

## **BEST Trustees' Meeting**

18 March 2025, 10:30am – 12.30pm

BEST House, Conference Room



**Attendees:** Alan Lee (AL), Ilona Bond (IB), Tony Sanderson (TS), Akhtar Ahamed (AA), Maggie Farrar (MF), Craig Smith (CS), Alison Wilshaw (AW) and Kim Rowe (KR)

**Apologies:** Nafia Baust (NB) and David Morgan (DM)

**Meeting Chair:** Ilona Bond (IB)

**Minute Taker:** Lisa Little (LL)

**Notification of any perceived conflicts of interest:** None

**Previous minutes:** Trustees meeting minutes (28/01/25) reviewed and unanimously approved for signature.

**SCA Ofsted** – Tom Clarke (TC) joined for this item only

TC provided a summary of the Ofsted experience at SCA – final report published

- Section 5, 2-day inspection with 3 inspectors (4-5 February 2025), no overall grade – deep dives into reading, maths, history, RE and computing
- 90-minute call – very thorough, call set the tone of the inspection
- Went to script, usual questions, largely want to know about the school – TC was very candid in this conversation and discussed the SCA story and challenges with recruitment and retention, HMI had empathy
- Heavy focus on wellbeing and checking all leaders/staff are okay
- TC was clear in initial phone call that there had been a culture change, particularly in respect of the behaviour policy and that there was still work to be done in terms of parent perception - inspectors then checked behaviour in practice
- Affirming to hear that staff were 'behind' the leaders and the new values adopted
- Areas to develop:
  - Approach to managing behaviour being consistently applied – work has already commenced on this
  - Adaptation of the curriculum for SEND children and design learning activities effectively that support all pupils to achieve well
  - Strengthen assessment in foundation subjects so that areas for improvement can be identified and acted upon
- Overall, the report had many strong features particularly noting the positive environment for children and the values adopted, and recognises the journey the school has been on

IB congratulated TC and his team on the outcomes and thanked him for his presentation. IB was pleased to hear that the Ofsted team showed concern for the wellbeing of the Principal and staff throughout the process without taking away the rigor.

**Question:** How well established is assessment and was this area for development expected due to staff changes?

**Answer:** The school is working on assessment in the foundation subjects therefore this area of development was anticipated.

**Question:** Being Executive Principal (EP) across two schools, will the learning points be shared across the schools?

**Answer:** TC presented an item on the Ofsted experience at the next GMA SLT meeting. The outcome and report are now published, and can therefore be openly discussed, which is beneficial in terms of transferrable learning.

Considering the school's journey, the school was praised for maintaining the Ofsted Good judgements. Trustees highlighted the importance placed upon reading at the school as well as the use of the word 'happy' in the report – happy staff, make happy children, which make happy schools!

Trustees also noted the leadership opportunities for children and stated that they would value gaining an understanding of whether this practice is adopted across all BEST schools – perhaps a future discussion item.

**Question:** The report suggests that the school is moving in the right direction, but there is more work to be done. How willing and energised are staff to move onto the next stages of school development?

**Answer:** Key members of staff have been brought onto SLT - this has provided a good source of support in cascading messages to staff. There are still some challenges in retaining and recruiting staff, but this is a priority for the leaders. The school will continue to embed the new values. The value of community is crucial.

AL thanked TC and his team for the continuing work at the school. AL also expressed his gratitude to the way the school work with the trust and the support of the School Improvement and Central Teams. AL commended the school on revisiting their values and mission, as well as committing to the philosophy of restorative behaviour. This behaviour approach is not always easily embedded. It is a very challenging time for schools with increasing budgetary constraints, but AL urged the schools to continue with constant school presence and relentless communication, and positivity.

**RBA Ofsted** – John Linehan (JL) joined for this item only

JL revisited the journey that led the school to the Ofsted outcome.

- It was clear upon appointment as Principal that the curriculum needed to be ‘tweaked’ to include progressive knowledge and skills
- The trust provides its schools with sufficient autonomy to make appropriate changes
- RBA has a strong personal development offer. The RBA values of community, opportunity and excellence were well established and embedded, and the school has a committed staff body
- RBA has a strong safeguarding team, and the trust commissioned audits keep the school on track
- There has been good recruitment, but some staff are secondary trained due to the issues with two-tier transition, which means that KS2 is not their primary strength
- Upon appointment, JL noted that sickness absence monitoring needed to be addressed – everyone needed to be present and in place to move forward
- JL felt that first impressions are important – this included having a strong website, data and being prepared for the initial phone call
- Despite JL recognising the school’s strengths, he also identified areas for development – it was important to create conditions for success. Voice and values were integral. Vitality and independence were added to the values. Strong belief in values being at the forefront with codifying systems. Staff needed clarity and consistency, including communication internally and externally. The leadership team was also restructured
- JL recommended the use of crib sheets such as safeguarding, SEND, outcomes, literacy, attendance etc, and checklists for known activities such as car parking, duties and lunches (logistics). These remove the panic from staff on the inspection days. JL told staff to smile and be yourself, be RBA but RBA on our best day
- School culture is built around values. Building Voice values into every facet of the school with codified systems in place
- Built leadership capacity in SEND team – provision and quality of education for SEND learners strongly contributed to the inspection outcomes
- Ofsted team recognised context and challenges of being a middle school and only having pupils for part of their KS2 journey
- Reading and literacy – JL recognised this as an area for development in terms of pupil progress and made this a focus. JL looked at best practice in other schools. Work is still to be done in this area, but reading is on a journey and is emerging as a strength
- The report is brief but outlines several of RBA’s strengths. CBC have visited the school as an example of good practice around pupil premium
- JL gave his thanks to the trust for their support over the two days.

IB thanked JL for his presentation and congratulated him and his team. There is a clear culture and team strengths.

The Trustees made the following observations and comments:

- A tremendous amount of work is involved in 'taking staff with you' on a journey and it is evident there is pride amongst RBA staff. There is a continual process of reflection and belief in values
- Staff not only wanted to do well for the school but also for JL – the report clearly evidences the dignity and respect shown
- Only a small percentage of schools manage to achieve back-to-back Outstanding gradings - this is a credit to JL and the RBA team
- RBA have been adversely affected by two-tier discussions – achieving these outcomes despite the challenges is a huge achievement. AL thanked the Board for supporting RBA throughout the two-tier discussions
- There is a reference to 'kindness' in the report which is a BEST value
- Disciplined approach of activating Voice values

**Question:** At a previous Performance and Wellbeing Committee, JL stated that he wished to improve the KS2 results and review some staffing. Trustees asked if JL was being too hard on himself or do the leaders have a culture of absolutely no complacency?

**Answer:** Committee meeting was shortly after KS2 results were published. The Ofsted inspection has revealed that results are important but, as a middle school, they are only part of the story. The results are still good in comparison to other local middle schools, however, JL still aspires to raise the outcomes.

AL stated his gratitude to RBA staff as well as the School Improvement and Central Teams who worked with the school. AL asked that his thanks be passed back to the RBA staff.

**Lawnside Academy Budget** – Cheryl Johnson (CJ) joined for this item only

**Pre-read:** LSA budget deficit recovery plan – refer to document for more detail

**Pre-read:** Lawnside Academy addendum to finance report – refer to document for more detail

AL provided Trustees with context to the budget situation at LSA. The school has the largest deficit budget in the trust. They have moved from Ofsted RI to Good and transitioned to primary school, although they still have temporary classrooms in place. The school has been working on improving pupil numbers but remains half full. The Principal has worked with the DoE and CFO to create a new strategy to address this deficit. The Principal must balance the budget.

CJ explained the deficit recovery plan to Trustees – the main saving would be around staffing, which is the highest school cost. The Director of SEND and Safeguarding has reviewed the SEND and EHCP provision and suggested staffing adjustments. These occurred naturally through staff changes. There are 11 EHCP pupils, potentially rising to 18 in near future.

Trustees commented that the percentage of the budget spent on staffing is very high compared to other schools and the recommended percentage from the DFE.

**Question:** Is there any additional funding available?

**Answer:** The funds would not be sufficient to cover the deficit.

**Question:** The national average for ECHPs is 4.8%, the school is almost in line with this figure, but this may change in September – is there capacity in the team to support the increase in EHCPs?

**Answer:** There is no spare capacity. The Principal, SENCo and Senior Leaders all have teaching commitments.

**Question:** Is there any flexibility around mixed age classes? Are teaching assistants attached to particular year group – is there any possibility to pool teaching assistants? This might enable better use of resources.

**Answer:** CJ explained the structure of teaching assistants. The teaching assistants are not assigned to classes.

**Question:** A number of schools now have some classes without teaching assistants, is it feasible that some EHCP pupils could be managed by the class teacher?

**Answer:** In addition to the teaching assistant provision, all staffing has been reviewed under the advice of Horizon HR. Teaching assistants support with some children who cannot access the class due to difficulties with transitions, those classes do not have teaching assistants as they are leading the support for those children.

**Question:** The paper is based on a PAN of 60 in Yr R and a temporary cap of 45 in other year groups. If the full PAN is not achieved, this could represent a further reduction in income. How confident are the school that 50 pupils will start in September 2025?

**Answer:** If 50 pupils were achieved for Yr R, it is hoped that this number will then follow on through year groups.

**Question:** What are the current application numbers for September 2025?

**Answer:** 39 1<sup>st</sup> preferences (another application due soon), 124 overall applications. The school are keen to convert the second places although there is no guarantee. The school is showing new families around most weeks but the funding is lagged.

**Question:** Has a reduction from 2FE to 1FE been considered?

**Answer:** Yes, but the savings would take time to work through the system.

**Question:** Are there any trends in pupil numbers locally, are pupil numbers likely to grow? What is the flow of pupils? Is there a long-term strategy?

**Answer:** CJ explained the local context with two primary schools reducing by 2FEs and another increasing to 4FE.

AL advised that the SRMA have been deployed to review the accounts processes due to the in-year deficit. Three schools in the trust are primarily responsible for this - LSA account for half of the in-year deficit. AL outlined future implications of the budget and pupil numbers. AL requested clarity on whether 1FE could address the budget issues if full. Initially the trust would like to prevent deficit growth and then focus on reduction.

**Question:** Can the determined admission arrangements be varied for September 2026?

**Answer:** The trust as the Admissions Authority can request an in-year variation through the DfE if a major change has occurred. This would require a consultation with the Local Authority and an application process. Applications commence (for September 2026) from 1<sup>st</sup> September 2025 therefore the process would need be finalised before the summer.

CJ speculated that potentially a nursery could be added in the future to increase the probability of pupil flow into the school.

IB thanked CJ for the hard work being done to address the matter.

**Action:** KR and CJ to review budget implications if reduced to 1FE and liaise with LL regarding the process for requesting a variation to the determined admission arrangements.

**Question:** Is there an expectation to provide Yr 6 residential trips?

**Answer:** This is not a statutory requirement or expectation across the trust.

## **Matters Arising**

**Safeguarding:** No trustee reportable safeguarding incidents since the last trustees' meeting. Safeguarding audits currently taking place.

**GDPR:** No trustee reportable GDPR incidents since the last trustees' meeting. GDPR audits currently taking place - annual report to be presented at the next trustees' meeting.

**Health & Safety:** No trustee reportable Health and Safety incidents since the last trustees' meeting. Cousins Safety audits are due in the Autumn. CNS have been audited by Cousins Safety and were judged as 56% compliant – the report and required actions are being discussed with the Principals together with a timeline to address this.

**Sustainability:** The trust is working with Let's Go Zero charity. One school has been audited so far. The majority of schools now have a Sustainability Lead and action plan. The trust is complying with simpler recycling requirements.

**Admission Arrangements September 2026:** Objection received from the Office of the Schools Adjudicator (OSA). LL working with OSA on this.

## **Performance and Wellbeing Committee Update**

**Pre-read:** PWC Minutes – 4 March 2025 (draft, to be approved at next committee meeting)

TS gave his thanks to IB for chairing the meeting due to technical difficulties. Please refer to the meeting minutes for detail. Areas to highlight:

- ETA likely to next receive Ofsted
- Targets at national average in schools – this is minimum expectation rather than aspirational
- Interventions – could be put in place earlier but classroom support limited due to budgets
- Concerns around teacher autonomy to predict grades in English at SWA – potential impact on reliability of predicted grades
- Strong links noted between budgets and outcomes
- Change in leadership at CMA
- Discussions taking place around formalising the all-through provision at CNS
- GMA staff voice being reviewed and relevant areas addressed
- Safeguarding provision at PBA being monitored/supported – temporary adjustment in staffing
- RBA and SCA predicted outcomes questioned – see meeting minutes for further detail
- Wellbeing survey – committee questioned when the surveys are carried out and if it impacts on results
- Fewer staff responded this year. It was agreed that benchmarking needed reviewing. The Wellbeing Leads Group will be reviewing the outcomes at their next meeting
- Education risk register – downgraded risk category E2 (fall in Ofsted inspection grades) and decision to add a new risk category, E6 (Failure to recruit quality Principals)
- Will George and Thomas Rowell have been invited to attend the next meeting.

## **Finance and Audit Committee Update**

**Pre-read:** FAC Minutes – 4 March 2025 (draft, to be approved at next committee meeting)

- Annual accounts submitted
- Key discussion item – 2025/26 budget assumptions, approved by committee
- Teacher pay award recommendation 2.8% uplift, included 3% in budget
- Unions requesting £3,000 on all of pay points for support staff - this equates to approximately 5% uplift across budgets (more staff on lower end of pay scale)
- External contracts around catering and cleaning are likely to increase this year primarily due to employers NI increase and cost being passed on

- GAG statements have now been received, schools are working towards actual income assumptions for next year, await post 16
- Budgets are being worked on and are still challenging for most of the schools
- Trading accounts showing overall surplus
- Request received from RBA to use some of their reserves for a new oven for the kitchen – this was approved by the committee
- DM as Chair of the Finance and Audit Committee has approved an invoice for ICT support provided by Partnership Education and an invoice from AQA Education in relation to SWA exam fees – these were ratified by the FAC committee (see FAC notes for further detail)
- Benchmarking, Kreston Report – BEST compared favourably overall, classed as a medium trust but with CNS joining, BEST is on the cusp of being considered a large trust. The key areas are pupil projections across the board, trusts are seeing a decrease in numbers, rising SEND and associated financial costs
- Risk register – updated to reflect level of reserves (trust is within recommended ESFA range at 8%), increased probability level for increased pressure on cash flow and reviewing the top 3 risks across the trust as a whole
- SRMA checklist – discussed and agreed for submission (this was submitted on 12 March 2025) with recommended changes
- Charging and Remission Policy approved.

### **Monthly Cashflow and Management Accounts**

Finance and Audit Committee members i.e. DM, AL, IB, NB and AA receive the cashflow and management account reports on behalf of the board of trustees, those present at the meeting agreed that the FAC committee are happy with the accounts and are satisfied the trust is financially sound at this moment in time.

### **BEST's Mission, Vision and Values**

On 5 May 2026 a Mission, Vision and Value Day is being held, commemorating the 10-year anniversary of BEST. The Priory in Hitchin has been booked as this is symbolic of where the trust began. AL encouraged Trustees to attend. It is anticipated that there will be approximately 60 attendees (maximum 70). AL will introduce the day and IB will speak about values and successes. A speaker is being organised to focus on compassion in leadership. Next year, CS will be leading on a 'Big Listen' in the BEST community, with a focus on what the next 10 years should look like.

### **BGHB Consultation**

Closing date for comments is 28 March 2025. AL encouraged Trustees to consider the Academy Trust Handbook and Ofsted framework. This will be the 10<sup>th</sup> edition.

### **Policies**

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

- Pay Policy
- Recruitment Policy
- Disciplinary Policy
- Grievance Policy
- Sickness Absence Policy

### **Questions and comments:**

- Cover sheet - typo under Recruitment Policy section, should read 'could not be tracked'.
- Pay Policy (point 2.8) - to avoid any conflict of interest and as the Chair is part of the CEO process, should this refer to the BEST Board of Trustees? All agreed.

**Decision:** Trustees unanimously approved the Pay Policy for BEST-wide use subject to Union Consultation and the above change.

**Decision:** Trustees unanimously approved the Recruitment Policy for immediate use.

**Decision:** Trustees unanimously approved the Disciplinary Policy for immediate use.

**Decision:** Trustees unanimously approved the Grievance Policy for immediate use.

**Decision:** Trustees unanimously agreed to extend the Sickness Absence Policy by a further to two years (three years in total).

**Question:** What training is carried out with Principals and Senior Leaders in terms of new/revised policies.

**Answer:** Training in terms of the core HR policies as well as Managing Allegations and Complaints, was carried last academic year. However, CNS might now also benefit from this training. Support is always available from the trust for schools and nurseries, and there is also the Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) for all staff to access.

**Action:** CS to review training provision for new and updated policies and determine if any additional sessions should be provided.

#### AOB

IB gave thanks to LL for stepping in as Governance Professional in YH's absence.

Trustees observed that in light of the school deficits, the trust and schools must be careful to balance budgets but also be aware of staff wellbeing and voice.

**Next meeting:** 10:30am on 13 May 2025 at BEST House

Minutes unanimously approved by the board of trustees on 13 May 2025 and electronically signed by the Chair of the Board of Trustees, Ilona Bond:

*J. Bond*

13/05/2025