



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 16th November 2023, 5.00pm, Held at Castle @Theale

Present: Wendy Batchelor (LEA Governor), Helen Cabell (Co-opted Governor), Jo Davis (Staff Governor), Charlie Kowalski (Parent Governor), Jon Hewitt (Headteacher), Adrian Crawford (Parent Governor), Nicola Markham (Co-opted Governor via **Zoom**), Jane Gray (Clerk)

Apologies: Philip Jackson (Co-opted Governor), Helen Amner-Munslow (Parent Governor)

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

All Governors present did a walk around our new site based in Theale prior to the meeting. Aside from a few snagging issues which are being worked on, CW was full of pride as to what has been achieved to provide a safe place for SMEH students to learn and thrive.

1. Apologies Received

Apologies received Philip Jackson & Helen Amner-Munslow.

2. Election of the Chair and Vice Chair of Governors for 2023/2024

JG informed the board that HC's four-year term had to come an end and that she expressed her wish to continue for a further four years. JG asked the Governors, with a show of hands, if they were happy for her continuation. All governors present, unanimously voted yes, with no votes against.

WB confirmed that, after many years, she was stepping aside as Chair and nominated HC to be the new Chair. JH proposed this nomination for HC to become Chair and CK seconded this motion. WB then nominated and proposed for NM to become the Vice Chair with JH seconding this motion.

Both HC and NM consented to the appointments so the Chair for 2023/24 is Helen Cabell, with Nicola Markham being Vice Chair. WB will remain as a governor until the end of her term.

JG advised that as HC is now Chair of the Governing Board, she can no longer be Chair to the Finance and Premises Committee. Therefore, until the next meeting of this committee, 1 February 2024, as Vice Chair, CK will step up in his capacity of Vice Chair and at that meeting an election will be held for chair of Finance and Premises Committee.

JG informed that there have been no changes to the *Standing Orders for the Procedural Workings of the Governing Body*. However, she will be updating who is on which committee, and other roles/responsibilities. WB asked JG to circulate these. Aside from Safeguarding, H&S and Arts Mark There were no other nominated roles but it was agreed that we might investigate a Careers Governor who would be the main point of contact with JW and the board on things like

WOW and other career events. WB will have a chat with HA-M and PJ to see if they would like to take on this role.

3. Declarations of interest for this meeting

None declared.

4. Any other business (AOB) items for the agenda

5. Minutes from the last meeting, 22 June 2023, and matters arising.

JD confirmed that she has now completed the New to Governance courses. JG also added that she emails all governors updates on courses being offered, requesting that if anyone is interested to let her know so she can it booked. HC expressed her interest in any courses in effective chairing, JG will let her know when the next one is as and when the information is released. Also, there is possibly an upcoming course on Finance for Governors. This is primarily aimed at those who may not have a finance background. Again, JG will inform the board as and when this becomes available.

JH is to deliver training on EHCPs at the next FGB in March 2024. It was suggested that JH sends out Guidance on EHCPs closer to the meeting and for Governors to email him with any questions.

JH's Headteacher report now includes a summary as to why staff have left. This information will be extracted from the exit reviews.

In October the H&S walk of the Love Lane site was done by AA, HC and CK.

WB asked that the absence rate, and the split between the different sites will now be included as part of the Safeguarding report. Due to staffing changes at the LA, the School now has a greater role which has seen extra work taken on by the Pastoral Team, alongside CW & JW. CW noted there are a number of children who, due to the nature of their disability, will have a higher level of absence, along with some @Theale, due to school avoidance issues.

JG informed the Board that a new committee was formed on the 7th November 2023 for Friends of Castle (FoC). The first meeting of the new committee will be held next week, where signature mandates will be completed as the first order of business, to enable funds that had been raised to be transferred to the main school accounts for items that have been purchased. JG also advised the board that, as a parent of the school, she is the Secretary for the committee.

JH updated the board on the progress of the redevelopment of the old bungalow. Unfortunately, things have slowed down due to potential issues regarding the old horse chestnut tree, the only tree on the site to have a TPO. AA said that we are currently awaiting a tree root analysis to see if there is a possibility that this can be moved. Once this has been completed, and alongside the other reports we have received on the tree a decision will be made on its future.

JH has held back on the report to justify the £105k surplus, and why any clawback will not be a possibility. The LA are currently undertaking a Better Value Programme review. However, JH and AA will still put together their thoughts. At a recent meeting JH said that there are serious concerns over the funding of special schools, and any new thinking will be discussed at the next F&P committee meeting, in February 2024. JH did say that if you compared the Castle with other West Berks SEND Schools, we have the lowest £ per pupil. As we are the only LA funded SEND school in West Berkshire we receive £26K per pupil. All other SEND schools in West Berks are now Academies and can receive up to £50k per pupil.

6. Committee Reports

- Curriculum Committee

NM asked if everyone was happy with the turnaround time of 7 day for minutes. All agreed and JG said that the ToR's will be updated, and the revised copies will be emailed out to everyone.

NM summarised the School's concerns over the number of applications that have already been received for 2024/25, especially out of county applications, as far afield as Essex. JH said that there were capacity limitations.

With reference to the idea of possible satellite SEND schools based at existing mainstream sites, JH said that at present our role would be to provide support and advice, instead of actually setting up the site and staffing.

NM reminded JG that she needed to send an email to all governors asking them to confirm that they have read Section 2 of the DfE KCSIE document.

Smoothwall, a programme to alert the DSL and IT to safeguarding issues for school IT, is working well. All internet searches made by students are monitored and if a trigger word is used it is then reported to us.

- Staffing Committee

Staffing levels across the board are good. However, we are still looking for a DT for @Theale. Post-16 and Love Lane levels are good but there is still no flexibility. We are now in a far better position, but JH did note that other SEND schools have had to resort to hiring Agency Staff which in turn has increased their staffing bill.

AC asked what has been done to make a difference in our staff levels. JH said it was difficult to say, but one possibility was that where we are located make us a good site for employment to the rural communities. Other SEND schools are in a more urban environment which means they are competing with a higher number of potential employers.

WB asked if the SEND Allowance has made a difference. JH said it's difficult to say, but leavers have slowed and the number of applications we have been receiving have increased.

AC then asked how many of those who are on Maternity Leave are looking at returning. JH honestly couldn't answer that question but reassured the board that they are plans in place if they are required. WB advised that the rule regarding shared maternity means that both parents can use that leave either in bits or as a lump.

- Premises Committee

As HC is now Chair for the whole Board, CK provided the summary.

AA notified the committee on what works were completed, put on hold or planned. Obviously the main focus was ensuring that the new build for @Theale was completed, which meant that some works have been delayed.

The Muga had to be abandoned over the summer and moved to next year. This was because the school was let down by the original contractor for the works. However, the contractor had to subcontract out the works to complete essential Maintenance for H&S reasons. Because of this extra monies were paid out to the sub-contractor but these have since been refunded to us by the original contractor. AA is currently seeking new quotes to do the refurb, but unfortunately they are coming in higher than when we originally sought quotes. At present it looks like the project will cost an extra £17k. Once all quotes are in and permission is given for the works it is still possible to complete by Easter 2024. AA will be feeding back to the F&P Committee in due course.

Regarding to the snagging issues at @Theale, AC asked if there was a solution to the heating system. AA & CW are both in contact with the heating company who have been in a number of times to try and resolve the problem.

The Old School house @Theale is nearly finished and is due to be handed over next week. At present that building has been used for any 1-2-1 working, but the plan is that it will be used for Year 11 students.

- Finance Committee

When the committee last convened, it was still relatively early in the financial year.

AA summarised his report to the committee. At that time the Staffing Budget should have been 50% spent, but it was only 44% spent. One of the main reasons is that the projected pay increases had yet to be confirmed. Once it is signed off, the pay increase will be paid, including in any back pay. The non-staffing budget was around 47% spent which was as expected.

The budget for @Castle was underspent in both staffing and non-staffing, but that was due in part to vacancies not yet being filled.

The Capital Spending budget was on track. The school did spend £40K on a second hand, 5 yr. old, low mileage, minibus for the school and is now in use following the receipt of the Section 19 paperwork. AA is also looking at completing another application for another Variety Club minibus to replace the current one we have from them.

There hasn't been much movement on the Private Fund. AA/JG both confirmed that with the formation of FoC, new signature mandates will be completed in the coming weeks, and they will then be able to transfer the raised funds for items that AA had purchased, on the behalf of FoC, as reimbursement.

There was also a brief update on the Finance Audit. The points that were raised were either a recommendation or a must do, which were all easy fixes. AA will be emailing the final report to committee members, so he can answer any questions they may have at the next meeting, in February 2024.

7. Headteacher's Report (JH)

All Governors were sent JH's Headteacher's Report prior to this meeting and JH asked if governors had any questions.

JH advised that at the end of this academic year there will be fewer children leaving, which in turn could be problematic for next September.

WB noted that the PPG performance is still good but that the gap has closed which means that effort is being put in to ensure that all pupils make good progress. PPG is a very large proportion of the School.

The progress of EAL (children who do not have English as their first language) is being monitored but is dictated by the needs of the individual child. The higher the needs then the progress is not as great.

JD will be updating the Class Structure, which in turn will be sent out to all governors.

AC asked why it looks like children from an ethnic background are not performing as well in English and Math. JW explained that this was being investigated and linked to individual need. WH recently attended an Earwig Conference. Currently all children are on a core pathway. However, WH is now exploring how the School can set up non-core pathways, which means then children will have a more targeted core to assess against. WB asked about the curriculum for Castle@Theale. CW said that several different curricula were used – the Castle Framework, the National Curriculum and Functional Skills depending on the needs of the pupils.

Staff have been using Boxhill. This is a system which enables staff to get to know the pupil better, entering these details, and the system works out a possible leaning outcome of the child.

AC asked, while understanding that there are very few SEND places available, did JH know how many places short they will be. JH said that places for Theale should be relatively straight forward. However, it is hard to say overall due to the needs of the child. It is definitely more of an issue with a child who has high complex needs, than children joining the school as they transfer from Year 6 Mainstream to Year 7 SEND.

WB asked if there was anything to report on WOW as it was a very important and successful programme for the Castle. JH said that part of the report had been dropped in error and will ensure that it is added back in. JG always forwards the WOW termly newsletter, as and when, to all governors. JW did add that while other SEND schools are reducing their work placements, Castle are actually increasing their program. Also, there is currently a good chance that these placements then convert into real jobs for the students.

AC enquired about staff mental health, how well its promoted in the school, and if possible, did JH know how many staff have benefited. JH, could not disclose confidential details. All staff as part of their training are made aware on how to access mental health support if its required. Also last year around 10 members of staff took advantage of the Bupa scheme. Information on all services can be found in staff rooms, but any member of staff can talk to a member of the SLT, who will then help support them in the help they need. JD did say the Bupa scheme is really good. She also said that JH has created a welcoming environment, where all staff feel supported and are happy to reach out for any support they need.

With morale generally, the governors notes that they appreciated JH's leadership in creating a supportive, open environment that has seen all staff, teaching and non-teaching, being proud to be a part of the school and working hard. For example, our maintenance team, who keep on top of all repairs have done a very good job as has our IT person particularly with Castle@Theale, The Pastoral Team should also be commended as they have , in recent months, had to take on extra work due to changes at the LA.

8. Policies for ratification

The following policies were agreed and ratified.

Policy Document	Proposed	Second
Child Protection & Safeguarding	JH	JD
Administration of Medication	WB	JD

Equality Information and Objectives & Accessibility Plan	JD	AC
Exclusions	WB	NM
ECT	AD	CK
First Aid	JH	NM
Pay Policy	HC	WB
Private Fund	CK	HC
16-19 Bursary	JH	JD
GDPR	WB	JD
Online Safety Policy	NM	JD
Anti-fraud and Corruption	AC	JH
Anti Money Laundering	HC	CK
Bribery Act	WB	AC

NOTE: There was a query with regards to the Bullying Policy as it was thought that there were some changes and need to be ratified at this meeting. JG will check this and as it is urgent will send it out to all governors to review and ratify by email.

9. Safeguarding update and signing of central register

WB said that, as safeguarding governor, she had met with CW prior to this meeting to review the position and will review the SCR at the school tomorrow. All new staff are due to have updated Safeguarding Training, which CW & JW will conduct.

There has been an increase of 18 Safeguarding concerns, compared to this time last year. Trends that the LA are currently looking into is the high number of CPP's that have been triggered by neglect, including affluent neglect.

Staff are still feeling confident in reporting any issues on My Concern and these are regularly reviewed.

CW said that the Safeguarding Newsletter which she produces termly has been well received by all staff. This newsletter is a good way to keep staff up to date with any changes and useful relevant articles.

CW/JW are also focusing on attendance rates due to changes at the LA, and with the help of the Pastoral Team they are now putting in plans to improve attendance rates where illness is not a factor. WB said that she had seen the Attendance Intervention Escalation Plan which was a good development for the school.

Recently, the WBerks Safeguarding Audit was completed online. There was only one area which was not met. This was in regard to Asylum Seekers, of which we currently do not have attending our school.

Currently we have 5 Children in Care and 1 child with a CPP.

CW will be in contact with NM to see what information she will need going forward to take over the role of Safeguarding Governor.

10. AOB items

- **Finance Audit**

AA had not emailed his report to governors. In total there were six elements that needed improvement, four of which have been met. AA will circulate to governors after this meeting.

The FMP has also had a wording change around the award of contracts of £5k or more. HC and CK will be added for the increased amount, along with JH. This will be sent out to committee members for the next F&P in February 2024.

SFVS – AA is to forward the paperwork to CK to look at the matrix we decide to use.

- **Health and Safety Audit**

AA has not yet heard back on a date for when that will take place, but we are overdue one. AA will ensure that all relevant paperwork is up to date, and he will let HC & CK know of the date, as and when.

11. PART 2

At this point in the meeting JH and JD, along with other staff, excluding JG, were asked to leave the room so the remaining governors could discuss the pay policy and HT review.