

## MINUTES

**South Essex Colleges Group Corporation Board  
MS Teams  
Tuesday 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2025 at 18:00**

|                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Date and timings:</b>         | <b>18:00 to 19:52</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| <b>Location:</b>                 | MS Teams                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| <b>Present (Governors):</b>      | Sally Dicketts (SD) (Chair)<br>Rick Olver (RO)<br>Denise Brown (DB) (Group CEO)<br>Jo Brooker (JB) (Staff Governor)<br>Kate Merritt (KM)<br>Aaron Thompson (AT)<br>Seye Awolusi (SA)<br>Tina Booth (TB) (Staff Governor)  |
| <b>Minutes:</b>                  | Carrie Brown (CB) Head of Governance                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| <b>Clerk to the Corporation:</b> | Lana Jackman (LJ) Group Executive Director Governance and Strategy                                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>In attendance:</b>            | Adam Fahey (AF) Group Deputy CEO- Curriculum and Quality<br>Ansar Mahmood (AM) Group Deputy CEO- Chief Information Officer<br>Jayne Sheehan (JS) Vice CEO- Innovation<br>Sharon Dunphy (SDu) Deputy Executive Director HE |
| <b>Apologies:</b>                | Gerry Bender (GB)                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| <b>Absent:</b>                   | Kianna Smith (KS) (Student Governor)<br>Andrew Overs Dowsett (AD)                                                                                                                                                         |

### Item

- 00.00 Agenda**
- 01.00 Chair's welcome and introduction.**  
SD welcomes attendees and opens the meeting.
- 02.00 Preliminary items.**
  - 02.01 Apologies for absence and declarations of interest.**  
Apologies were received from Gerry Bender.
  - 02.02 Declarations of Interest.**  
No additional declarations of interest other than those already registered.
  - 02.03 Urgent business notified in advance.**  
None.
- 03.00 Minutes and matters arising of the previous meeting.**
  - 03.01 Minutes of 6 May 2025.**  
The Minutes of the meeting held on 6 May 2025 were **APPROVED** as an accurate reflection of the meeting.

### 03.02 **Matters arising not covered elsewhere on the agenda.**

RO asks how the EDI pledge is being taken forward. LJ confirms that Sarah Barnes is leading on this for the wider organisation and has submitted the formal documentation to the AoC. SD suggests that Sarah Barnes could engage with Bradford University regarding the innovative work they are undertaking on EDI.

There were no other outstanding matters arising from the minutes of the meeting 6 May 2025 that were not discussed elsewhere on the agenda.

## **STRATEGIC ITEMS**

### 04.00 **Accountability Statement.**

The Corporation Board **APPROVE** the South Essex Colleges Group Accountability Statement.

SD explains that this is the second year of Accountability Statements, which consist of finance and curriculum targets, and form the basis of discussions with the DfE. She reflects positively on the SECG meeting with the DfE and FEC, noting their favourable view of the organisation and its leadership. She also confirms that last year's annual statement was signed off by the DfE.

RO welcomes the plan, describing it as forward-focused and constructive.

JB reflects on her Teaching, Learning and Standards (TLS) work within the Accountability Statement, acknowledging the challenges but viewing them as manageable.

KM describes the document as aspirational, challenging, and exciting.

AM agrees, stating it is demanding but achievable and well-targeted.

JS confirms that the skills-related aspects are achievable.

TB echoes previous remarks, agreeing that the targets are ambitious but realistic.

AT requests clarity on milestones to monitor progress against the plan. SA supports the inclusion of milestones within the document.

**ACTION:** Clear milestones to be added into the Accountability Statement to allow the monitoring of progress against the plan.

DB highlights that this is a sub-delivery plan of the strategic plan and its associated projects and that early progress is already evident.

AF notes that the document builds on work from the previous year and welcomes the positive feedback.

SD suggests the employability skills section could be strengthened, particularly given the impact of COVID-19 on learners' readiness for employment. She proposes including an additional strand next year to further support SEND learners, and extends his congratulations to those involved.

**ACTION:** Employability skills section to be strengthened.

AF adds that the recommendations at the end of the document clearly track progress.

## **OPERATIONAL AREAS OF CONCERN.**

*SDu joins in the meeting 18:15*

### 05.00 **HE**

#### 05.01 **HE Access and Participation Plan.**

The Corporation Board **APPROVE** the South Essex Colleges Group HE Access and Participation Plan for submission to the Office for Students.

SDu presents the plan, highlighting that it outlines targeted, evidence-based interventions to address nine identified risks to opportunity.

SD explains that the requirement for this plan originates from the Office for Students, although it is primarily aimed at larger, more selective universities.

SDu notes that SECG performs well with the most deprived learners; however, BAME and SEND learners are not achieving the highest grades. She shares feedback indicating that these groups would value dedicated focus groups.

SD asks whether BAME and SEND attainment has declined or stagnated. SDu clarifies that while outcomes have not worsened, progress has been inconsistent.

AT asks whether the interventions are costed and how value added is tracked. SDu responds that this has traditionally been based on results, but the focus is now shifting to a ProMonitor-based intervention review with full analysis looking at what intervention each learner accessed and its impact.

DB highlights that this is the first plan led by SDu, praising the thoughtful and methodical approach from a quality perspective.

SD thanks SDu for her work and requests the addition of a 'lessons learnt' column.

**ACTION:** Lessons learnt column to be added into the HE Access and Participation Plan.

*AD joins in the meeting 18:23*

## **05.02 Proposed 25-26 HE fees.**

The Corporation Board **APPROVE** the South Essex Colleges Group proposed 25-26 HE fees.

SDu presents the proposed 2025–26 HE fees, noting that, unlike many in the sector, SECG will not raise fees annually in line with inflation. Instead, fees will remain fixed for the duration of the three-year programme and will be phased in.

SDu reports that this approach aligns with wider sector trends, as discussed with the Mixed Economy Group. She highlights that concerns about the cost of living have led SECG to expand its bursary offer.

SA asks how student feedback is collected. SDu confirms it is based on survey responses and adds that this year will see the first fee increase since 2019.

AT expresses support for increasing fees but queries why the rise is being staggered rather than introduced immediately. SDu explains that this phased approach avoids a steep, one-off increase. AT notes that this could make fee structures less transparent to students.

DB acknowledges she is typically opposed to fee increases but has been persuaded by student concerns. She notes that returning students will benefit from increased bursaries and highlights that SECG's small class sizes create a more expensive delivery model. She also points to SECG's strong TEF performance and the value of offering degrees validated by a top 50 university.

SA raises concerns about the impact of an unphased fee increase on disadvantaged learners. He asks how many students self-fund their fees; SDu confirms this applies to two learners.

SDu also queries whether a non-phased model should apply to HND programmes. The Corporation Board agrees that HND fees should be set at a maximum £8,000 to remain competitive after researching the local market.

The Corporation Board **APPROVE** that the HND courses should be priced competitively to a maximum off £8,000.

The Corporation Board **APPROVE** the South Essex Colleges Group agree the remove the incremental increases to the fees and having a none phased approach.

**SD** thanks **SDu** for her work.

*SDu leaves the meeting 18:48*

#### **05.03 SEN Information Report.**

The Corporation Board **NOTE** the South Essex Colleges Group SEN Information Report **AND ASK FOR THE DOCUMENT TO BE REVISED AN RESUBMITTED TO THE JULY CORPORATION BOARD.**

AF presents the report, noting that it summarises last year's achievements against the agreed aims.

RO comments that the report reads as an information paper and does not fully capture the depth or impact of SECG's work on SEND.

JB suggests incorporating feedback from SEND student forums to reflect the learner voice more effectively.

LJ reminds members that this is a statutory governance document, which the Corporation Board is required to approve and publish.

KM agrees with RO, stating that the report does not reflect the lived experience at SECG.

TB adds that the document feels bland and does not convey the ethos or outstanding work carried out in this area.

SD agrees and recommends including details of work placements and work experience opportunities.

DB raises concerns about the use of an acronym in the title and suggests that case studies should be included, such as one from a previous Student of the Year. She also recommends including data to show scale, noting that 27% of SECG learners have learning disabilities. She stresses that SECG's work in this area is exceptional and the document should reflect that.

The Corporation Board **asks that the document be revised** to include the suggested additions. LJ notes the requirement to publish it on the website by the end of July. The revised paper will return to the Corporation Board on 15th July 2025.

*AD left the meeting 18:58.*

#### **05.04 Maths and English Presentation.**

The Corporation Board **NOTE** the South Essex Colleges Group Maths and English presentation.

AF provides an overview of 2024/25 16–18 student applications, with a campus-by-campus analysis covering Thurrock, Basildon, and Southend. He notes that the figures presented are approximate and do not yet account for EHCP learners. Additionally, the "actual" column refers to students enrolled on two-year programmes due to complete in 2025/26.

At Thurrock, the primary concern is the *Hair and Media Makeup* course, which currently has only two applicants. A 0.6 FTE vacancy is attached to the programme, but this will not be filled—and the course will not run—unless application numbers increase. AF confirms that this cohort includes 19 planned learners, so cancellation will impact target figures for Creative Arts. He is in discussion with curriculum leads to address low numbers.

SD queries how the "target" column is constituted and whether it includes both new and returning learners. She highlights the importance of understanding the application pipeline—particularly distinguishing between learners who have been interviewed and made offers, and those yet to be

engaged. SD stresses that a lack of pace in this process may risk losing applicants to other providers and suggests this level of data is necessary for the Board to provide support and challenge effectively.

DB supports this view and advises that the *Marketing and Admissions Group*, which she chairs, already tracks this information. She notes the need for a more streamlined process and confirms that, at this point in the cycle, most applicants have already had some engagement, though further improvements are being explored.

RO queries why Basildon data is broken down by campus (e.g. Luckyn Lane and Stephenson Road), unlike Thurrock and Southend which are categorised by programme area. RO notes that the Basildon Town Centre [BTC] numbers look low and asks why this is the case? AF acknowledges the inconsistency and confirms that the BTC numbers have been raised with John, who has now provided updated figures suggesting higher progression and application numbers. Nonetheless, these still fall short of the target of 345. AF suspects data reporting issues and has asked for further review. If the shortfall is genuine, targeted marketing will be necessary between now and August.

SD notes Thurrock's overall target of 927 learners, with 313 identified as progressing and 32 confirmed as actual, leaving two-thirds of the cohort to be secured. She seeks assurance from AF and the College Principal regarding confidence in meeting the target. AF states that while exact numbers cannot be guaranteed, he does not believe there is cause for concern at this stage. For example, *A Level* applications in Thurrock are high (146 against a target of 59), but not all will meet GCSE entry criteria, and attrition is expected.

At Basildon, AF confirms that progression is critical to achieving targets. He adds that some delays in confirming progression are due to learners sitting multiple Level 1 exams in the lead-up to year-end, which may impact the timing of Level 2 enrolments.

DB reiterates the importance of close monitoring, especially where high-demand courses rely heavily on progression. She notes that if progressions fall short, some areas may experience application shortfalls, and this risk must be mitigated through proactive action.

SD notes that she would like figures on the offer and interview process and the speed of this turn around.

TB asked that a comparison column with applications at the same time the previous year is added to future documents to give more confidence.

SD asks for more information at the Away Day or at the July meeting to have a detailed review of the marketing activities taking place to build on the application figures.

KM asks if there is still a plan to have H&SC at Basildon? DB notes that this was planned for the 26-27 academic year due to space issues.

SA asks if the downward trend in applications is seen in the sector? SD responds that this depends on the population growth and competition in each area. DB notes that market share and demographic in Southend is neutral. Thurrock has a small demographic blunge. Basildon has no demographic blunge.

JB notes that the Level 2 Digital Learners historically have a high level of EHCP plans and this may be why there is a slow uptake in this area.

SD notes that the application process needs to be slicker and there needs to be a strong social media campaign.

#### Attendance English and Maths.

AF reports that attendance at the GCSE exams in Basildon Town Centre stood at 93%. This figure represents attendance of learners currently on-programme, whereas 82% refers to the original cohort signed up for the qualification, indicating some learner drop-out. SD confirmed this means the 93% includes drop-outs already accounted for, whereas in the previous year this was the final figure.

SD notes that most College's within the Group have seen a decrease in attendance compared to the previous year when measured against ILR data. AF confirms this and states that the key reason appears to be lower retention—particularly within English and maths. He acknowledged the current strategy is not achieving the desired outcomes in terms of student retention.

SD emphasises the financial implications of lower retention and suggests the Corporation Board should address this well before the year-end. She remarks that dips following Ofsted inspections are not unusual as teams often relax once the immediate pressure subsides, but stresses the importance of ensuring this is a temporary dip rather than a longer-term trend.

DB highlighted that the unusual scheduling of exams on Fridays—when learners are not timetabled and many have external commitments—likely contributed to the lower attendance. AF adds that final attendance figures show 78% against the ILR for English this year (compared to 73% last year), and 81% for maths in both years, indicating some stability despite the challenges.

AF clarifies that the figures discussed relate strictly to attendance, not achievement predictions. He describes GCSE results day as a nervous time, noting that outcomes can be heavily influenced by the awarding organisation's grade boundaries. DB and SD discuss the impact of grade boundary changes and how this can disproportionately affect students performing at lower levels—particularly given the bell curve model used by awarding organisations.

SD suggests that, longer-term, the SECG must review and refine its teaching and learning strategies to better meet student needs, with DB fully agreeing. There is a brief discussion around predicted outcomes for level 3 programmes, which currently appear positive in some areas.

AF explains that "Review 3" refers to the third of four annual internal performance reviews, which had just concluded before half-term. At this stage, curriculum leaders submit predictions based on a 'worst-case scenario' model. He emphasises that these are not optimistic forecasts but grounded assessments of potential outcomes if the term ended now.

SD summarises the discussion by stating that while *achievement* does not appear to be a concern for those who remain engaged, *retention* is a critical issue. AF supports this conclusion, reiterating that those who stay with the College tend to succeed—captured in the team's guiding principle: "*If they stay, they pass.*"

SD thanks AF for this paper.

## **COMPLIANCE.**

### **06.00 GOVERNANCE MATTERS.**

#### **06.01 Governor on site visits.**

LJ outlines the importance of Governors informing the Governance Department of any visits to SECG sites, as part of establishing a robust framework for site visits. This is intended to help Governors maintain an impartial, strategic ('balcony view') perspective and avoid conflicts with their governance role. All Governors are therefore required to complete a Governor Visit Form prior to visiting.

KM asks whether this applies to her visits in a professional capacity. LJ clarifies that the requirement applies only when acting in the capacity of a Governor.

SD adds that the process is in place to protect Governors.

RO suggests the form could be reviewed after six months. SD agrees, commenting that the current version may be too complex and could be simplified.

SA raises concerns about the process. In response, SD gives an example of previous safeguarding issues, emphasising that the process is designed to protect Governors.

DB notes that ad-hoc conversations with staff are not always representative and do not provide meaningful triangulation. She highlights that Local College Boards already support this function and, with over 780 staff at SECG, speaking to a few individuals does not provide a full picture.

LJ confirms that this process is outlined in the Governors' Handbook and reflects governance best practice.

SD reiterates that the form will be refined, emphasising that this is not about limiting transparency.

**ACTION:** Governor visit form to be revised and simplified.

#### 06.02 Events.

CB notes that there has been some confusion regarding Governor attendance at SECG events. She confirms that all events open to Governors will be communicated via email by the Governance Department. This is to manage limited capacity at events such as *Celebrating Success*, where the priority is to accommodate learners and their families. CB adds that while Governors are welcome to attend events, their attendance is not compulsory.

SD requests that the Senior Leadership Team reminds staff not to invite individual Governors directly, and instead to coordinate all Governor invitations through the Governance Department.

#### 07.00 Student Voice.

The Corporation Board **DEFERRED** the verbal Student Voice Report.

#### FORMAL APPROVAL OF POLICIES.

#### 08.00 Policies.

None.

#### 09.00 Any Other Business.

Resignation of Noel Gibb.

SD informs the Corporation Board and Noel Gibb has formally resigned as he has been offered Chair of Governors at Ambitious College. NG thanked SECG for the opportunity to serve and wishes SECG the best of luck for the future. SD notes that she is happy to pass his email to over Governors.

SD details that DB, LJ, CB and herself are meeting with recruiter tomorrow to look into recruiting for various vacancies.

SD thanks Governors for their time and support to SECG.

***There being no further business the meeting ended at 19:52 hrs***

Signed 

Dated 15<sup>th</sup> July 2025

| Item                            | Actions                                                                                                              | Deadline | Lead | Status    |
|---------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------|------|-----------|
| <b>Actions from 3 June 2025</b> |                                                                                                                      |          |      |           |
| 04.00                           | Clear milestones to be added into the Accountability Statement to allow the monitoring of progress against the plan. | ASAP     | AF   | Completed |
| 04.00                           | Employability skills section to be strengthened in the Accountability Statement                                      | ASAP     | AF   | Completed |

|       |                                                                                    |           |       |           |
|-------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|-------|-----------|
| 05.01 | Lessons learnt column to be added into the HE Access and Participation Plan.       |           | SDu   | Completed |
| 05.03 | SEN Information Report to be revised and resubmitted to the July Corporation Board | July 2025 | DS    | Completed |
| 06.01 | Governor visit form to be revised an simplified.                                   |           | LJ/SD | Completed |