Present:**

Mr L Trigg (chair), Mrs V Bennett, 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

**229. Declarations of Interest:**

There were no declarations of interest relevant to agenda items.

**230. Minutes:**

Minutes of a meeting of the Finance and Audit committee held on 2 December 2020 had been previously circulated and taken as read.

It was resolved –

That the minutes be received and approved, subject to the following amendment:

Minute 223 (resolution (ii)) – Covid-19-Financial Implications for Schools and the ULT.

Revised resolution to read:

That the chief finance officer would advise the DfE that the Trust Board was aware that two schools had mistakenly claimed for additional funding and had therefore reminded all of the schools to ensure that any future claims should be submitted in accordance with guidance.

**231. Matters Arising:**

a) External Audit (Minute 218 refers)

The CFO confirmed that the Audit Report and Financial Statements had been submitted to the ESFA as required, and now available on the ULT website. He reminded trustees that the report had identified some issues of concern that required amendment, including in particular rules around procurement and monthly cash flow recording. Discussion followed and the chair of the trust board further reported that it was important to note that ULT financial procedures had been revised to address both matters.

It was resolved –

That the update on the external audit be noted and that trustees formally record that all necessary actions had been taken to address concerns identified by the auditor.

b) PR & Marketing Strategy (Minute 221(a) refers)

The CEO provided an update on pupil numbers across schools in the Trust and highlighted differences from the previous school year. Trustees were reminded that a significant drop in numbers would impact on a school's budget and this was the case in particular for Oldfields Hall Middle and All Saints First Schools. As such, school budget projections would be revised as necessary. The CEO further reported that pupil numbers remained a challenge particularly as Covid-19 implications made it extremely difficult for schools to hold recruitment events. They were, however, being held remotely.

It was resolved –

That the update on pupil numbers be noted.

c) Trust Capacity Fund (Minute 221(b) refers)

The CEO confirmed that the Trust Capacity Fund bid had been submitted and that a decision was expected shortly. The chair of the trust board also reminded trustees that, if successful, the funds would need to be allocated before the end of March 2021. There were, however, a number of projects ready to be implemented should funds become available.

d) New School (Minute 221(c) refers)

The CEO reported that meetings around the build of the new school continued and it was hoped to start the required consultation after half-term. Trustees were reminded that LA funding (£25K) was available to support the PR and marketing of the school, including development of the school's website and support with this was being given by SERO. The chair of the trust board also reminded trustees that they would also have to be mindful of other related costs prior to the school opening in September 2022.

e) Richard Clarke First School (Minute 221(c) refers)

The CEO reported that all necessary arrangements continued, including issues around land registration, to ensure that the school would be able to officially join the ULT from 1 April 2021. The CEO was also pleased to report that agreement had been given for the nursery to remain on-site as part of the school.

f) Review of IT (Minute 212(e) refers)

The CEO reported that consideration continued to be given to IT provision and support across the Trust and that a detailed report would be available for consideration at the next meeting of the trust board. The views of headteachers were also being sought to help shape the IT review and subsequent outcomes. Some interim decisions had been taken, including the appointment of a part-time (0.6) IT technician for the remainder of the school year. The technician supporting Windsor Park and Oldfields Hall Middle schools was also now supporting the first schools.

The CEO further reported that the remote learning programmes put in place by schools had also highlighted other issues that would have to be taken into account as part of the review, including broadband/telephone provision. Headteachers had indicated support for a Trust wide arrangement being put in place.

It was resolved –

That the update on the IT review be noted and that trustees look forward to discussing this further at the next meeting of the trust board.

g) Internal Audit (Minute 222(a) refers)

The CFO reported that all schools had put appropriate action plans in place to address issues identified during the internal audit and that these had been submitted to the auditor. The CFO confirmed that he, and other finance colleagues, undertook checks to ensure that schools were taking necessary actions in accordance with the plans.

Discussion followed and trustees discussed the need for them to see individual school action plans. The chair further reported that the internal audit reports highlighted a number of recurring themes, including in particular reference to local governing bodies approving the Trust's Financial Policy and Procedures Manual. The chair also referred to a section in the audit report for Oldfields Hall, giving a member of staff approval to set discretionary fees. Trustees agreed that such action was not appropriate and the CEO was requested to inform the headteacher of this.

It was resolved –

- i) That the CFO be requested to arrange for copies of each school's action plan in response to the internal audit to be made available to the Finance committee for future review.
- ii) That the CEO be requested to remind headteachers that trustees were responsible for approving the Trust's Financial Policy and Procedures Manual and that governing bodies were required to accept it as presented.

**232. ULT Finance Report:**

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

a) CIF Bids

The CFO reported that an emergency CIF bid on behalf of All Saints School for roof repairs had been submitted but that a response had not yet been received. He would continue to pursue the matter. He further reported that temporary heating repairs at the school had been undertaken.

The CFO also outlined the CIF bids that had been submitted for 2021/22 which, if all were successful, would require around £600K in school contributions. The outcome of bids would be known towards the end of April.

It was resolved –

That the update on CIF bids be noted.

b) Land and Buildings Collection Tool

The CFO confirmed that the land and buildings return, referred to at the previous meeting, had been completed and returned to the ESFA within the agreed timeframe.

c) Performance Accounts

The CFO reported that the January figures were currently being finalised and that a report would shortly be prepared for trustees. The chair of the trust board reported that it was important for trustees to not just look at the 5-year budget plan for the ULT and its schools, and that there should be some comparison made with other schools and trusts to help benchmark the various KPIs. Such information would be of help when looking at school finances, particularly those schools likely to go into a deficit. The CFO reported

that the School Resource Management Asset Toolkit would be of help with this and would input data as necessary and would prepare a report for trustees to highlight the various issues.

It was resolved –

That trustees look forward to receiving the completed School Resource Management Asset toolkit to help them benchmark financial expenditure against other schools and trusts.

### **233. ULT Central Services:**

The chair of the trust board reported that a review of central services was necessary, particularly as the Trust continued to grow, and had been taken into account when putting the Trust Capacity Fund bid together. The CEO further reported that a report would be made available for the next meeting of the Trust Board to help prioritise the focus for a review of central services.

It was resolved –

That the update on central services be noted and that trustees look forward to receiving the report to support further discussions.

### **234. Covid-19 – Financial Implications for Schools and the ULT:**

The CFO reported that various Government grants were available to financially support schools due to increased expenditure arising from the impact of Covid-19. However, there was agreed criteria for submitting claims, which was also dependent on the level of reserve funding held by schools individually or the Trust as a whole. The CFO further reported that the reserve funding for a Trust should be no more than 4% of its total budget but that this figure was currently around 12% for the ULT. As things currently stood, schools were therefore not eligible to submit claims.

Discussion followed and trustees expressed concern that its schools continued to increase unplanned expenditure to comply with Covid-19 requirements, particularly around the purchase of PPE and additional staffing costs for both teaching and cleaning purposes. Trustees acknowledged the current level of reserve funding but much of it was already committed for future projects, particularly necessary building works should CIF bids not be successful.

It was resolved –

That the CEO and CFO be requested to make representation to both the DfE and RSC regarding this matter and to make it clear that the Trust's level of reserve funding would be around the required amount of 4% once all committed school projects had been taken into account.

### **235. Safeguarding:**

The CEO reported that schools had been asked to develop risk assessments associated with the remote learning programmes, including the issues around the recording of live lessons. Headteachers had been asked to share their school's risk assessment to help identify best practice.

The CEO was also pleased to report that there were no specific safeguarding issues to bring to the attention of trustees.

It was resolved –

That trustees welcome the encouragement for schools to share best practice around risk assessments to ensure that any safeguarding concerns were addressed.

### **236. Risk Register:**

Trustees had been previously circulated with an updated risk register and the CEO outlined the key changes that had been made to the register. Reference was made in particular to the recent temporary closure of Hutchinson Memorial First School due to a number of positive Covid-19 tests but the CEO confirmed that all actions had been taken in accordance with local and national guidance. The CEO also updated on the risk associated with Rycroft Middle School due to performance issues and impending changes to the school's leadership. The levels of risk would remain under review.

The CEO further reported that the risk associated with the health and safety objective would also remain under review should the CIF bids be unsuccessful. With regard to the risk associated with the growth of the ULT and the condition of some of the school buildings, the chair of the trust board reported that he and the CEO had recently met with Staffordshire County Council's portfolio holder for Education to seek his support in gaining funds for the ULT to help with its growth and the necessary improvement to the fabric of some of the schools. Trustees would be kept updated.

It was resolved –

That the updated risk register be received and noted.

### **237. Policy Approval:**

#### Financial Policy and Procedures Manual

A copy of the policy had been previously circulated and the CFO outlined the changes that had been made to the manual. Discussion followed and reference also made to procurement procedures. The chair reported that revised procedures were now in place for public procurement since the end of the Brexit transition period and a copy of the guidance document had been forwarded to the CFO. The CFO confirmed that he would further revise the financial manual as necessary.

It was resolved –

That the Financial Policy and Procedures manual be received and approved subject to the further changes around procurement.

The CEO left the meeting at this point.

### **238. Pay Review:**

See Confidential Appendix (attached).

**239. Date of Next Meeting:**

As previously agreed, the next meeting of the Finance Committee was to be held on Wednesday, 24 March 2021 at 5.30pm. The meeting would again be held remotely.

Mrs V Bennett  
**Signed**.....

24 March 2021  
**Date**.....