

Board of The Mead Educational Trust

Minutes of the meeting held on 12th October 2021 at 5.30pm

Present

Gemma Bhagalia	Hetal Parmar (Vice-Chair)
Tony Glover (Chair)	Jerry Robinson
Kirsty Holt	Carolyn Robson, CEO
Hiten Mehta	Kasar Singh (from item 448)

In attendance

Cathy Brown, Director of Governance	Paul Ticher, Clerk
Sarah Ridley, Director of Primary Ed.	

Apologies for absence

Kate Foster

**Action
by**

444 Welcome and apologies for absence

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting, the first to be held in person since the beginning of the covid-19 pandemic. Apologies for absence from Kate Foster were accepted.

445 Election of Chair and Vice-chair

The Clerk took the chair and invited nominations for the post of Chair, to serve for the current year. Mr Glover was proposed by Mrs Bhagalia, seconded by Mr Parmar. Mr Glover was reappointed by acclamation and resumed the chair.

The Chair asked for nominations for the post of Vice-Chair, and reminded trustees that Mr Parmar had been acting as co-Chair. Mr Glover proposed Mr Parmar's reappointment. There being no other nominations, Mr Parmar was reappointed as Vice-Chair.

446 Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of business or pecuniary interests in any of the agenda items. Mr Glover and Mr Parmar reminded trustees of their respective involvements with other academy trusts.

447 Minutes of the meetings held on 22nd June and 15th July 2021

The minutes of the meetings held on 22nd June and 15th July 2021 were each **approved** as a correct record and the Chair was **authorised** to sign them.

448 Matters arising from previous minutes

Item 436 (HR policies): It was confirmed that Mrs Robson had provided a copy of the induction programme, as requested.

Item 438 (Trust strategy) & 440c (Board membership): On the agenda for this meeting.

Item 440d (Trust governance): Mrs Robson reported that a governance plan is in progress.

Item 440e (Succession planning): Mrs Robson reported that she and Lisa Cochrane, Director of People and Organisational Development, had been working on a draft people plan, which would include succession planning. This would be ready later in the term.

A trustee **suggested** that the Board would want to see an emergency succession plan, as well as a long-term one. In the course of the detailed discussion that ensued, Mrs Robson explained the Trust's decision to install Mark Oldman as interim Principal at Orchard Mead, when the post became vacant too late in the term for a permanent recruitment. She also gave an example where recruitment to a senior post was successful, but emphasised that the Trust is vulnerable in some areas.

The meeting **explored** the reasons why potential internal candidates for headship may be unwilling or not ready to apply for such posts. It was noted that stand-ins can usually manage the operational part of the role, but not necessarily the leadership aspects – in senior Trust posts as well as in schools. Mrs Ridley suggested that this is somewhat less of an issue in primary schools.

[Mr Singh joined the meeting]

In response to probing **questions** Mrs Robson explained the constraints on recruitment in education, where resignations must be submitted before set dates each term. She indicated that the Trust is currently doing well on retention, with most resignations taking place for specific personal reasons, and that there is a range of opportunities to move within the Trust. It was suggested that modern foreign languages, in particular, have seen an effect from the cessation of free movement from within the EU, and that the covid-19 pandemic has delayed some people from moving on.

It was reported that the Rushey Mead Academy Council had raised concerns about recruitment in certain subjects. Mrs Robson explained that it is permissible to teach out of one's specialist subject up to GCSE, but not at 'A' level.

It was **noted** that the People and Culture Committee will be in operation next year, and there was support for asking Lisa Cochrane to present to the Board. Mrs Robson added that the outcome of a national project on grade descriptions for roles will be useful to the Committee.

Item 443 (2021-22 Budget): A trustee **asked** about progress in relating spending plans in the budget to educational outcomes. Mrs Robson and Mr Mehta confirmed that work was underway on the necessary changes in the way information is presented to the board, but that the target date of the start of the current term had not been met, owing to staff absence on account of covid-19.

449 Committee terms of reference and membership

Mrs Brown reported that each committee had been given the opportunity to review their terms of reference, and that some changes had been made. She reminded the Board that the new People & Culture Committee has evolved from, and replaced, the Remunerations Committee.

Mr Robinson's offer to join the People & Culture Committee was **accepted**.

Trustees **initiated a debate** on the size and membership of committees, now that there are four (Education, Finance, Audit & Risk and People & Culture). It was **generally accepted** that the Board needs more trustees in order to spread the load. Options for recruitment were discussed, including whether there are potential candidates from among academy councillors. The Board **supported** the option for independent (i.e. non-trustee) committee members, and it was suggested that this could perhaps include senior Trust staff, as part of their career development.

The Board **affirmed** the Trust's commitment to inclusion, while recognising that the Board at present has scope for being more diverse. Trustees were **encouraged** to submit ideas on how this might be progressed.

The Board **discussed** the role of local knowledge at Board level (in comparison to professional expertise), and **recognised** the important role of academy councils in providing local knowledge.

The Board **approved** the revised terms of reference of all four committees, subject to further review as required, for example to refer more clearly to Trust strategy and to recognise the areas where two or more committee remits overlap.

The Board discussed briefly the format of meetings, recognised that both remote and in-person meetings have benefits, and **agreed** that a balance was ideal. The option of hybrid meetings was **explored**, and it was **agreed** that the Board's December meeting should allow for both remote and in-person attendance.

450 Trust policies

The revised Safeguarding and Child Protection policy, which had been previously circulated, was **approved**.

451 Trust update

Mrs Robson presented the Trust update, which had been previously circulated, and drew attention to several areas:

a) Covid-19: Mrs Robson reported that the Trust's schools are experiencing a high number of covid-19 cases, and that the vaccination programme is not being delivered smoothly by the external agencies responsible. She emphasised that the Trust's core objective has been not to close schools, on account of the damage that missed education causes to students. The Trust's approach includes measures to protect the health of staff and pupils, but does not fully follow government guidelines. Trustees **strongly endorsed** that approach.

Mrs Ridley described in detail the alterations to the normal pattern of events in primary schools, and emphasised the importance of enabling children (and their parents) to experience events such as school nativity plays and other rites of passage.

b) Brook Mead: Mrs Robson reported that the number of pupils joining Brook Mead is adequate, and growing slowly, but below the ideal number. She gave details of the delay in construction of permanent buildings for Brook Mead on account of a badger sett.

c) Fosse Mead: Mrs Ridley reported that huge changes are taking place at Fosse Mead, following its academy conversion and accession to the Trust. She commented on the hard work involved in bringing the school out of special measures, and described the high aspirations in its School Improvement Plan (equivalent to the other Trust primaries).

d) Orchard Mead: Mrs Robson reported in detail on a very positive parents' evening, based on responses from parents, from primary school pupils and individuals who had attended. She noted in particular that student behaviour had improved markedly, and attributed the improvements to the strong leadership of Mr Oldman and his excellent relationship with both students and parents. She added that the school is overdue an Ofsted inspection, and that while it is unlikely to be rated Good yet, it is expected to have moved from Special Measures to Requires Improvement.

In discussion, the Board **recognised** the importance of the role of Principal, and **reiterated** the need to build talent within the Trust.

e) Complaints: Mrs Robson reported that the Trust has been receiving an unusually high number of complaints from parents, and a few staff grievances. After discussion the Board **concluded** that one underlying factor is likely to be stress induced by covid-19. The Board

recognised the amount of time taken in resolving complaints, and the risk to the Trust's reputation if complaints receive publicity, especially where the complaint appears to relate to a policy rather than a specific incident.

Mrs Robson reported that the Trust has engaged the services of a media consultant, who has been issuing press releases and seeking to promote good news stories. The Board gave its **general approval** to the Trust's approach.

f) School Centred Initial Teacher Training: Mrs Robson explained that the Trust is not currently seeking a permanent head for the SCITT, because of uncertainties about the direction of government policy on initial teacher training.

g) Trust strategy: The Board gave its **strong approval** to the Trust strategy document and commented that it is very coherent. Mrs Robson indicated that she would now move on to operational planning.

h) Letter from ESFA to Accounting Officers: The letter from the Education and Skills Funding Agency had been previously circulated. Mrs Robson reported that the Trust had taken all the actions necessary. A trustee **commented** on how political influence leads to changes in policy. The Board briefly **discussed** relations between the Trust and the Regional Schools Commissioner, and **asked** for this to be on a future agenda. Clerk

452 Governance

a) Committee reports: Committee chairs reported on key points from their recent meetings.

For the Education Committee, Mrs Brown relayed a **question** from Ms Foster relating to a recent rise in safeguarding cases. Mrs Ridley explained that the incidence had gone down during the covid-19 restrictions, and was now returning to more normal levels. Ms Foster had also **asked** about provision for SEND students and Designated Special Provision (DSP), while Mr Oldman was diverted from his work in those areas in order to support Orchard Mead. Mrs Robson explained how this work was being maintained, and confirmed that the Trust would now be in a position to take on a school with DSP, if asked. A request from Ms Foster for an amendment to the Education Committee minutes was **noted**.

For the Finance Committee, Mr Mehta reported that matters were well in hand for the audit, and the meeting with auditors was scheduled for 6th December. He drew attention to the increase in reserves and the reasons for unspent Pupil Premium and capital, with funds for both carried forward to the current year. He reported on the actions being taken in response to audit reports, including the need to report monthly on cash flow.

For the Audit & Risk Committee, Mr Robinson declared himself pleased that the committee is becoming familiar with how the Trust's structures and processes work, and that he looked forward to clarifying the relationship and respective roles of the Finance Committee and the Audit & Risk Committee.

b) Academy council reports:

The Board **received** the academy council summary reports and **asked** how the points for action were being addressed. Mrs Brown confirmed that the actions generally did not require Board intervention, and that they were being responded to. Trustees **welcomed** the format of the reports, found the document useful, and **asked** that in future an additional column should indicate what actions were being taken and the financial implications.

There being no further business, the Chair thanked everyone for their attendance and closed the meeting at 7.40pm.

Signed:

Date: