

## **BEST Trustees' Meeting**

10 December 2024, 10:30am – 12:00pm

BEST House, Conference Room

**Attendees:** Ilona Bond (IB), Paul Walker (PW), Alan Lee (AL), Tony Sanderson (TS), David Morgan (DM), Nafia Baust (NB), Maggie Farrar (MF), Akhtar Ahamed (AA), Craig Smith (CS), Alison Wilshaw (AW), Kim Rowe (KR)

**Chair:** Ilona Bond

**Governance Professional:** Yvonne Humphries

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

**Previous Minutes (01/10/2024):** Previous minutes reviewed and unanimously approved for signature.

### **Matters Arising**

**Safeguarding:** No trustee reportable safeguarding incidents since the last trustees' meeting. Safeguarding audits are scheduled to take place during the Spring term.

**GDPR:** One reportable breach to ICO. The source of the issue is being investigated. In the meantime, ICO has closed the case and confirmed no further action is required.

**Health & Safety:** No trustee reportable Health and Safety incidents since the last trustees' meeting.

**Sustainability:** Activity taking place to support schools with their 2025 Sustainability Plans in readiness for September 2025. CS and NB attended the Our Schools, Our World conference.

### **BEST Financial Accounts – 2023/24**

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

- End of Year Accounts: September 2023 – August 2024
- Letters of Representation
- Letter of support from the Charity to the Nursery

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

Nurseries have reported a £45,000 profit against a loss of £64,000; this is better than recent years but auditors, Bishop Fleming (BF), advise a comfort letter is still required. Finance and Audit Committee (FAC) members are satisfied no further action is required at this moment in time as the nurseries are in a better position than last year.

The Charity needs to trade-off between rental income and heavy depreciation. Assets include BEST House at approx. £1.8 million and £110,000 loan to the nursery; there are no liabilities.

The consolidated MAT accounts confirm the forecasted in-year deficit was achieved through a mixture of schools performing well and some schools not so well.

The calculation and clarification around free reserves has been obtained – BEST hold reserves of 8%. The calculation varies firm to firm – BF failed to provide much guidance in this area.

The accounts were deemed 'very clean' and provide greater disclosure.

**Action:** Page 1 = Typo, AL is listed as Member – this is not correct and needs to be amended.

At the moment pensions are deemed an asset. However, this is subject to change.

Post year events include the purchase/acquisition of Castle Newnham School. Castle Newnham School joined BEST on 1 September 2024.

Trustees were made aware of the following:

- Letter of support from the Charities to Nurseries is required – the nurseries are considered a going concern.
- Trustees were made aware the Charities are owed £110,000 by the nurseries.
- Regularity letters are required to confirm the assets belong to BEST. BEST is aware of the financial responsibility and the need for a letter of support.
- The comfort letter from the Charity to Nurseries is to provide assurance that repayment of the loan will not be demanded within 12 months.

Summary from the Audit Completion Report (Formerly known as KIDD)

- There were five tests across each of the three entities (15 in total); test override Controls – showed 1 unauthorised transaction
- All three entities are clean
- The four schools carrying the deficits are listed within the report
- This year, pensions are an asset because of changing assumptions. If change, could become a liability
- BEST Have free reserves at 8%, against ESFA's minimum 5% reserves requirement
- Charity have £110,000 invested in the nurseries – an impairment is not required
- One previously identified internal control has been carried forward: Written authorisation should always be obtained prior to transacting
- No Internal Financial Controls (IFC) have been flagged as 'red' this year
- MAT: IFC flagged one 'green': an admin error relating to a term of office on GIAS – Resolved
- Charity: IFC flagged one 'green': Interests not declared – Resolved
- Nurseries: IFC flagged one 'green': Late payroll authorisation – Resolved
- Charity/Nurseries: IFC flagged an 'amber': Sage not correctly closed down for the previous year – Resolve
- Nurseries: IFC flagged an 'amber': exercise to take place tidy up debtors to allow more accurate monitoring of aged debtors – In progress.

Until now, Castle Newnham School have never submitted a three year budget, the submission showed a deficit of £1.9 million over three years. 2024/25 is an accurate reflection but more investigation work is required for the following two years; the budgeted loss is too high. An objective within all principals' appraisals is to meet or beat their agreed deficit budgets this year and then maintain balanced budgets going forward.

Trustees discussed the significant rise in Castle Newnham School's staffing costs i.e. from 83% to 92%. Trustees were advised the school has undergone much change but are aware of the financial challenges and are on the case.

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

**Action:** BEST is 'leading the way with Mindfulness' a future focus for BEST will be to look at parity between achievement and wellbeing and how it's effectiveness is measured.

### **Finance and Audit Committee Update**

**Pre-read:** Finance and Audit Committee meeting minutes 12/11/2024 distributed prior to the meeting – see minutes for more detail.

A large proportion of the meeting discussion was around the financial accounts as documented above.

The Finance and Audit Committee approved the Castle Newnham school budget for 2024/25 academic year. The three year budget provided has only received a high level overview, more work is required. The extension to the LVA Wrap Around Club (WAC) is proving financially successful; CBC provide financial support to WAC staffing costs. Outstanding invoices are paid and cashflow has improved. The Nursery Hub Manager has resigned and the nurseries will now adopt a less expensive leadership model. All three nurseries are now term-time only. Nurseries should be able to make a partial repayment towards the £50,000 loan from the BEST Charity in August 2025. Nurseries are still considered a going concern.

### External Auditor Recommendations

KR advised the audit had gone well and the accounts were received on time. KR is happy to recommend Bishop Fleming for one further year, following which BEST will need to go out to tender in line with ESFA guidance i.e. no more than five years. **Decision:** Trustees unanimously support KR's recommendation and will present the recommendation to the BEST Members at the AGM. BEST Members are responsible for appointing Auditors.

### Monthly Cashflow and Management Accounts

Finance and Audit Committee members i.e. DM, AL, IB, PW, 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.

### Performance and Wellbeing Committee Update

**Pre-read:** Finance and Audit Committee meeting minutes 19/11/2024 distributed prior to the meeting – see minutes for more detail.

Each Principal attended and presented to the Performance and Wellbeing Committee; the presentations were 'excellent'. There was lot to celebrate and some dips, particularly around Key Stage 2. However, the Principals have been thorough in understanding why the results were lower than expected and are moving forward with aspiration for the upcoming year. The affected Principals showed honesty in their lack of satisfaction and a passion and commitment for improvement. AW is reviewing possible use of PIXL across BEST at Key Stage 2.

SEN is a big concern for all BEST schools, and nationally – GMA in particular have very high levels of need.

Principals referenced the support received from BEST Central and the School Improvement Team.

High volumes of in-year admissions are a struggle for some of the BEST Schools.

and yet, Principals continue to strive for excellence.

Principals are pushing themselves hard but were all told of the importance of looking after themselves.

**Action:** TS to write a letter of thanks to each of the Principals on behalf of the Board of Trustees.

### Growth Strategy Developments

BEST have been contacted by and have presented to a Primary School who are look to join a trust next year – we await the outcome.

BEST have also been contacted by a four school cluster within the area who are looking to join a trust. Across the four schools there are 1600 pupils. The schools have Good Ofsted Inspections, Good outcomes and are financially viable.

LSA have this year transitioned from 3Tier to 2Tier – the planning application for the permanent build is still not submitted and potential caveats around bus routes etc have come to light. Meetings and discussions with CBC continue but unless matters are resolved promptly LSA becoming a 1 form of entry (FE) may be solution in the medium term.

CBC feel confident that there are enough pupils to fill a new build 2FE school in Arlesey, as well as GMA.

LVA to remain a 1FE until CBC provide the permanent build; CBC have confirmed this will happen.

Hales trust have submitted a planning application got 60 new build houses on the field behind SWA, with claims of a new access road for SWA. This has not been agreed by SWA or BEST and will therefore likely be objected on the grounds of being misleading.

## Admission Arrangements 2026

**Pre-read:** The following documents were distributed prior to the meeting – see documents for more detail.

- SWA Proposal to reduce PAN from 400 to 380 document submitted by SWA Principal
- SWA Admission Summary Document
- Draft Admission Arrangements for September 2026 all distributed prior to the meeting

The SWA proposal advised of the challenges that have arisen from the Shefford/Stotfold clusters partial transition from 3Tier to 2Tier, namely misaligned points of entry, thus resulting in a lower number of pupil applications year on year. Providing resources for 400 pupils, if only 380 pupils show up would equate to unnecessary costs of £300,000.

**Decision:** Trustees appreciate the predicament but would like the PAN to remain 'as is' with a review of the proposal in one year.

**Appeal:** Since the meeting, the SWA Principal appealed the decision and provided additional information.

**Decision:** Trustees unanimously approved (via email on 16 December 2024) including a SWA PAN reduction from 400 to 380 within the BEST Admissions Arrangements for 2026.

**Decision:** Trustees unanimously approved LSA request to remove their catchment area to align with local schools in Biggleswade.

**Request:** Wilstead Primary, who transitioned to 2Tier several years ago, asked to be removed as a feeder school to RBA. CS advised trustees applications equate to only two/three per year; whilst sympathetic to the school's position, the RBA Principal is not supportive of the change.

**Decision:** Trustees unanimously agreed to support the RBA Principal. The request to remove Wilstead Primary School as an RBA feeder school declined.

## Policies

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

**Decision:** Trustees unanimously approved the Staff Code of Conduct for BEST-Wide use subject to Union Consultation.

**Decision:** Trustees unanimously approved the Grievance Policy for BEST-Wide use subject to Union Consultation.

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

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

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

**Proposal:** The STPCD has removed the requirement for teachers' annual pay awards to be linked to performance. BEST Central Executive members met with Principals to discuss these changes and agree a way forward. Principals felt leadership roles warranted 'performance related pay' in order to keep schools on track. However, performance related pay would be removed from the appraisal objectives of general teachers, including those on MPS and UPS. Horizon HR have confirmed this can be done.

**Decision:** Trustees unanimously approved the principle proposed above.

**Action:** BEST HR will work with Horizon HR to re-word the policy to reflect the abovementioned changes. Following which, trustee approval and union consultation will be required.

## BEST Personnel Update

PBA Principal is leaving at the end of this academic year. Interviews for his replacement will take place next week.

BEST Chief Operations Officer is leaving at the end of this academic year, the recruitment process will commence in the new year. AL thanked CS for the notice period given and the excellent support and service provided over the last seven years.

PW has completed two terms of office as a BEST Trustee and will stand down on 31 December 2024. PW will become a BEST Member from the 1 January 2025, as agreed at the 2023 AGM.

**Decision:** With three nominations and by unanimous trustee approval, NB will become Vice Chair of Trustees from 1 January 2025.

IB thanked PW for his support over the years and NB for agreeing to be the next Vice Chair of Trustees.

### **AOB**

No items received.

**Next meeting:** 10:30am on 28 January 2025 at BEST House.

Minutes reviewed, approved and signed on 28 January 2025

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Paul Burt', is written over a faint, light blue rectangular stamp.