



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 21st March 2024, 5.00pm, Held at Castle Post-16

Present: Helen Cabell (HC) (Chair, Co-opted Governor), Jo Davis (JD) (Staff Governor), Charlie Kowalski (CK) (Parent Governor), Jon Hewitt (JH) (Headteacher), Adrian Crawford (AC) (Parent Governor), Nicola Markham (NM) (Co-opted Governor), William Alexander (WA) (Parent Governor), Indira Hann (IH) (Co-opted Governor), Helen Amner-Munslow (HA-M) (Parent Governor), Jane Gray (JG) (Clerk)

Apologies: Philip Jackson (PJ) (Co-opted Governor), Atul Attra (AA) (School Business Manager)

In attendance: Caroline Whitlock (CW) (Deputy Head), James Whybra (JW) (Deputy Head)

All Governors present did a walk around of our Post-16 next to Newbury College. Outside Will Harvey (WH) and JW explained the latest information they had on potential new building works which included a supermarket, housing and doctor's surgery. They also mentioned the interaction that some of our Post-16 students have with those students who attend Newbury College and what facilities in the college itself they use including the cafeteria and sports facilities. Inside they explained how they have classes set up to meet student's needs. Also WH explained how the classes have been set out to meet the students' needs. He explained how the staffwork with not only the students but their families as well, to ensure the students can live independently and some of them are prepared for entering the workplace through the Wools of Work programme. The classroom all surround a central, but small courtyard. In September 2024 the new Year 12's is a sporty group of students. Whilst our students may use some of the space at Newbury College, this might not always be possible. Therefore, how they use the courtyard space will need to be reviewed given its size.

1. Apologies Received

Apologies received from Atul Attra.

2. Appointment of new Governors to the Board

At this meeting, we welcomed two new Governors to the Board. William Alexander (Parent) and Indira Hann (Co-opted). As a way of introductions each member of the Board and the staff present gave a brief introduction of themselves. Following the round of introductions, all governors voted unanimously for WA and IH to join the Full Governing Board (FGB).

Following Wendy Batchelor's decision to stand down at the end of her last four year term in February, the board is currently without a Local authority (LA) Appointed Governor. As HC is currently Chair of the FGB she agreed to apply for the role to become the LA representative on the board. JG will forward the application for her to complete.

The Board concurred that Wendy has been a valuable member of the board for 20 years, joining the team in 2004. The Governors wished to have it minuted that they thanked Wendy for her tireless contribution to the Castle School over the years which has seen many changes and the challenges that come with them.

3. Declarations of interest for this meeting

None declared.

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

- Schools Financial Value Standard (SFVS)

5. Minutes from the last meeting, 16th November 2023, and matters arising

Due to potential changes to the Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCPs), JH and HC have agreed that it would be best to provide training for Governors at the Strategy Session on Tuesday 4th June. For the benefit of our new governors JH explained that EHCPs were introduced to replace the original Statement of Special Needs. EHCPs brings together both Education and Health Care plans, into one document, and only those children with an EHCP can by law attend Castle.

The plans for the Old Bungalow are well underway, with, at this time, a completion date of September 2025. Demolition of the old building is due to start during the summer holidays and the cost of the project will be approximately £2.5m. Like Castle @Theale there will be a planned phased introduction of additional places. However, JH has expressed concerns that, in October/November 2024, he will potentially be offering pupils a place at the school for September 2025, and the new classrooms may not be ready in time.

HA-M asked about the future of the Horse Chestnut Tree, which is the only tree on the site with a Tree Preservation Order. JH has confirmed that there will need to be some work to be done on the lower branches, but the tree will be staying.

HA-M asked about parking arrangements when the new building is operational. She stated that at present, during the morning drop-off and afternoon pick-up, it's not uncommon for conflicts to arise between parents because of the lack of spaces to park. As parents know that she is a Parent Governor, she often gets questions or requests to take up the parking issue at Love Lane with JH. JH is aware of this issue, and HC asked JG to add this topic to the agenda for the next Finances & Premises (F&P) committee meeting. JH also commented that there should not be a shortage of parking as an additional 20 spaces were being created.

AC asked if there are any plans for the new build which can be shared with governors. JH said they are still being drawn up, but as soon as they are available he will share them with the Board.

With regards to the Finance Audit, all points have now been actioned, with the exception of completion of the skills matrix for the SFVS, which will be discussed under AOB.

The Health and Safety Audit report has now been received and a huge congratulation is extended to AA, the Site Management Team and those that were involved. When AA joined the Castle School was scoring only 50%. Now, due to hard work and dedication, the most recent score was 95%. The areas of concern that were highlighted are minor and will easily be resolved.

6. Committee Reports

- Curriculum Committee held on 25th January 2024

NM briefed the board on concerns with high pupil absence rate. CW and JH are currently monitoring the levels, however there is a clear trend that towards the end of each term the rates of sickness increase. Because of JH knowledge of the pupils, if the absence of a child is challenged by the LA the school can easily explain why the absences are occurring. HA-M confirmed this due her daughter's health issue, and that the LA were able to see that when she is in school she is happy and thriving.

JH also advised the Board that all absents are known. He also confirmed that hw would be highly unlikely to fine a parent for taking their child out of term time for holidays, as it generally a quieter and cheaper time to go especially for children who have sensory issues. He will only issue a fine in exceptional circumstances.

JH informed the Board that this year to date he has received 60 applications for places at the school commencing in September 2024 from the LA and 250 from other local authorities. He also confirmed that he will not be increasing places available at this time.

AC asked about class closures. It was confirmed that this would be discussed in Item 7 as it will come under the Headteacher's report.

NM advised the Board that in January she had attended a West Berkshire course on Suspensions and Exclusions. NM felt that this course would be of benefit to all Governors as it was of great importance and imperative that procedures were handled correctly. Failure to follow the statutory guidance could result in the school being fined. It was agreed at the committee meeting that as many governors as possible, including JG in her role as Clerk, to attend a course in the event any exclusion panels need to be set up in the future.

CW reported to the Board that there is now a change in the way My Concern reports are reported to the LA. Any reports between Levels 1-3 are no longer triaged by a Social Worker (there are currently 4 levels). The school now fills in the relevant paper work along with Family Support workers. If there is any uncertainty with the case, CW will still continue to report to Children's Services.

CW also expressed concerns with the level of work now being pushed back to the schools, due to the lack of staff available at the LA. It was noted that this is a national problem as LA's are having to streamline services. This has raised concerns about possible gaps, especially as West Berkshire are not replacing the staff who are currently leaving.

NM confirmed her role as Safeguarding Governor and that she had met CW prior to the FGB with a view to reviewing the Safeguarding Report and having a handover meeting with Wendy. NM will be signing the Safeguarding Register, and will inform HC, as FGB Chair, that this has been completed. The register is a **hot** area for any Ofsted inspection.

NM has met with Anna Scholl from Castle to discuss the school's approach to Artsmark. NM commented that the Artsmark paper was well written and very concise and reflected the school's ambitions in this area which she hopes to help with and support and raise awareness with the Governors. NM will feed back to the next committee meeting more details.

- Staffing Committee held on 25th January 2024

JH confirmed to the committee that the pay increases, along with back pay, had been completed.

JH provided an update on staffing levels at the present time. Currently levels were meeting the needs of the school. At the time there was a DT Teacher and Caretaker role to be filled at Castle @Theale. A few TA's in the pipeline as the school was awaiting their DBS checks to come through. With regards to staffing for September 2024, JH will be starting to look at The Castle staffing needs soon, so adverts for roles can be sent out.

CW did add that the new caretaker will be starting soon and the new DT teacher will be starting in the Summer Term, so everything is set up and ready for September at Castle @Theale.

JH also informed the governors that Castle will no longer be buying into the HR support from West Berkshire, and that the school is currently looking into a new supplier, Judicium, who can provide the comprehensive support that is needed, the school feel it is no longer getting from West Berkshire.

NM also mentioned that she will be doing Parent Voice Sampling session with CW and JW, as part of the Parent, Pupil, and Staff survey. She will report on the results at our Strategy Session in June.

- Finance Committee held on 1st February 2024

CK informed the board that the MUGA refurb, which should have been completed last summer, is still on hold. Currently AA and Peter Butler (Premises Manager) are finding it increasingly difficult to get contractors who specialise in this type of refurbishment to provide a quote. It's an increasing trend with external contractors, who will only quote for work that they want to do.

Friend of Castle (FOC) have now confirmed that they have had to open a new bank account as it was not possible to change the signatories on the old bank account. They now need to wait for 30 days for checks to be completed before they can transfer the funding for items which have been purchased.

AA is now ensuring that staff complete a requisition for all orders. This will generate the required order number for when paying the invoices.

The committee were informed that AA had completed the benchmarking for all sites and there are a number of tables that show the current levels between all three Castle sites. It is worth noting that each of our sites are individually unique, and therefore is difficult to compare to other schools who do benchmarking. We currently represent good value for money given the vast needs of our pupils when compared with other SEND schools. AC requested that JH and AA keep the committee informed with regards to this and that it becomes a regular agenda item going forward.

AA provided the committee with a summary of the spend up to the meeting in February. At this time we have a healthy reserve. However due to the need to set up an extra classroom this year, to meet the needs of some pupils, some of this reserve would probably be used. AA will provide a further update and final outturn of this year's budget at the next F&P meeting in April prior to the 2024/25 budget. Currently we have a staffing underspend. JH advised the Board that this is due to periods of time when a role is vacant within the school.

Castle will be changing its IT supplier to CoConnect. At present the school has had a SLA with the LA. Unfortunately the support they have provided has deteriorated and it can take some months for any updates or equipment to be installed. CoConnect will provide the school with a better and more flexible service to meet its needs, especially any changes that may be needed under safeguarding. AC added that he has still yet to catch up with Tom to go through the technical aspect of the contract and it was suggested that WA, our new parent governor, assist AC with this due to his background in Cyber Security.

The Building Maintenance is looking at a 3.64% overspend. This is due, in part, to the purchase of a new air conditioning unit, to replace one that was broken beyond repair. Plus the increase costs to make the MUGA safe while awaiting its refurbishment.

HA-M asked if the school allowed Voluntary Maintenance days. JH said that they do have a couple of days where local companies come in and help with maintenance. However with thanks to Peter Butler and his team they do most of the work around the sites, reducing the need for other help or to pay for external contractors.

JH confirmed that any unspent monies in the Primary Sports Premium (PSP) fund will not have to be handed back this year. Some of this funding was going towards the refurbishment of the MUGA. We have purchased items like Quiditch and other outdoor activities from this fund.

CK mentioned to the Board that the budget for Castle @Theale is still an unknown quantity until such time it's operating a full capacity, which won't be for a further 3 years.

JH advised the board that the school has recently been the unexpected beneficiary of some money. A few years ago, when Mrs Berry's husband passed away, a donation was made to the school as Mr Berry had a brother with special needs. A few months ago we received a letter informing us that sadly Mrs Berry had died. Along with another few local charities, we will be receiving a share of the proceeds from the sale of her six houses. So far two have been sold and we have received £110k. JH commented that there is no rush to spend this money so it will be put into the Private Fund.

AC asked if there were any stipulations or catches with the money. JH said that they have had legal look through the paperwork and that there does not appear to be anything to worry about.

JH reported to the Board that there is are further details at this time on any proposed clawback of reserves. It looks likely the implementation will be from March 2025, end of the 2024/25 financial year.

- Premises Committee held on 1st February 2024

Most works have been completed or are due to be completed. The Sensory Room at Post-16 will be completed during the Easter Holidays. It is hoped that the MUGA refurbishment will be completed during the Summer Holidays, but is dependant on a contractor being found.

There are still snagging issues at Castle @Theale following the handover of the latest phase of the rebuild. One issue is still the heating system. However, CW did inform the Board that the heating seems to be a bit more stable.

At present there are no major works to be scheduled so AA and the Maintenance Team are currently looking at works that will need to be done at Love Lane for the next financial year, as the focus this year has been the Theale site.

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.

AC appreciated JH honesty in reporting the number of school class closures to date for this academic year, but he expressed concern that there have been 21 class closures to date. JH said that when it comes to closing classes the decision is not taken lightly. One of the main reasons for the closures is due to staff sickness. Parents send their children into school who are unwell and should be kept at home. JH regularly sends out reminder emails to parents on this matter. There can also be other reasons for class closures so JH will break them down further in his reports. It was noted that there had been exceptional class closures due to staff attendance at funerals and it was agreed these should be reported separately.

AC then asked if there needs to be more contingencies put in place for example a few extra staff who can fill in. JD responded by saying that it is not always possible, especially in cases of children with Feeding Plans. Staff who are involved with these children must undertake training from the NHS and they are assessed regularly on administering these plans.

JH said that it is difficult to have the extra staff as sickness comes in waves which makes it not as straightforward. He understands the concerns of a child not learning versus the inconvenience of parents having to find childcare for the day.

JW and Kate Mason manage the attendance lines from 6am, where they then work on a plan for the day. At present the school's staffing levels meet its needs. However there may be days where the school would not be able to operate a certain class safely and the decision is then made whether to close that class or not.

It was noted that some schools nationally are now operating a 4 day week due to the lack of staff. One local SEND school currently has 21 agency staff, and Independent SEND schools are no longer offering places.

HC asked JH if the exclusions are repeat offenders. JH confirmed that there is a small group that have had a number of exclusions. All pupils who have been excluded will have a plan in place for when they return to school. To make it clearer in his report he will split the exclusions into one off exclusion or repeated exclusion.

8. Policies for ratification

Having been submitted and approved by the relevant committees the following policies were agreed and ratified.

Policy Document	Proposed	Second
Capability	JH	NH
Redundancy	HC	CK
Server weather	See note Below	See Note Bellow
Health and Safety	JD	NM
Financial Management	CK	JH
Charging and Remissions	NM	HC
SEND	JH	JD
Admissions	NM	JD
Creative Arts	NM	JD

It was agreed by all Governors present to remove the Server Weather Policy with effect from 21 March 2024.

JH reminded governors that all HR policies will need to be reviewed, or replaced, now that Judicium will be providing the support Castle need.

9. Safeguarding update and signing of central register

NM and CW met prior to today's meeting and went through the training of staff. CW went through the way reports, between Levels 1-3 are no longer triaged by a Social Worker (there are currently 4 levels). The school now fills in the relevant paper work along with Family Support workers. Concerns were raised that with these changes that there may be delays in getting things actioned. However, CW did say that we do go above and beyond in our duty for safeguarding.

Currently there are four children in Care.

In November 2023 a Safeguarding Audit was completed. No significant changes were identified.

CW and JW have also conducted a Peer Review.

10. Governance and Training

The Board discussed the training needs to Governors. JG will signing WA and IH up for the New to Governance course being held in May and June.

In April there will be an Ofsted Bite size workshop, and it was agreed that HC will attend and then feed back to Governors on any items that they need to be aware of.

JG agreed to send JH her list acronyms to JH so he could review and update it. It will then be circulated to the Board.

JG will circulate the Finance Skills Survey to all Governors on the Finance Committee, as well as the FGB chair and Vice Chair. These will need to be completed and returned with sufficient time in order for the skills matrix to be completed by the end of June 2024.

JG asked that all governors who took part in the site visit of Post-16 to complete the site visit form which she will send out after the meeting.

11. AOB

- Finance Audit, Registration of Authorising Officers

HC confirmed that most audit actions are now closed. Given AA's absence it was agreed that this will be deferred back to the next F&P meeting for any further discussion and approval.

- Health & Safety Audit

Already covered under item 5.

- LA Clawback

Already covered under item 6 (Finance Committee). The situation will be a standing agenda item for the Finance Committee going forward.

- WAN Contract and HR SLA

Already covered under item 6. New contracts for the IT support and HR support will come into effect on 1st April 2024.

- Suspensions and Exclusions

Already covered under item 6. JG will, book a place for all Governors and herself on the next course available.

- SFVS

The F&P committee had got given final sign off on the SFVS. It was agreed that the F&P committee would meet with HC on 22/03/2024 to complete that sign off. HC would minute that meeting to enable Governor approval of the SFVS to be given and documented ahead of its submission by 31/03/2024..

- JH requested that going forward minutes of meetings should have page numbers added

12. Date and Time of the next FGB meetings

Budget Sign-off – Thursday 25th April 2024 on Teams

Governor's Strategy Session – Tuesday 4th June 2024 in person at Post-16

FGB – Thursday 27th June 2024 in person at Love Lane