



**The Castle School**  
A SPECIALIST COLLEGE FOR COMMUNICATION & INTERACTION

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**MINUTES of a meeting of the Full Governing Board held on  
Thursday 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2023, from 5.00pm,  
Held on Zoom**

**Present:** Wendy Batchelor (LEA governor), Helen Cabell (co-opted governor), Charlie Kowalski (Parent Governor) (*joined 5 mins in*), Philip Jackson (Co-opted governor), Jon Hewitt (Headteacher), Nicola Markham (Co-opted) Jo Davies (Staff Governor) (*joined 10 mins in*), Arianna Loconte (Co-opted Governor), Adrian Crawford (parent Governor), Giles Francis (Co-opted Governor), Jane Gray (Clerk)

**In attendance:** Atul Attra (School Business Manager), James Whybra (Deputy Head), Caroline Whitlock (Deputy Head)

**1. Apologies Received (JG)**

Apologies received from Helen Amner-Munslow.

**2. Declarations of interest for this meeting (Chair)**

None declared.

**3. Any other business (AOB) items for the agenda (Chair)**

Recruitment of Co-opted Governors  
Governor Training  
National situation with Ofsted

**4. Minutes from the last meeting and matters arising (Chair)**

JG confirmed that a list of acronyms was sent out following the last FGB meeting but is happy to send it out at any time if required.

WB thanked all Governors for completing the Skills Audit. This will now assist with determining any further training that may be required. Also, we will be able to identify any skills gaps we may have when recruiting for Governors in future.

WB thanked NM for sending a letter on behalf of the Governors to the staff @Theale for all their hard work to date and for getting the new site ready for the start of the Autumn Term.

All new governors confirmed that DBS checks have been completed and the Induction packs have been sent out. Details have recently been emailed to new governors regarding the induction course run by WBC.

The latest WOW newsletters have been sent to the governors and JW to inform governors on when the next event will be. JW also confirmed that governors are welcome to attend any

workplace assessments. WB suggested that if this was taken on by one of the governors , they can then feed back to the board.

No further issues were raised and therefore the minutes from 17<sup>th</sup> November 2022 were approved.

## 5. Committee reports

**Curriculum (WB)** There is still a need for EHCP training for Governors. It has been suggested that this only needs to be half an hour and probably best to incorporate at the Governors Strategy Day. However, it was felt that a more in-depth training session might benefit those on the Curriculum Committee. **JH to investigate this and to follow up with to JG.**

Play based education was discussed. Kate Mason is working on that with KS1 and KS2 and will work up through the school.

5 pupils have left the school so far this year, due to moving out of the area. Also, sadly, there was the death of a pupil. As this pupil had not been in school very much recently, there wasn't a significant impact on the school.

There was no further update on Earwig. **Will Harvey (WH) will provide an update at the Autumn 2023 Curriculum Committee and FGB.** Earwig is the right tool for the school and WH is working with class teachers to make sure it suits their requirements.

JH updated the FGB on Admissions. At this time, there have been more applications made than we have places, and as a result there has been an increase in refusals going to tribunals. Around 75% of these are found in favour of the parents. There has also been a huge increase, 70+, in the number of out of catchment/county applications. In the past it has been around 15. This is due, in part, to the fact that mainstream schools are having difficulties in recruitment and retention of staff to support these pupils, meaning they are unable to meet the pupils needs. At the recent Admissions Panel there were 76 applications from WB for 6 spaces for the younger children. Currently we have not had any Directions where we must take a child.

**Staffing (WB)** Discussions were had over recruitment and retention of staff and further discussion will be had later in the meeting.

D&V Absence Policy is now 24 hours instead of 48 hours. Evidence suggests that this improves attendance, without an increase in sickness amongst the school community. JH feels that this should be considered for both staff and pupils.

The 5% pay increase for teachers has now been implemented, however industrial action has been taken as unions want a higher increase. At this time no further progress has been made with discussions between the unions and DfE.

**Finance (HC)** Looking at a significant underspend which will increase our reserves, in the region of £800k - £1m. AA will expand on the reason for this later in the meeting but the principal under spend is in the staffing budget due to the number of vacancies we have at present.

The Finance Audit has recently been completed and we were currently awaiting the final written report from the auditors.

Also, there was discussion on the SCVF and SEN Allowance, which will be covered later in this meeting.

**Premises (HC)** The majority of the works/projects have gone through without any further issues.

HC informed the board that AA is facing increasing difficulties in getting quotes. On a number of occasions AA only receives two quotes instead of the required three we would normally like, and the Premises Committee have agreed that if it means that the works get completed then we'll go with what quotes we can get, if they are reasonable.

Unlike the issues back in September, HC reported good news in that the next phase of works @Theale is progressing well and that there are no major issues at present.

HC informed the board that there needs to be a plan for H&S walks/visits which have yet to be completed due to HC being immobile.

## **6. Headteacher's report (JH)**

WB informed that everyone should have had, and read, JH's report, and asked if anyone had any questions or would like JH to elaborate further on any of the points.

As members couldn't open the PDF of appendices, JH to resend in a compatible formatting.

WB and HC asked about the five exclusions. JH responded by saying that there is a current uptick in exclusions, one at Love Lane and four @Theale. The pupil at Love Lane is currently on a programme, which is working and will move to another placement which will meet their needs. The remainder are @Theale.. This is because the site is not yet fully adapted for the needs of the students. JH reconfirmed to the board that exclusions are a last resort and where possible measures are implemented to reduce the risk of that happening. WB informed members who were not aware that if a permanent exclusion is made, the exclusion then goes to a panel which is made up of board members to review the case and if this was the correct course of action. JH gave an outline of the school's exclusion policy and in future will include further details of exclusions in his termly report.

WB expressed concerns over the current attendance levels and unauthorised absence as levels are still high following Covid. JH confirmed that this is still high nationally. CW meets with the EWO, once per half term, and currently has concerns for 6 pupils. This in part is due to high anxiety, school-based avoidance, and separation anxiety from home. In these cases, bespoke packages are implemented with the support of external services, such as EHA. Sometimes absence is also due to poor health, mentally or physically.

WB asked about getting the West Berks Wellbeing award. She wanted to know what the point in that was and was it just about paperwork. CW said this is part of the PHSE department as is about the pupils engaging and leading on their own wellbeing and that of their environment/community.

## **7. Finance Update**

AA has already updated the Finance committee on P.10 and gave a brief update to the board on P.11. We have four revenue accounts and one capital account.

Main budget (Love Lane/Post 16) will be coming out around £800k, which is around 100k more than last year, when we carried forward. It's about 15% of our budget we're carrying forward which is due to a few reasons, the main one being staffing, which has already been mentioned.

The Pupil Primum account is coming out where we expected, around the 5k figure. This fund is primarily used by the Pastoral Team and for children in care.

PSP, looking at 2k, but it will be around 19k as we are currently unable to get the three quotes required for the Muga which has meant we have had to put it on hold for now. We had received two quotes, but they are now out of date, and we are now currently seeking new quotes. Hopefully this will be done over the summer and currently we're looking at around 18k. Initially when setting this budget, we were unsure if the Government were going to continue funding this, but funding has now been confirmed for another 2-3 years. This will mean an additional 16.5k per year and we are currently working the PE Lead on ideas, one being the Forest School, with more training. Also, suggestions for more specialised equipment and external PE support.

Castle @Theale: we're still unsure what the budget will be as this is still a work in progress, and we won't know the final annual amount until the completion of the whole project which will be in five years. We are currently looking at it being 300k. The school has not received any startup costs yet from the LEA, as they only want to fund as we spend. Due to a lack of storage and the temporary buildings we chose to keep purchases for the new site to a minimum. We will be increasing our spend on items over the next couple of months ready for when the next phase is complete and the next intake of students. AA confirmed that this budget will be a stand-alone budget for the next 5 years, until all running costs are known, when it will then be merged into the main budget.

Capital budget, coming out 148k due to some projects coming in cheaper than planned and some being putting on hold. 100k also was transferred into this account earlier this year for future projects and IT.

Overall, we will have healthy budget once everything has gone through, so we're looking around the £1.2/1.3m mark.

The Finance Audit has taken place and AA reported that he should have the written report in around a week to ten days. We previously had a rating of 5 and we would be looking at a rating of 4 or 3 this time round. There were a few issues under Governance which have been raised, e.g., forms, documentation in the minutes. Also, in the FMP **AA needs to add a few lines added due to the debit card we now hold for the Private Fund**. AA noted he has had a letter from NatWest saying they are removing counter services in the bank and that he will need to obtain a card to withdraw any monies.

WB asked that **once AA receives the final report from the audit that it is fed back through the Finance Committee along with any changes and recommendations**.

SFVS. HC, with help from AA has gone through the annual SFVS for this year and requested that WB sign-off on the document as its due to be submitted by the end of March. AA confirmed that the dates have been added to the highlighted areas. AA did note that for the next SFVS the Auditor did make the recommendation to work with additional guidance documentation.

## SEN Allowance

WB outlined the background to this proposal, which JH and AA brought before the Governors last year asking for approval to pay non-teaching staff an extra allowance to aid in retention and recruitment of staff. At that time the Board required more information on this proposal and asked that JH and AA draw up a business proposal for their request. This proposal has been put together and emailed to all Governors. WB has a few questions on this along with HC and GF.

WB asked JH to summarize why there is a need for this allowance. JH said that there is currently a national crisis in employing enough support staff, especially in SEND education. The concern that the school is now facing is the recruitment of staff with the relevant, or similar, skills alongside a reduced number of applications. We have also had several staff who are leaving for jobs that pay more due to the rising cost of living. Even though we are not quite there, JH has concerns that if he can't recruit staff to replace those who have left, then the remaining staff are put under further pressure which in turn could impact their health, both mentally and physically. Another concern is that some of those who are leaving are key skilled assistants, which means new or existing staff have to be trained to fill that role, and the NHS will only train a certain number of people during any given period.

The biggest concern would be if, in the future, JH had to report back to governors that he is unable to meet the needs of pupils or has to close classes. On occasions over the last year, he has had to close classes due to staff sickness as he does not have a free staff to help man the class safely.

The hope is that with this SEN Allowance, the school will be able to retain the existing non-teaching staff and hopefully increase the number of candidates who apply for these vacancies. Also, these support roles in mainstream schools are paid the same and, because these children are most likely not to have complex needs, people will look and apply for them instead. Another issue relating to recruitment and retention are that some supermarkets not only offer a high rate of pay but also term time only contracts, which are highly attractive to people who have children in school.

JH is now strongly recommending that Governors approve this before this staffing issue gets worse. AA has already budgeted this additional pay for 22/23. However, the Government has confirmed that all SEND sc. Is will be getting 3.4% funding over the next 4 years, and this additional monies will cover this Allowance.

WB mentioned that JH had set out a number of options, one being Agency Staff. This has been discounted and WB asked why this is not a viable option, JH responded saying that it costs twice as much as an employed member. Also, the school does not get staff with the right skills level, the commitment or ownership of the role. However, we do have a couple of agency staff who are with the school on a long-term basis. JH gave the board an example of another SEND school which has fifteen agency staff, but due to the cost they will no longer be using them after Easter.

HC agreed with JH that agency staff is not a long-term option for us. HC also acknowledged that this additional funding for SEN allowance for non-teaching staff is not going to be a one off, and because of the current reserves we can afford it.

WB asked for confirmation that this is for all non-teaching staff and because it cannot be segregated, it will also be fully pensionable, which JH confirmed.

NM asked for clarification over the wording :“back dating of this if required”. If this could happen, would it help to retain the member of staff who was currently considering leaving for extra hours

and pay elsewhere? JH had asked her if he was able to pay her more would she stay, but she sadly took up the employment elsewhere.

GF fully understands and sympathise with the current issues that the school faces. This proposal has been going on for some time and is not happy with the progress made on this. He has asked in the past for an updated proposal so the board can take their time and not be faced with making a rushed decision on whether to approve this or not. He agreed that the school absolutely need to do something as not doing anything is no longer an option. GF feels that proposal does not contain enough information for him to decide and commit the school to this increase in the salary budget. He feels that there are other options which have not been considered and if the board were given more time this could have been explored. Therefore, GF disagrees with making this a permanent arrangement, however, agrees to an extent that temporary staff is not ideal, but this is his preferred option until the LEA and/or Government reviews the pay for these members of staff as this is obviously a wider problem with other SEND providers.

JH responded that at present we simply can't get the correct agency staff in and we're lucky to have the two we currently have. At present the agencies that we have approached do have people, but they don't have the required experience or training that we need to fill the roles we have.

AC felt that the notes that GF circulated raised some very good points. However, he acknowledged the time constraints. He wanted to have an explanation of the Union factor. Also, he was concerned about the domino effect and the risk that this might upset other staff members. JH responded that the school only has two types of staff. Teachers and the non-teaching support staff. This allowance will cover all non-teaching support staff so no one will be left out. With regards to the Unions, if the school waits for that outcome, it may be months down the line and unfortunately we could be in a worse position with staffing levels than we are now.

JH also wanted it noted that other SEND Schools in the area are currently paying their non-teaching staff an SEN Allowance and he feels that we need to be in line.

AL asked what the hourly rate will work out to be following the additional allowance. JH confirmed it will work out to be around £11.50, which is on a par, or slightly more, with what local retail shops are currently paying. With this rate it is hoped to not only retain staff but also attract applicants to fill the vacancies.

JD noted that, as a teacher, it is all well and good in having agency staff to step in, but it adds to the teachers' workloads as they have to explain/train them up so they can work the children. JD feels strongly that the non-teaching staff should be paid this allowance, as without them the teachers cannot fully meet the needs of the students.

WB acknowledged that there are different views on this allowance and asked for all those in favour of approving this allowance to raise their hands.

Those in favour of the SEN Allowance: JH, NM, WB, JD, HC, AL CK and AC

Those not in favour of the SEN Allowance: GF

WB confirmed the approval of the SEN Allowance by the Governing Board.

## **8. Policies for ratification**

The following policies were agreed and ratified.

<b>Policy Document</b>	<b>Proposed</b>	<b>Second</b>
Admissions	WB	JH
SEND	NM	JD
Looked after Children	WB	AL

Supporting Pupils with Medical Conditions	WB	AL
Capability	WB	JD
Flexible Working	NM	CK
Appraisals	WB	HC
Financial Management	HC	CK
Charging and Remissions	HC	JH
Minibus	HC	JD
Off-site Activity Guidance	HC	NM

## 9. Safeguarding update and signing of central register (JH / WB)

WB has met with CS concerning the central register and is pleased with the great work she is doing in filling in the historic gaps. Therefore, WB is happy to sign off on the register.

CW confirmed that the Safeguarding Training is where it needs to be. The Government recommends training over a three-year period however we run a two-year rolling programme as it's important to ensure that all staff are fully up to date with this.

CW and WH have also recently taken LEA Adult Safeguarding training as there have been a few relevant issues. Basically it follows the same safeguarding measures as those in place for children but there are some additional enhancements required. CW will be asking the Pastoral Team to undertake this training as they have contact with parents as part of family support.

My Family Plans. CW and JW attended training on this from the LA. Basically the LA wants us to case hold. In the past it was done as a plan around the child and now the LA wants these to be managed by the school instead of Children's Services. CW is not happy about this plan but will update governors as it progresses.

My Concerns raised by staff. The number of incidents that have been raised have increased significantly but this is the same nationally.

The Safeguarding Audit has been conducted and no major issues or concerns were raised/highlighted at the time and no further feedback has been received.

Peer review was carried out by CW at an Independent SEND School which was really interesting and informative.

Parent, Staff and Pupil Safety Survey has been completed and the results show no surprises. However, based on comments about communicating safeguarding updates, CW will now produce a termly newsletter which will be sent to all staff. **JG will then forward a copy of this to all governors when this is issued.**

We now have Hannah on board who will be DSL trained and undertake further training next term. She will now be a valuable extra set of eyes on the SLT.

HC was concerned about her training and if it is up to date as it seems a long time ago since she's done any. **CW will check with Di and if it required she'll set something up.**

## 10. AOB items

WB asked JH to comment on the recent tragedy with a Headteacher in Reading following a recent Ofsted report. JH reported that there is now a big upsurge nationally that the inspection system be reviewed as it is adding additional undue stress to Headteachers, worrying about the potential of unannounced inspections and the resulting outcome. At this time, it is not appropriate

to go into further details surrounding this incident, but he will keep the board informed as and when there is more information to report, especially if it will affect the school.

JH also informed the board that CW will be co-ordinating the CastleFest (not Fete) this year which will take place on 24<sup>th</sup> June. She is currently working on raffle prizes so if anyone can assist, have ideas please let CW know. They are also looking to see if they can make it a cashless event.

JG asked to make sure that all governors check their Castle emails twice a week. Also, information has been sent to all new governors regarding introduction training. JG is also working on going out to advert to find some more Co-opted Governors.

Finally, WB extended her thanks and appreciation to GF who will be ending his term on the board this month. He has been a much-valued governor and we've very much appreciated him expressing views and making contributions over this time. We wished him good luck for the future.

Meeting Closed 6.45pm