

MINUTES OF THE CORPORATION MEETING

HELD ON WEDNESDAY 15th OCTOBER 2025 AT 5.30 P.M. MEETING 25/01

IN QUAD 3, VARNDEAN COLLEGE

Present: Jodie Braham, Toby Douglass, Sarah Dunsmore, Ayas Fallon-Khan, Paul Herridge, Donna-Marie Janson, Simon Lindfield, Carrie Llewellyn, Alan Walker, John Williams (Chair)

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

1. Welcomes and Apologies for Absence

Apologies: Yasmin Khan, Brendan Ward, Jolanta Young, John Lamb, Nick Armstrong, Keith Perera, Jason Wye

Welcomes: None

In the Chair: John Williams

The Meeting was quorate.

2. 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.

3. Minutes of the Corporation held on 9th July 2025 Part I Main Business; Part II Confidential Minutes (none)

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

4. 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.

In response to a question from Paul Herridge, Audit Committee Chair, regarding the Audit Strategy Memorandum, referred to on page 8, Elaine French confirmed that this would be presented to Governors at the next Audit Committee in November.

Ofsted consultation item, the Principal confirmed that this action had been completed.

Student Governors' "buddy" arrangement with a Governor – the Chair of Corporation confirmed that he had had a pre-meeting with the Student Governor to go through the Meeting papers and that this would be arranged before every Corporation meeting.

ACTION: John Williams/Student Governors

SU Constitution – Toby Douglass confirmed that proposed changes to this document were in progress and once the final draft was ready, this would be brought to Corporation for review and approval. **ACTION: Student Governors**

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

4b) High Level Risks' schedule: Governors were reminded that the schedule listing the significant risks were included in the meeting papers, to act as a reminder for Governors to ensure awareness throughout the meeting when considering each agenda item.

5. Chair's Report

Papers: Chair's Report

The Chair presented his report to the Corporation and the contents of this were noted by the Meeting.

Attention was drawn to the invitation from the SFCA to participate in the SFCs' governance benchmarking research project, noting that the Chair would be meeting with Rajbir Hazelwood (Managing Director, ImpactEd) on 9 October for an initial meeting. The Chair also informed Governors that they would be invited to participate in the process via a questionnaire which will be emailed in due course, and should take about 15 minutes to complete.

The Corporation approved the proposal that John Williams should be appointed Chair of S & G Committee with immediate effect, noting that the existing Committee Chair, Brendan Ward, would continue as a Committee Member; thanks were recorded to Brendan for his service as Committee Chair. Following a question from Governors, it was noted that it was common practice for the Chair of Corporation to also Chair the Search Committee. **ACTION: Louise Pennington**

6. Principal's Report

The Principal presented her Report and attention was drawn to the following points:

Papers: Executive Summary

a) Start of Year Update

The positive outcomes and improvements in results, retention levels, value added and enrolments were welcomed by the Governing Body, noting that the analyses would be presented by James Gordon, within item 10, later in the meeting.

- Student numbers: The College achieved its 3 year target this year which while very positive has created some issues regarding class sizes and number of classes. The additional Students enrolled this year, will generate £950K funding for next year.

- Retention: improvement in retention levels, reflects the additional strategies introduced last year to address the various retention issues; funding has also improved in light of the retention levels.
- A new HR system will be introduced shortly for probation, training and appraisals, and this will be implemented over the coming year bearing in mind teacher workload issues. In response to a question from Governors, James Gordon stated that the growth in Student numbers had arisen across the board and not from 1 specific area. He also added that in light of our increased popularity and local demographics, SLT had some concern about managing Student numbers for next year. Meetings have been held with other local Sixth Form providers to discuss management of Student numbers for next year, noting that Varndean is full, and that next year was likely to attract further increases on the positive side, teaching space has been expanded, since adult education has been significantly reduced this year (only Counselling remains).
- Open Evenings have already started this term in respect of recruiting Students for 2026/2027 and the College has experienced record numbers attending these events.
- SLT is in the process of reviewing its Admission Policy for next year, in light of the pressure on future growth in terms of teaching staff and the overall Student experience.
- So far this term, Students appear to be settling in well and SLT and Heads of School etc, have completed various learning walks which has provided good feedback from Students.

b) Pay Award Update

The Principal confirmed that the pay award agreed at the last Corporation meeting, had been implemented, noting also that regarding the Support Staff pay settlement agreement had been reached with the Unions, which the College will aim to implement with immediate effect in the October pay roll (and backdated to 1st September), subject to Corporation agreement (4% has been included in the budget). The Corporation approved this, but also noted that Support Staff had not been awarded the full pay award or back pay regarding last year's pay award, but that this would be revisited at the next Corporation meeting. **ACTION: SLT**

It was reported that the Teachers' pay had also settled at 4% but with other issues raised during the negotiation process, based upon working conditions – class sizes, directed time, administrative tasks, plus annual leave, none of which have yet been resolved and negotiations were continuing between the NEU and the SFCA.

c) Government Policy Updates

The Governing Body were referred to the summary provided in the paper, highlighting the following items – qualification reforms in terms of focussing on skills with a new V Level qualification (vocational); new Ofsted framework which will be discussed at the College's new Quality, Curriculum and Student Experience Committee, although noting that the College was unlikely to receive notice for an Ofsted visit for a couple of years, taking into account the last Ofsted visit held in Spring Term 2024.

A letter from the DfE has also been including which informs the College that the DfE intends to revise IB funding, no longer classifying it as a high value course, which will result in the discontinuation of the current additional funding uplift. Varndean College is 1 of only 20 state sixth form providers which offers the IB. The funding loss equates to approximately £80K/£85K. Some of the local MPS have raised the issue in Parliament during PM's question time. The College has also submitted letters (from the Principal and also the Chair of Governors) to the DfE (and to our local MPs) about this, along with various Parents etc. It was also noted that the IB includes Maths and Science and as the additional funding is meant for STEM courses, as the IB includes these courses, challenges will continue to be made to the DfE.

The IB offer by the College is sustainable with 100 Students, noting also the excellent results which the College's Students achieve, including 1 Student last year who got 44 out of 45 points, placing them in the top 1% in the world.

7. Student Governors' Report

Toby Douglass, the Student Governor, provided the following update to Governors on various activities involving the SU and Student Governors, since the last meeting and he referred to the Student Governors' first written report, the details of which were noted.

- The written report highlighted actions completed since the last meeting together with new items to be progressed.
- This half term has been quite hectic with freshers' week, involving a different event or activity per day, and also involvement in the Open Days.
- Student Voice activities – including the first Student Council Meeting of the academic year, plus involvement in Citizens UK.
- SU EDI Officer led on organisation for the Black History events.
- Next week the SU has organised various Halloween activities, culminating in a costume event on Friday before half term.
- An events calendar is being drafted to improve organisation and to enable sufficient notification to Students.
- The top 3 items on the action plan are:
 - Common Room – request to open a number of classrooms at lunchtime for Students to use particularly during the winter months, bearing in mind that the canteen becomes very busy and other inside areas are needed. In response SLT confirmed that a plan for opening certain classrooms during lunchtimes, is being devised for post reading week, and Teaching Staff will have to be paid to supervise each room and also to ensure that each classroom is then also ready for the next lessons. It was also noted that as there were numerous enrichment activities taking place at lunchtimes, this also placed a greater demand for classroom space too. The intention will be for the Library Manager to co-ordinate the lunchtime classroom options which will then be offered from post reading week, until February half-term. Furthermore, 16 more corridor benches had been ordered to provide additional inside seating areas.

- Canteen food – a greater variety of food options, including healthy choices, has been requested by Students via the SU. The Catering Manager will be meeting with the Students at the next Student Council Meeting to discuss this and the SU may also establish a focus group of Students to review and suggest ideas to take to the Catering Manager for consideration.
- Recycling bins – the College’s environmental action group is looking to take forward the initiative to encourage more bins to be made available.
- Ongoing project working with the transport companies to investigate the frequency of buses particularly during busy times and also where certain routes have been lost, with the aim of seeking solutions to improve Student transport. The SU is also investigating harassment on buses and how to prevent this.
- SU Democracy Officer is looking at promoting voting to Students in light of the proposed reduction in voting age for the next General Election.

Thanks were recorded to Toby Douglass for his report.

8. Governor Membership Matters

The contents of the paper were considered by the Corporation and the following recommendations endorsed:

1. **Recommendation: Quality, Curriculum & Student Experience Committee** - Carrie Llewellyn to be appointed to the Committee with immediate effect.
2. **S & G Committee** Chair – refer Chair’s Report
3. **Remuneration Committee** – Jodie Braham to be appointed as Chair (currently Simon Lindfield)
4. **Vacancies:** a) **Link and Lead Governors**
 - Environment and Sustainability Link Governor
 - Skills Link Governor
- b) **Committees:** Finance Committee – vacancy

Other: John Williams reported that he had a CV for a candidate for the vacant Environment and Sustainability Link Governor role, which would be presented for consideration at the next Search and Governance Committee (noting that there were currently no Governor vacancies, but that certain co-opted Committee member vacancies may be an option for the S & G Committee to consider).

9. **Tea, Coffee Sustenance Comfort Break** – at this point the meeting was paused for a 10 minute break.

10. Finance

Financial Sustainability - *“We will secure the future of the college, its students, staff and estate through excellent financial and resource management to enable an exceptional student experience, a happy, secure and consistent workplace and a growing and thriving community asset”*

PAPERS:**10a Financial Update: Draft Year-End Management Accounts****10a (i) Executive Summary****10a (ii) Draft Year End Income and Expenditure 12-25****10a (iii) Draft Year End Balance Sheet 12-25**

Elaine French presented the various financial papers to the Corporation, highlight the key aspects within each of the financial schedules.

The following points were highlighted:

- Draft year end figures include the final adjustments in respect of pension, noting that this had not affected the financial health figure or the EBITDA. The Auditors have been working with Elaine French and the Finance Team on the end of year figures.
- Year end figures – noted variance against budget to date and budget to forecast, including the variance from the last forecast presented to Corporation in July.
- Noted from the executive summary that the latest figures have improved slightly compared to those presented in July. Despite this and as expected, the College's financial health for the year remains at "requires improvement", being a score of 120.
- In response to a question from Governors regarding international students and whether there was scope to increase fee levels, in response it was reported that the last fee increase had been with effect from the last academic year and that the College had a 3 year fee increase plan and that in order to remain competitive, there were no plans to revise the current plan. However, it was also reported that the College placed a limit on the number of International Students in order to ensure that places are prioritised for local students, noting also that the College no longer enrolls international students for single terms, with the current numbers for full year 1/year 2 Students is at 70 Students. Should the local demographics reduce, the College will reconsider increasing its international student numbers. It was also noted at this point that some of the international students were enrolled on the IB course.
- Governors queried next year's forecast with the financial health projected to be "good", subject to funding remaining unchanged and noting the impact of the additional Students enrolled this year, resulting in lagged funding, reflected in next year's figures. The DfE are due to confirm the in year growth funding in the Spring Term, but it was expected that this income would be honoured and likely to be based on a similar calculation to the method used by the DfE for 2024/2025.
- Staffing ratio remains high at 80 (sector average is under 75% but target for the sector is between 65 and 70) so the College will have to continue to focus on managing this more closely, with the aim of improving this ratio, noting that the increase in class sizes, would assist with this, together with discontinuing the Adult Education offer.

10b Estates and Resources**10b (i) Executive Summary****10b (ii) Health and Safety Report**

Elaine French reported on the recent retirement of Nick Stubbs, the College's H and S officer and informed Governors that the operational element of the role had been taken over by the Estates Manager, who was in the process of finishing his H and S course. Whilst the Estates Manager will largely deal with operational H and S matters, it was noted that an external H and S consultant with extensive expertise, would almost certainly be needed to assist the Estates Manager in ensuring that the College was fully compliant with the H and S laws, rules and regulations and an allowance for this has been included in the budget. Nick Stubbs has been retained on a consultancy basis anyway since his retirement in July, for 6 months.

11. Curriculum and Standards

11a Student Performance Data Dashboard (including value-added and exam results for all learners)

11a (i) Executive Summary

11a (ii) Data Dashboard

James Gordon presented the papers to the Corporation, drawing Governors to the following:

- Data dashboard reflects that all the key metrics have improved.
- Executive summary highlights the actions taken by the College, as set out in the QIP (Quality Improvement Plan), which have been responsible for the various areas of improvement.
- Student retention – Level 3 vocational Students has had a particular issue with retention and the latest figures show that it has improved by 16% over the 2 years. Other groups of Students have also shown more marginal gains in retention.
- Referring to the graphs in respect of the main metrics, attention was drawn to the improvements in the figures, based on the graphs showing the pass rates, retention levels (which contributes towards the overall achievement figures and high grade measures - noting that for vocational subjects distinction grades or above, and for foundation/GCSE courses – merit or above/grade 4 or above are taken into account).
- The executive summary also highlights the EDI outcomes, where improvements in certain areas were focused upon, including Students from low income backgrounds, certain ethnic groups and male Student retention figures as the College was losing 8% more male Students than female Students – regarding the latter, there remains a difference but the percentage has reduced to just below 4% retention loss. James Gordon reiterated the interventions/support programmes introduced targeting those Students who were under achieving and had low attendance levels etc.
- Regarding the review of the Admissions Policy, it was noted that SLT were holding an away day to review this and discuss all issues such as Students' distance from the College etc. The predicted demographic projections for the local area were also noted, and in particular the predicted reduction expected in the next few years.

11b Student Enrolment and Class Sizes

11b (i) Executive Summary

11b (ii) Analysis

James Gordon presented the papers to the Corporation, highlighting the enrolment analysis, identifying where growth has been generated in certain areas – being 10% year on year and 12% over 2 years, which has to be managed in terms of how many Students can be accommodated on the site.

- The figures provided in the executive summary were highlighted which reflected the growth in Student numbers in year 1 and then progressing to year 2, plus also raised the challenge of managing the increase in intake, year on year.
- Foundation year student numbers have also increased – currently at 270 Students and requiring a close monitoring and management of classroom space.
- Funded student numbers are calculated based on the number of Students who are retained after 42 days since enrolment.
- Class/set size for year 1 has increased to an average 19.4 (compared with 16.8, 4 years ago), with some classes reaching 22 to 24 Student numbers, whilst IB class size has increased marginally to 16.4.
- The number of classes within the foundation year offer have increased, but this is being reviewed to ensure its sustainability, as there is a limit on how many Maths GCSE classes for example, can be offered; class size around 20.
- Other challenges regarding the number of classes offered for foundation and other year 1/year 2 courses, arise from those subjects which require specialist resources, such as art rooms, specialist labs etc
- Particular departments suffering high class sizes such as some of the IB options – eg maths and biology, have put in place additional workshop times for Students.
- The admission team processing of Student applications has also resulted in the conversion of more applications, so that when Students miss interviews, they are contacted and re-booked for a second interview, which has increased the overall Student applications/enrolment numbers.

11c Staff CPD Report

11c (i) Executive Summary

11c (ii) Report

James Gordon gave a summary of the Staff training/CPD carried out, including mandatory training together with workshops on sharing good practice, also noting sessions on digital training including AI.

Other training reported included S7 training (Surrey and Sussex consortium), noting that all senior leaders from the S7 colleges participating in the consortium, which contributed to the training sessions. The Principal is currently the Chair of S7. There are also training courses for support staff managers.

11d Annual Safeguarding Report

11d (i) Executive Summary

11d (ii) Report

Lisa Watkin-Stevens introduced the Safeguarding Report in respect of the 2024/2025 academic year and highlighted the following aspects:

- Format remains the same as last year, together with the safeguarding team overview, plus operational matters, processes and reporting.
- Student Mental Health remains the primary issue nationally
- The report draws attention to the College's work with external groups and agencies which support students, with mental health and safeguarding issues.
- Statutory requirements regarding staff training, recruitment and SCR record keeping were noted.
- Report concludes with an outlined focus of plans for this year, together with details of the Safeguarding Team – one of the tasks being to investigate the use of CPOMs software which several colleges and schools use, making the transfer and sharing of safeguarding files easier, more effective and secure. Next year the report will have a revised presentation and content, with a more detailed analysis, as a consequence of the move to the new software.

12. Policies and Other Documents

12a Executive Summary for Items 12a i and ii:

12a i) Health and Safety Policy

12a ii) Health and Safety Annual Report – Refer Finance section

12a iii) Health and Safety Link Governor Report

The Corporation noted the technical updates to the Policy which were approved by the Corporation. **ACTION: DMJ**

Ayas Fallon-Khan, the Link, H and S Governor, gave a summary of his visits to College, and noting that any key aspects, had already been addressed in the H and S annual report.

12b) Safeguarding Policy

Executive Summary and Policy

The contents of the summary and policy were noted and that there were very few changes, apart from some personnel updates, together with Appendix F (online safety). The document was approved by the Corporation. It was also noted that this item was usually presented annually at the July Corporation meeting but that this had been deferred owing to the late issuance of the updated version of KCSiE (Keeping Children Safe in Education).

ACTION: LWS

13. Any Other Business

The Principal referred Governors to the College branded bag and documents, and highlighted the change of branding from Varndean College to Varndean Sixth Form College, notwithstanding that the College's name had not been changed officially and legally remained as Varndean College.

14. Confidential Business – none.

15. 2025-2026 Meeting Schedule (revised Quality, Curriculum and Student Experience Committee dates). – noted.

16. Date of Next Meeting: Wednesday 10th December 2025 at 5.30 p.m.

17. Any Other Business - none.

Part II Confidential business – None

Any other confidential business – None

18. Enclosures for Information – None

Chair.....

Date.....

Louise Pennington 15/10/25