

Attendees: Ilona Bond (IB), Alan Lee (AL), Tony Sanderson (TS), David Morgan (DM), Nafia Baust (NB), Maggie Farrar (MF), Akhtar Ahamed (AA), Alison Wilshaw (AW), Kim Rowe (KR) and Mark Liddiard (ML)

Chair: Ilona Bond

Guests: Nick Martin (NM) and John Linehan (JL)

Governance Professional: Yvonne Humphries

Procedural

Notification of any perceived conflicts of interest: None

Previous Minutes (30/09/2025): Previous minutes reviewed and unanimously approved for signature.

SWA/RBA All-through Proposal

Pre-read: Proposed future models of schooling and Shefford & Stotfold – School Place Planning distributed prior to the meeting. See documents for more details.

The three 'most workable' models (out of the eight considered) were presented to the Board of Trustees. SWA and RBA have a well established close working relationship and have worked well together over many years. However, the anticipated 2Tier/3Tier cluster split is now beginning to adversely effect pupil numbers at SWA; NM anticipates the drop in pupil numbers over a three year period equating to a loss in revenue to the sum of £1.5million. The local authority's (CBC) decision regarding school buses has further impounded the situation. RBA remains a popular, full school. JL said time is less of an issue for RBA; JL is keen to support SWA but acknowledges it would have a financial repercussion for RBA.

Model 1: This would be a holding position and is JL's preferred position – two extended secondary schools; this is then a model replicated across BEST i.e. aligns with ETA and PBA and would support the CBC with year 5 and 6 pupil places. However, this would have a cost implication for SWA as there is less funding for younger children. Furthermore, KS2 staffing experience is minimal at SWA and vice versa with KS4 at RBA.

Model 2: This is the preferred long-term model – two secondary schools. This model would be reliant on working closely with CBC and several schools within the cluster would need to transition from lower to primary schools.

Model 3: This proposed holding position would be NM's preferred choice – RBA remains as is i.e. Years 5-8 with a 240 PAN. SWA Becomes a secondary school, taking only 90 children in years 7 and 8; RBA pupils join SWA in Year 9 (Year 9-11 330 PAN). NM believes this solves the financial position and allows RBA/SWA to compete with other schools locally. JL has reservations as RBA could lose pupils at the end of Year 6 and RBA would be a national outlier.

Both Principals feel financially they're unable to wait for CBC to find a solution regarding the split cluster. Positives include a broad KS4 curriculum and the ability to share resources. NM is keen to work towards a September 2028 start date for change.

Trustees, NM and JL discussed the recommendations, set of Principles, the viability and pro/cons of an all-through school. Local housing growth is anticipated but capital funding is unlikely for at least four or five years.

NM and JL left the meeting.

Trustees discussed the proposal and agreed upon the following:

Timing is essential to avoid financial implications – CBC plans may take too long. An agreed plan is needed during 2025/26, to consult Autumn 2026 in readiness for September 2028. Whilst timing is key, CBC have advised some comms relating to cluster plans will be released in February 2026; trustees would like to see sight of CBC's updates before making any firm plans.

Decision: Trustees would like NM and JL to continue working together closely on this project and consider what an all-through school may look like. In the meantime, trustees will await sight of CBC's comms regarding cluster/housing plans and will invite NM and JL back to discuss options in Spring 2026.

Action: YH to obtain details of SWA's declining pupil numbers from LL and forward onto Trustees.

Action: ML to advise NM and JL of the Trustees' decision and gratitude.

Matters Arising

Safeguarding: DSLs have received training and support from TR and LL, this has been well received. There are strong effective systems in place, as evidenced in the audits recently completed. Safeguarding Link Governor training will take place in the new year.

GDPR: ICO reportable incident – teacher laptop open and unattended and viewed by pupils. LL has provided further training to GDPR Leads. ICO have dropped the case.

Health & Safety: Cousins have completed their Health and Safety audits across the trust and some improvements have been seen. Site Agent training has been provided and well received. Asbestos reports completed across both north and south sites at CNS – thus allowing any future works to take place (if required) without disruption.

Sustainability: Schools are working with 'Let's go Zero'. Conversations are taking place with suppliers re: one time plastic/better recyclable products. School Sustainability leads are working with student forums.

BEST Financial Accounts – 2024/25

Pre-read: Auditors Key Issues for Discussion document distributed prior to the meeting – see document for detail

Pre-read: The following documents for each of the three entities were distributed prior to the meeting

- End of Year Accounts: September 2024 – August 2025
- Letters of Representation

DM as Chair of the Finance and Audit Committee provided trustees with an overview of the accounts:

- Nurseries have performed well this year, are now solvent and no longer in need of a comfort letter
- The Nurseries loans from the Charity have been repaid
- Profits will be subject to tax (Gift Aid is a separate agenda item)

Trustees thanked KR and AW for their leadership with the nurseries.

- The Charities assets include BEST House. BEST House generates a profit but depreciation of the property offsets the profit resulting in a small loss
- Both sets of subsidiary accounts are clean and straight forward
- The MAT accounts included details of the CNS onboarding, which includes the freehold property, taking the value of property to £123 million
- 7.7% of free reserves, this is within the DfE's recommendation of reserves between 5-20% (Trustees' are comfortable with this level and would prefer to remain the lower end of the scale and spend the money on pupils today)
- The accounts include details of the four schools with a deficit budget, together with their recovery plans
- Pensions are not included within the accounts as this year they are deemed a net asset. This year pensions show as an £8 million surplus. Should assumptions change in the future and pensions become a negative, they will need to be included within the accounts.

Summary from the Key Issues Discussion Document (KIDD):

Six tests were completed and BEST passed all six tests, these include:

1. Management override of controls
2. Fraud in income recognition
3. Valuation of assets and liabilities transferred on conversion/transfer
4. Unauthorised transactions¹
5. Related parties
6. Unauthorised borrowing or leases

As discussed above, details relating to the four BEST schools with a deficit and pension assumptions are documented within the KIDD. BEST has £4.2 million of reserves (7.7%).

Management letter points and internal control systems identified six items during the 2023/24 audit – these have now all been resolved. The 2024/25 audit identified six new items, of which five were low grade and easily resolved. The remaining 'amber' item relates to ensuring sufficient quotes are obtained in line with policy; this was an oversight and details of the correct procurement process have been shared with schools.

Decision: Trustees unanimously approved the 2024-2025 accounts for sign-off and ESFA submission.

¹ Attention was drawn to the management letter point in relation to the purchase of alcohol; the school paid for a gift on the bank card and paid collection funds into the account.

Finance and Audit Committee Update

Pre-read: Finance and Audit Committee (FAC) meeting minutes 11/11/2025 distributed prior to the meeting – see minutes for more detail.

The FAC reviewed the accounts and acknowledge the £50 million threshold has now been exceeded and as such, BEST may choose to separate the FAC into two committees: 1. Audit & Scrutiny. 2. Finance. This will be reviewed and considered in the new year.

FAC discussed the four schools with a deficit budget and their proposed recovery plans.

FAC discussed the nurseries surplus position and the possibility of Gift Aid – KR was tasked to look into this and make a recommendation to the board (next agenda item).

DM confirmed no fraud or any causes of concern were identified with the accounts.

Letters of representation for each of the entities will need signing; only three trustees are on the nursery board of trustees (IB, AL & NB).

CFO Update

Pre-read: Nurseries Gift Aid document distributed prior to the meeting – see document for more detail.

Nurseries Gift Aid

The improved financial performance of the nurseries has led to a £131k profit and would be subject to a £32k tax bill, unless the funds are gift aided to the charity. KR shared for options with trustees:

Option 1: Gift aid the whole balance to the Charity – this is not advisable as the nurseries have no reserves

Option 2: Gift aid £100k to the charity, this would reduce the tax liability to £6k

Option 3: Gift aid half the profits to the charity and half the tax liability

Option 4: Do not gift aid any of the profits

Recommendation: KR recommended option 4, as it's the first year the nurseries have a stabilised position and it allows the opportunity to build some reserves and for the nurseries to spend monies after a frugal few years.

Capital and expenditure plans are being looked into for future years.

Decision: Trustees unanimously approved KR's recommendation to re-invest funds back into the nurseries i.e. no funds will be gift aided to the Charity.

External Auditor Recommendation: This year marks the fifth year of using Bishop Fleming – BEST will go out to tender in the new year. Further details to follow in due course.

Monthly Cashflow and Management Accounts

Finance and Audit Committee members i.e. DM, AL, IB, NB and AA receive the cashflow and management accounts reports on behalf of the board of trustees, all of whom, agreed they are happy with the accounts and are satisfied the trust is financially sound.

Internal Scrutiny

Pre-read: Internal Scrutiny Scope 2025/26 document distributed prior to the meeting – see document for detail.

The FAC discussed the proposed internal scrutiny recommendations from Junipers, this resulted in a slight tweak in the non-financial area for internal scrutiny.

Recommendation: Non-Financial = Health & Safety. Financial = Balance Sheet (increased to two days).

Decision: Trustees unanimously approved the abovementioned recommendations for the 2025/26 internal scrutiny.

Performance and Wellbeing Committee Update

Pre-read: Performance and Wellbeing Committee (PWC) meeting minutes 18/11/2025 distributed prior to the meeting – see minutes for more detail.

Action: YH to share the Director of Education's report with the full board of Trustees.

TS provided trustees with an update of each of the schools, highlighting the positives and any specific challenges. Trustees were told that schools have been told of the need to be aspirational and compete nationally, as the local authority is not performing to a very high standard.

Standardised templates were discussed, to allow for consistency of information being presented to the Committee. However, Principals provided feedback that they like to discuss items such as ethos. Presentations were balanced, looking at outcomes, successes, challenges and wellbeing.

AL is considering whether the Autumn 2026 PWC Committee meeting would be better spread over two days (it was a long day).

Confidential: [REDACTED]

AL will be creating a new Mindfulness model that will give greater sustainability. Fourteen teachers are now qualified to deliver Mindfulness training to pupils and should start to be utilised more next year.

PWC asked each of the Principals if they could have a wish, what SI team support they would like. Each Principal responded with a request for building/adding capacity.

Castle Newnham Academy (CNS) All-through Consultation

Pre-read: CNS Consultation responses distributed prior to the meeting – see document for more detail.

The Consultation received thirteen responses, five in favour and eight opposed. However, a majority of the objections were around the misconception that CNS Primary would be expected to join CNS in year 7; LL will write to each of the respondents to explain the situation.

Policies

Pre-read: Complaints analysis (Annual Summary) distributed prior to the meeting – see document for detail.

Pre-read: The following policies were distributed prior to the meeting for review and consideration:

Decision: Trustees unanimously approved both the Discretions LGPS Policy for immediate use BEST-wide.

Decision: Trustees unanimously approved the BEST Complaints Policy (Trust level only) for immediate use.

Decision: Trustees unanimously approved the School Complaints Policy Template for immediate use.

Complaints analysis – annual summary document shared with trustees for information purposes only.

Ofsted received thirteen complaints regarding BEST schools. Complainants are asked by Ofsted to confirm that they had followed the BEST Complaints process, all confirmed they had but in actual fact, only three had. Ofsted forward the complaints onto the local authority, BEST have cooperated with their investigations.

Trustees expressed gratitude to LL for her hard work.

Action: IB to write to LL on behalf of the board of trustees to thank her for all her hard work.

AOB

A strong field of applicants received for the CNS Principal vacancy – an appointment has been made.

Trustees thanked Central Executive for their continued hard work.

AL on behalf of Central Executive, thanked the board of trustees for their challenge and support.

Next meeting: 10:30am on 27 January 2026 at BEST House.

J. Bond

Minutes approved and electronically signed on 27 January 2026.