

MINUTES

**South Essex Colleges Group Corporation Board
7E.03 Southend College
Tuesday 6th May 2025 at 17:45**

Date and timings:	17:45 to 21:00
Location:	7E.03 Southend College
Present (Governors):	Sally Dicketts (SD) (Chair) Rick Olver (RO) Gerry Bender (GB) (MS Teams) Denise Brown (DB) (Group CEO) Jo Brooker (JB) (Staff Governor) Kate Merritt (KM) Kianna Smith (KS) (Student Governor) Aaron Thompson (AT) Andrew Overs Dowsett (AD) Seye Awolusi (SA)
Minutes:	Carrie Brown (CB)- Head of Governance
Clerk to the Corporation:	Lana Jackman (LJ)- Group Executive Director Governance and Strategy
In attendance:	Adam Fahey (AF) Group Deputy CEO- Curriculum and Quality Zed Mohammed (ZM) Group Deputy CEO Ansar Mahmood (AM) Group Deputy CEO- Chief Information Officer (MS Teams) Jayne Sheehan (JS) Vice CEO- Innovation Sharon Dunphy (SDu) Deputy Executive Director HE
Apologies:	Noel Gibb (NG) Tina Booth (TB) (Staff Governor)

Absent:

Item

- 00.00 Agenda**
- 01.00 Chair's welcome and introduction.**
SD welcomes attendees and opens the meeting and hopes everyone had a good Easter.
- 02.00 Preliminary items.**
 - 02.01 Apologies for absence and declarations of interest.**
Apologies were received from Noel Gibb and Tina Booth.
 - 02.03 Declarations of Interest.**
No additional declarations of interest other than those already registered.
 - 02.02 Urgent business notified in advance.**
None.

03.00 NEXUS.

The Corporation Board **RECEIVE** the Nexus update.

DB notes that this is a flavour from the floor about the learners and the staff.

04.00 Review Strategy Away Day

04.01 Governor reflection on the Strategic Away Day.

SD gives an overview of the Strategic Away Day and asks the Corporation Board if they have any additional comments:

AD notes that he felt that it was productive and it was good to visit another College.

RO highlights the transformation element with the revised vision and this needs to be set clearly and driven forward.

AT stresses that SECG needs to be competitiveness on the agenda especially when we don't have a lot of money.

JB expresses appreciation for the session focused on the way learners learn.

SA found the financial history section particularly informative.

DB explains that the insights from the "how learners learn" session have been carried forward into the Leadership and Management [L&M] conference, forming a golden thread throughout the organisation.

GB valued the opportunity to exchange ideas on the future of SECG.

LJ remarks on the distinctiveness of the learning philosophy and its role in creating a competitive edge.

AF comments on the L&M follow-up, noting the effort to inspire creative thinking around different educational models and the need to adapt to the current generation of learners.

JS found it helpful to have the full financial context and enjoys the group discussions with Governors, which generate new ideas and momentum.

ZM highlights the sense of unity developed during the Away Day and explains how this has influenced the agenda for the L&M day.

AM observes that SECG is at a pivotal moment and believes the organisation is beginning to turn a corner.

05.00 Minutes and matters arising of the previous meeting.

05.01 Minutes of 11 February 2025.

The Minutes of the meeting held on 11 February 2025 were **APPROVED** as an accurate reflection of the meeting.

05.02 Matters arising not covered elsewhere on the agenda.

There were no outstanding matters arising from the minutes of the meeting 11 February 2025 that were not discussed elsewhere on the agenda.

STRATEGIC ITEMS.

06.00 Group CEO Report.

The Corporation Board **RECEIVE** the South Essex Colleges Group CEO Report.

DB provides an update on the review of the South Essex Colleges Group [SECG] Leadership Team and shares the results of the recent staff survey. DB notes that while the unions have accepted the 1.5% pay increase, it has not been received enthusiastically. However, AM and DB are working with staff to highlight the progress made in pay for lecturers and academic managers.

DB reports on the recent UK Supreme Court ruling: in which the 'Supreme Court rules that the legal definition of a woman is based on biological sex. The court adds that Transgender people still have legal protection from discrimination.' It was reported that SECG will address the issue that this may potentially present to SECG's transgender community.

DB shares insights from her recent visit to Sacramento, noting similarities across the sector and the uplifting nature of the conference activities. She adds that research indicates overseas educational visits

can improve student retention and achievement, and suggests that SECG should review this in the context of the Turing Scheme visits.

AT enquires about the leadership structure following JS's retirement. DB confirms that the current plan is not to replace JS's role directly; instead, the responsibilities will be absorbed into the Deputy CEO [DCEO] roles.

SD asks about accountability arrangements among the three Deputy CEOs during DB's absence. DB explains that responsibility will rotate between the three roles.

AT asks whether anyone will assume a Chief Operating Officer (COO) role. DB confirms that this function is currently covered by ZM.

SA enquires whether the new structure will incur additional costs. DB confirms that the restructure results in a small overall saving.

07.00 HR Report.

The Corporation Board **RECEIVE** the South Essex Colleges Group HR Report.

The Corporation Board **APPROVE SIGNING** the AoC EDI Charter while wanting to ensure that meaningful action with a long term vision is taken towards moving forward with EDI.

AM informs the Corporation Board that SECG has joined the Black Leadership Group and outlines the positive impact this has had on recruitment. AM notes that SECG is able to nominate up to 25 individuals to participate in the programme.

AM also introduces the Association of Colleges (AoC) Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Charter, stating SECG's intention to sign up and presents the accompanying action plan.

SD queries the cost of the Black Leadership Group membership and whether it is an annual fee. AM clarifies that the diagnostic is a one-off cost, while the remaining fees are recurring annually. AM acknowledges that the programme is expensive and confirms that the membership, paid in November, is being monitored to ensure value for money.

SD comments that 25 participants is a relatively small number and suggests that nominations should be drawn from across the wider SECG community, with final decisions made by the Executive Board.

SA supports the concept but expresses concern about the high costs, emphasising the need to ensure tangible benefits from participation in the network. He recommends a review of the programme's impact.

AT notes that if SECG is using this initiative as a recruitment tool for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic [BAME] staff, then outreach efforts should be directed towards spaces and platforms frequented by individuals from more diverse backgrounds.

SD comments on the EDI Charter, stressing that signing up must be accompanied by meaningful action. DB suggests that the future direction of these initiatives should be discussed further at an Away Day, and highlights the need for clear aims and objectives.

SD adds that SECG must foster an environment in which staff from diverse backgrounds can thrive. KS proposes the introduction of cultural celebration days at SECG.

AD recommends that SECG consider signing the Armed Forces Covenant. JS is tasked with progressing this, with support from KM.

ACTION: SECG to look into signing the Armed Forces Covenant.

OPERATIONAL AREAS OF CONCERN.

08.00 Finance.

08.01 Finance Report.

The Corporation Board **RECEIVE** the South Essex Colleges Group Finance Report, March Management Accounts, management accounts for The Backstage Centre Ltd and funding allocations report.

ZM presents the Finance Report, highlighting the March forecast, which shows a breakeven position for the first time in over a decade. ZM explains that commercial income has underperformed, primarily due to The Backstage Centre Ltd. However, financial health is currently assessed as 'Requires Improvement' and is moving closer to a 'Good' rating.

SA notes the reduction in agency costs and enquires about the reasons behind this. ZM explains that tighter controls have been implemented, including negotiating lower finder's fees. He adds that agency costs remain a sector-wide challenge.

The Corporation Board discusses staff cost ratios, noting that national benchmarks often fail to account for factors such as pay increases.

RO asks about the decline in Higher Education (HE) figures. DB responds that being 34 learners below target is a relatively strong outcome, given the current challenges in the HE market.

The Corporation Board also discusses Apprenticeship figures. JS explains that these operate on a roll-on, roll-off basis, meaning the numbers are constantly changing. She provides an update on the 64 Past End Date [PED] learners, attributing the delays mainly to issues with End Point Assessment [EPA].

AD enquires about the use of the RAG [Red, Amber, Green] rating system in reporting. DB provides context, noting that while historical variances were in the tens of thousands, they are now in the low thousands, indicating improved financial control.

SA asks what might lead to an increase in agency costs. DB cites staff sickness, turnover, and the need to fill critical roles where recruitment has been unsuccessful. She notes that agency staff typically cost 25% more than directly employed staff.

KM asks whether there is a process for recruiting agency staff who prove to be a good fit for SECG. ZM explains that agency contracts are time-limited, and incentives are considered to retain high-performing individuals. AF adds that such decisions are made on a case-by-case basis.

SD congratulates ZM and his team on the improved financial position.

The Backstage Centre Ltd [TBC].

JS provides background on The Backstage Centre Ltd and its role within the SECG landscape, noting that commercial lettings have been a challenge since 2025. She also updates the Board on the limitations caused by the dock doors, which restrict the functionality of the facility.

SD requests a paper outlining the legal responsibilities associated with The Backstage Centre Ltd. DB responds that SECG holds a 100-year lease on the property, meaning the organisation would be responsible for repairs before returning the site.

JS confirms that TBC has undergone a staff restructure, reducing the team to a minimum. DB adds that the lease terms require the space to be used for creative arts and notes that the property is owned by Thurrock Council. She also highlights reputational concerns linked to TBC.

ZM reports a current loss of £250k, with JS adding that redundancy costs totalled £24k. ZM projects a total loss of £330k for the year.

The Corporation Board discusses the potential for repurposing the space and explores creative uses for the facility.

GB reflects on the emergence of new centres in the area and asks whether there is potential for collaboration. DB notes that Eastbrook now has eight sound stages, significantly larger than TBC, and suggests that TBC should be marketed to smaller-scale operations.

SD reminds the Board that any decision to wind up TBC must be made by the TBC Board. She also comments on the broader lesson of acquiring additional assets, acknowledging that this was a historical decision that the current Board must now manage.

DB stresses the importance of Corporation Board oversight for subsidiary companies and recommends that each subsidiary has a Corporation Board member as Chair.

AT questions why TBC's challenges were not foreseen, given the long lead time for new facilities. DB responds that the Board was blindsided due to inadequate reporting from management. SD adds that rapid technological changes have further accelerated the issue.

Funding Allocation 25-26.

ZM presents the paper, highlighting positive progress in this area and noting the receipt of a £2.4 million Capital Grant Allocation.

DB comments that the positive momentum of the strategic plan is now becoming evident.

09.00 Curriculum Plan

09.01 Overview of the Curriculum Plan.

The Corporation Board **RECEIVE** the South Essex Colleges Group Curriculum Plan.

AF presents his report, referencing the findings of the Frances Review. SD comments that while she is disappointed by the findings, she is not surprised.

AF explains that the data included in the report was accurate at the time of drafting, but some figures may change due to dependencies on estates work, which may be impacted by current capital constraints.

SD remarks that *what we do and how we do it* defines a college, and expresses interest in understanding whether SECG is approaching this differently compared to other institutions. She requests to see year-on-year growth figures, including comparative data.

RO notes that the Local Skills Improvement Plan [LSIP] has been granted an extension until September 2025. DB adds that there are indications this may be extended further.

COMPLIANCE.

SDu joins the meeting 19:32.

10.00 HE [Higher Education] Compliance.

10.01 HE Compliance.

The Corporation Board **RECEIVE** the South Essex Colleges Group HE Compliance.

ACTION: CB to ensure staff presentations are first on future agendas.

SDu presents the Higher Education Compliance Report to the Corporation Board.

SDu poses the question: *"What is the one issue that keeps you awake at night?"* SD responds that it is completion rates, as these can trigger intervention from the Office for Students [OfS].

SD thanks SDu for her report and commends her diligence in the role

10.02 HE Student Experience Report.

The Corporation Board **RECEIVE** the South Essex Colleges Group HE Student Experience Report. The Corporation Board **AGREE** the recommendations and next steps in the report.

SDu provides a summary of the current Higher Education (HE) student experience across SECG. Drawing on the latest termly returns from the Higher Education Student Experience Committee

[HESEC], Access and Participation Plan [APP] Success Projects, and Student Voice feedback, the report identifies key themes including mental health and wellbeing, academic and careers support, safeguarding, and inclusive access. Strengths include academic support and wellbeing services, while challenges remain in areas such as marketing engagement, delays in the Disabled Students' Allowance [DSA], and low participation in Student Union [SU] activities.

SD enquires about the issues surrounding Student Union engagement. SDu responds that the SU is currently undergoing a reset, with support from the Vice President of the National Union of Students [NUS], who is working with SECG.

AD asks about the use of alumni and whether they are being actively engaged. SDu explains that a comprehensive alumni programme is being refreshed and expanded, beginning with Year 3 learners this academic year.

10.03 HE Strategic Training for Governors.

The Corporation Board **RECEIVE** the South Essex Colleges Group HE Strategic Training for Governors.

SDu explains that the recommendation arises from a Scrutton Bland audit, which identified a need for greater oversight at Corporation Board level.

SD notes that the proposed training is costly. DB enquires whether Advance HE might offer a discount, given the size of the organisations HE provision. SD comments that, despite sitting on two university boards, she has not previously encountered training of this intensity.

AT expresses concern that the proposal may not be appropriate in its current form and suggests that SECG requires a more tailored training package. DB adds that the training will support the Teaching Excellence Framework [TEF] submission. SD highlights the importance of negotiating for in-person delivery as part of the package.

AD raises a concern about the high number of hours allocated to the HE training.

AT concludes that the training must be aligned with the baseline knowledge required by the Corporation Board.

ACTION: HE Strategic Training for Governors to be further explored with the aim to get a less costly bespoke plan for the SECG Corporation Board.

SDu left the meeting 19:52.

11.00 Committee Reports.

11.01 Ratification of Committee Members.

LJ provides an overview of current Committee memberships, noting that the Governance and Remuneration Committee requires an additional member. LJ also highlights that the Audit and Risk Committee is in need of one more member.

CB emphasises the importance of full attendance by current Committee members at upcoming meetings, due to ongoing issues with quoracy.

12.00 Governance Matters.

12.01 ESG Future of FE Governance and capitalising on ESG Award for SECG.

The Corporation Board **RECEIVE** the South Essex Colleges Group Future of FE Governance Paper.

The Corporation Board **CONFIRM** that they would like to move forward with an ethical framework.

LJ notes that, compared to other areas of strategic focus, the organisation's ethical identity is less prominently defined. She highlights the importance of a well-developed Ethical Framework, which reflects the organisation's core values, mission, and its capacity for innovation, creativity, and

entrepreneurship. These attributes are seen as indicators of a strong cultural profile and are typical of high-performing Boards.

LJ emphasises that ethical leadership should cascade from the Corporation Board through the Executive and into the wider organisation. She stresses that the long-term success of SECG depends on a balanced cultural profile, with the Ethical Framework forming a key foundation.

LJ underlines the importance of a Corporation Board that not only understands governance and how to govern effectively, but also has a clear sense of its own ethical values, organisational culture, strengths, and potential to future-proof the organisation.

13.00 Local College Boards.

The Corporation Board **RECEIVE** the verbal update from the Local College Board Chairs [LCB].

Thurrock: AT reports that the Local College Board has met twice this year and describes the meetings as highly positive, particularly praising the strength of the membership. However, he expresses some uncertainty about what information from the LCB should be escalated to the Corporation Board.

SD explains that the LCB provides an additional layer of oversight and serves as a useful mechanism for sense-checking data.

DB adds that the local leadership element of the LCB is a key strength.

Southend: KM echoes AT's comments, highlighting the offers of support and the LCB's role in addressing local challenges. He notes the depth and positivity of discussions at the Southend LCB.

CB adds that the Southend LCB has reviewed the business curriculum and offered constructive suggestions for improvement working collaboratively with the business links forged in the LCB.

Basildon: GB reports issues with student representative attendance, noting that the main contributor at the last meeting was the representative from Sharp. He stresses the need to engage more local businesses and improve community representation.

DB acknowledges that this is a specific issue for the Basildon LCB, as the other boards are functioning well.

KM suggests that the Basildon for Business Forum could be a potential avenue for engagement.

DB adds that town centre traders group in Basildon may also be worth approaching to strengthen participation.

ACTION: LCB Chairs to have a meeting with the Corporation Board Chair to discuss the Boards further.

14.00 Student Voice.

14.01 Student Governor Report.

The Corporation Board **RECEIVE** the verbal Student Governor Report.

KS shares that, following her recent training, she would like to organise a Culture Day at Southend College, along with a public speaking and networking event.

DB supports the idea and emphasises that debating and public speaking should be embedded within the SECG curriculum and offered as a standard opportunity for learners.

JB suggests that the Culture Day could be developed as a project-based learning initiative across the College.

ACTION: SECG Culture Day to be progressed with KS and Jane Belcher. Alongside the integration of networking and debating skills into the curriculum.

FORMAL APPROVAL OF POLICIES.

15.00 Policies.

15.01 Instrument and Articles.

The Corporation Board **DEFERED** the South Essex Colleges Group Instrument and Articles.

15.02 Governance Policies.

The Corporation Board **DEFERED** the South Essex Colleges Group Governance Policies.

16.00 Any Other Business.

Forthcoming Events- 3rd June 2025 End of Year Show.

Governors to attend 4th June 2025 and tickets to be reserved via CB. AF to check that the tickets have been reserved for Governors.

KS and JB leave the meeting 20:36

There being no further business the meeting ended at 20:36 hrs

Signed 

Dated 3rd June 2025

Item	Actions	Deadline	Lead	Status
Actions from 6 May 2025				
07.00	SECG to look into signing the Armed Forces Covenant.		AM	Executive Board agreed adopting and this is being actively worked on by HR
08.01	Paper for information to come to the Corporation Board outlining the legal responsibilities associated with The Backstage Centre Ltd.		JS	To be scheduled for July meeting
09.01	Curriculum Plan- year-on-year growth figures, including comparative data.		AF	
10.01	CB to ensure staff presentations are first on future agendas.	ASAP	CB	Moved forward in the agenda and as remote meeting staff involved have been given indication of required.
10.03	HE Strategic Training for Governors to be further explored with the aim to get a less costly bespoke plan for the SECG Corporation Board.		LJ/SDu	Further discussions had regarding the agenda and this will look to be organized in



				the next academic year.
13.00	LCB Chairs to have a meeting with the Corporation Board Chair to discuss the Boards further		CB to organise	In progress
14.01	SECG Culture Day to be progressed with KS and Jane Belcher.		CB to facilitate	In progress
14.01	Integration of networking and debating skills into the curriculum		HP	In progress