

## MINUTES OF THE CORPORATION MEETING

HELD ON WEDNESDAY 21<sup>ST</sup> MAY 2025 AT 6.00 P.M. MEETING 24/04

### IN QUAD 3, VARNDEAN COLLEGE

Present: Jill Arnold, Nick Armstrong, Jodie Braham, Toby Douglass, Sarah Dunsmore, Simon Lindfield, Alan Walker, Brendan Ward, John Williams, Jason Wye, Jolanta Young

In Attendance: James Gordon, Lisa Watkin-Stevens, Elaine French, Louise Pennington

The Meeting was quorate.

#### 1. Governor Membership Matters:

- a) Outcome of Student Union Elections and appointment of new Student Governors: Jolanta Young and Toby Douglass. **ACTION:** The Corporation endorsed the outcome of the election and duly appointed the new Student Governors for a 1 year term until their successors are elected next year.

#### 2. Welcomes and Apologies for Absence

Apologies: Ayas Fallon Khan, Paul Herridge, Keith Perera, Donna-Marie Janson, John Lamb, Carrie Llewellyn,

Welcomes: New Student Governors: Jolanta Young and Toby Douglass; New Staff Governor (Support Category): Sarah Dunsmore

In the Chair: Jill Arnold

The Meeting was quorate.

#### 3. Declarations of Interest

None recorded at this time, other than those declarations notified at previous meetings and as recorded in the Register of Interests' files.

#### 4. Minutes of the Corporation held on 26<sup>th</sup> March 2025 Part I Main Business and Part II Confidential Minutes

The minutes Parts I and II of the meeting were approved by the Corporation and the Chair was authorised to sign these. **ACTION: Louise Pennington/Chair of Governors**

In response to a question from Nick Armstrong, the SEND Link Governor, regarding feedback on the new policies (admissions and attendance), it was confirmed that the Admissions Policy was on the meeting agenda and that regarding attendance, SLT would liaise with Nick Armstrong after the meeting and would share the proposed updated Attendance Policy with him for his input, as soon as it had been drafted. **ACTION: SLT/NA**

#### 5. Matters Arising and Action Points and Significant Risks

The Corporation noted the progress with actions to date and those which were on the agenda, in progress or would be taken forward in due course.

It was noted that the actions' schedule would be updated to reflect any changes detailed above. **ACTION: Louise Pennington.**

At this point Jill Arnold, Chair of Governors informed the Corporation that to date one Governor had expressed interest in taking over the role of Chair and that other Governors were invited to apply for the post, following which interviews would be held. Subject to appointing her successor, Jill Arnold confirmed that although it was initially proposed that she would remain in post for 1 more year until the end of July 2026, she intends to retire at the end of this academic year, with the new Chair being appointed with effect from the next academic year. She advised that a communication providing details would be circulated to all Governors prior to the end of this half term. **ACTION: Jill Arnold, Louise Pennington and Governors**

The contents of the schedule of significant risks/High Level risks were noted by the Corporation.

## **5. Chair's Report**

Reference was made to the Principal's report which included details of the DfE's Annual Strategic Conversation which the Chair had attended along with the Principal and members of SLT.

## **6. Principal's Report**

### **Papers: Executive Summary**

In the absence of the Principal, Donna-Marie Janson, James Gordon, Deputy Principal and Lisa Watkin-Stevens, Vice-Principal, provided the following update on her behalf:

- The Governing Body noted the contents of the Principal's written report.
- Meeting at University of Brighton regarding the creation of a strategic alliance across Sussex, was held recently, with the previous meeting hosted by Sussex University. Discussions were held regarding objectives and collaborations, with the aim of introducing joint approaches towards key areas such as student wellbeing and developing life skills, transition from FE to HR, support staff workload challenges.
- DfE Annual Strategic Conversation where the DfE team visited the College, met with the Chair of Governors and SLT Members (Principal, Deputy Principal and Vice-Principal (Finance) and reviewed the accountability statement and progression towards objectives. The meeting was useful but also more robust than previous years, in terms of comparing performance measures and how well the curriculum matches the local skills priorities, together with discussing the College's retention figures. The DfE Team was satisfied with the actions set out in the various quality improvement plans, which highlighted actions being taken to improve achievement and efficiencies and the College's strengths were recognised. During the meeting a useful conversation regarding the College's efficiency benchmarking tools being implemented to focus upon the overall financial health. The Team noted the difficult

financial situation and also that there was no capital funding likely to be available in the near future. The Team were given a tour of the site including the various temporary huts, so understood the building issues. In response to a question from Governors, it was confirmed that timing of future capital funding was not known. A brief conversation occurred in respect of T Levels noting that there was no longer a T Level capital bid programme (The College's T Level provision was based upon the courses in early years and child care as set out in the old accountability statement). A brief reference to academisation was included in the conversation, noting that the College had in the past considered the options, including financial repercussions etc.

- Accountability Statement and Local Needs: the agreement has been reviewed and progression against the statement has been highlighted and included in the summary, taking into account the decision to discontinue Adult Education, whilst maintaining Counselling courses, the latter of which meets the City's skills needs. Reference was made to the information relating to employability/Varndean College internship programme and working with the LSIF (Local Skills Improvement Fund). A new careers' "app" has been developed across all FE Colleges to enable Students to apply for employment/other roles/internships etc, arising from a LSIP (Local Skills Improvement Plan) project with FE Sussex, which was launched at College a few weeks ago. It was noted that this was at the early stages of development with only a few employers on the app at present, but the intention will be to develop this as a useful "market place" for Students in the area; the app will have the ability to match a Student's skills/experiences/qualifications with particular roles. In response to a question from Governors regarding how employers engage with the app, James Gordno explained that this was managed by FE Sussex with the onus on them to increase the engagement from local employers, which is currently work in progress. James Gordon confirmed that he had attended meetings regularly via a Steering Group, along with other College representatives but that funding for this had now ceased. It was noted that the local Chamber of Commerce was involved in developing this going forward, along with FE Sussex.

Key priorities within the new accountability statement were highlighted and reference was made to continuing focus upon responding to local employers and alignment with the LSIP, including health and wellbeing and early years, noting also that the Principal represented the local Sixth Form sector in the Group. Strategic partnerships were also highlighted in the new statement including that with the University and FE Sussex, S7 and EQR. Improvements in data and analysis was noted including the FE dashboard and other external measures enabling benchmarking.

The accountability agreement/statement was approved by the Governing Body.

**ACTION: SLT**

### **Update from Staff Wellbeing and Satisfaction Survey re Staff Project/Staff Wellbeing Mentors (action from July 2024 Meeting)**

Lisa Watkin-Stevens (Vice-Principal) provided the following update:

- A survey was initiated by the HR Department and findings were presented to the Staff on 29th April 2025.

- The document included in the papers, namely the proposed action plan, was drawn to the attention of Governors, noting the issues highlighted including workload and administration.
- In response to a question from the Corporation, the Vice-Principal explained the additional workload placed upon Staff including that generated owing to the new Skills Act requirements, together with increasing expectations on Teachers and an increase in time spent on managing mental health issues, post the pandemic, noting that all of the issues had been addressed in the action plan, including reviewing the number and purpose of staff meetings. The low response rate from Teaching staff overall to the survey, was also noted, again reflecting the workload pressures on Staff taking into account the issues recorded above, together with other causes including increased class sizes/more work, reduced technical support in some curriculum areas, reduction in high needs funding etc. At this point reference was also made to the decision to discontinue adult education provision wef the next academic year and it was confirmed that no appeals had been submitted from Staff affected by this. The Deputy Principal reported that redundancies had been avoided where possible with 4/5 of Staff being redeployed. Regarding the discontinuation of the College's ESOL provision, the Deputy Principal explained that this had been more challenging but that the College continued to work with Brighton University, GB Met and the Local Authority to encourage and enable Students to move to the other local providers, subject to funding support continuing. Regarding evening leisure courses, information has been provided, sign posting to similar provisions in the City.

Thanks were recorded to SLT for their report.

## 7. Student Governors' Report

The new Student Governors, Toby Douglass and Jolanta Young introduced themselves and then provided the following update to Governors on various activities involving the SU and Student Governors, since their election:

- SU Election - significant interest this year with a record number of applications - 44 and good voting turnout - 838 votes.
- The new SU has had several meetings post the election.
- VE Day events raised money for local charities.
- Mental Health awareness event organised and held last Friday.
- Year 2 Prom. event - initial plans underway, with input requested from Students via google forms.
- The SU may review the SU constitution this year before the next election period and it was noted that any changes would need to be presented to Corporation for consideration and approval, noting that there needed to be a greater focus upon encouraging male Students to participate in the process, with only 1 male presidential candidate submitted this year. **ACTION: Student Governors**
- Citizens UK - SU involvement and at present discussing the various citywide projects underway.
- Brighton Pride events - Student involvement under discussion.

Thanks were recorded to the Student Governors for their report.

## **8. Curriculum and Standards**

James Gordon and Lisa Watkin-Stevens provided the following reports to the Corporation:

### **a) College SAR/QIP Review**

#### **Papers:**

- i) Executive Summary**
- ii) Report**

- James Gordon updated Governors on the QIP progress, referring to pages 25 onwards and highlighting the key targets for the year and actions to date.
- Key areas highlighted focused on retention and achievement and noting retention target of 84%, with a retention achieved at the time of writing of 88.4%, but currently registered at 86%. It was thought that as at the year end, the College was likely to achieve the target, reflecting the initiatives implemented to improve the figures including Student induction and skills development, together with improving the admissions process to ensure Students were on the right courses.
- Male retention figures, which are separately reported, have also improved.
- the various retention and engagement initiatives around Foundation Students were noted which has resulted in improved retention and progression of Students on to Level 3 courses, post their Foundation studies. A framework for foundation Students has been developed, including expectations.
- In response to a question from the Corporation, it was noted that retention was measured over 2 years - from October half term year 1 until year 2 and looked at on a course by course retention - which reflects the impact of both Students changing courses and those reducing from 3 on enrolment to 2 in some instances. The most significant impact on retention figures relates to changing courses, rather than Students withdrawing from College but it was noted that some may withdraw and repeat a year owing to ill health issues, preventing progression and others move to employment/apprenticeship opportunities in their second year.
- The College's retention target of 84/85% will be a significant improvement from 76/77% but noting the national benchmark being above 90%, notwithstanding the impact of the local context which explains the lower retention level compared to the national figure.

### **b) Student Application Numbers' Update**

#### **Papers:**

- i) Executive Summary**
- iii) Report**

Lisa Watkin-Stevens reported on the application numbers to date which are looking very positive. The application data reported in graphical format was highlighted within the report (third graph dated 9th May over last 4 years), which demonstrated the College's position since 2022, and noting that the College's applications from Brighton and Hove Schools had continued to increase, including the number of Foundation Year Students progressing to level 3.

Improvements had been made by the College to the new Student Day, liaison assemblies and Year 10 days, which appears to have had a positive impact on the application numbers. Currently SLT are forecasting a larger first year which will be balanced by a slightly smaller second year, the latter reflecting the fact that the College had had more Foundation year Students enrolling last year and are therefore returning in September for their 1st year of a 2 year course. SLT is focusing on achieving a steady growth in Student numbers but also taking into account the limitations of the College's estates. It was noted that the College's capacity was broadly at its limit at the moment and a waiting list had been established for Student enrolment for 25/26 year.

### **c) Enrichment Report**

#### **Papers:**

- I) Executive Summary**
- II) Report**

Lisa Watkin-Stevens presented the papers and the following points were recorded:

- It's been a successful year to date with an increased focus upon enrichment, having consulted Students via a Student survey to identify what activities would work, be of most interest to Students whilst also providing transferable skills and reflect the community ethos
- Next steps - focus upon improving attendance on some of the enrichment courses in conjunction with the respective Head of School. Secondly, SLT is aiming to encourage more Student-led enrichment activities.

**Owing to the sensitive nature of the following items, it was resolved to transfer the record to Confidential Part II Minutes**

### **9. Finance - CONFIDENTIAL**

The various papers were presented to the Corporation, noting that the Budget for 25/26 would be considered at the June 2025 Finance Committee and reported to the July 2025 Corporation Meeting for approval.

#### **a) Financial Updates and Management Accounts**

**Papers: i) Executive Summary, ii) Detailed Income & Expenditure, iii) Balance Sheet, iv) Cashflow Forecast**

Elaine French drew attention to the following points:

- The forecast remains similar to the last set of management accounts.
- Still awaiting confirmation from ESFA regarding the in year funding grant agreed to cover the Teachers' pay award, which the DfE advised initially that this would be received by Colleges in February.
- The increase in Employers' National Insurance contributions equates to £84K in year additional costs but next year is predicted to increase to around £250k. Initially the DfE advised that this additional cost would be covered by a grant in full, but the indications from the DfE more recently is that this will be 75% funded. The difficulty



managing the finances when significant levels of funding previously promised in a timely manner, still hasn't been received, was noted.

- for 2025/2026 the funding rate will be increased, also reflecting the increase in Student retention, which will also be improved owing to an increase in Student numbers.
- Cash position - in response to a question from the Governing Body, Elaine French explained how the Finance Team was managing its suppliers, noting that many were supportive and understanding of the College's financial situation. The Corporation was also reminded that following the ONS reclassification of FE/SFCs back into the public sector, Colleges were no longer able to borrow money commercially, from banks including an overdraft arrangement. The College's financial management was assisted this year by the International Team bringing forward their payments dates for September enrolments. As funding is not paid by the DfE upfront, the first quarter of 25/26 will have to be very carefully managed in terms of cash.
- Regarding a question arising from paper 10a Part 1 table summary and references to months eg 02/25 etc, year end projections, clarification was sought from Governors and Elaine French confirmed that this reflected the financial year with 02/25 being September 2025 (second month with year starting in August and ending in July). It was agreed that the headings should be revised (inserting month) to avoid any confusion. **ACTION: Elaine French**

#### **b) Property Update**

The Corporation was informed that the outcome of the 2 bids had not yet been announced but was expected within the next 1 or 2 weeks. (bid 1: £1M to upgrade heating in main building and hutchins wing, following boiler upgrade last year; bid 2: upgrade all fire doors in main building which are not up to date with Health and Safety Regulations).

Other plans for the summer works, where a small budget has been established, will cover essential maintenance and a limited amount of refurbishment.

**ACTION: Elaine French/Chair of Governors/Principal**

### **10. Policies and Other Documents**

It was agreed that the following section would be taken as read, subject to any questions received from Governors. The policies were approved by the Corporation.

#### **a) Admissions Policy (executive summary and policy) - annual policy**

- revisions highlighted in the paper were noted.
- the new Foundation gateway year option was explained by the Deputy Principal, noting that this was a new initiative to support refugees with UK residency, needing support relating to English language, providing them with the option of an additional year.
- Governors were reminded that there were waiting lists for the next academic year and that the College will aim to accommodate Students requests to

change courses where possible, although this may not be available in all cases.

- The changes to the admissions interview and enrolment process was highlighted too.
- Reference was also made to the input offered by the SEND Link Governor, Nick Armstrong, to review the attendance policy. **ACTION: Lisa Watkin-Stevens/Nick Armstrong**

**b) CCTV Policy (executive summary and policy)**

The Corporation noted that the content of the policy was broadly unchanged with some administrative changes updated.

The Corporation approved the policies. **ACTION: SLT**

**15. Date of Next Meeting:** Wednesday 9<sup>th</sup> July 2025 at 6.00 p.m.

**15. Any Other Business** - none.

At this point following a question raised by a Governor regarding consequences relating to the recent Supreme Court ruling regarding “sex” in the Equality Act 2010 refers to biological sex, not gender identity or legal recognition, it was noted that the College was working on guidance for Colleges with Brighton and Hove.

A Governor recorded thanks to Students and Staff having recently attended the Dance extravaganza.

- a) **Part II Confidential business** – Minutes March 2025 approved – refer above.
- b) **Any other confidential business** – None.

**17. Enclosures for Information – Meeting dates for Summer Term 2025** – Governors were encouraged to put the dates relevant to them in their diaries.

Louise Pennington 21/05/25

Chair.....

Date.....