

MINUTES

**South Essex Colleges Group Corporation Board
07.03E Southend College, Luker Road
Tuesday 10th March 2026 at 18:00**

Date and timings:	18:00 to 21:41
Location:	7E.03 Southend College, Luker Road and via MS Teams.
Present (Governors):	Sally Dicketts (SD) (Chair) Seye Awolusi (SA) Gerry Bender (GB) Denise Brown (Group CEO) Denise Darrell (DD) Kate Green (KG) (MS Teams) Steven Hemmings (SH) (MS Teams) David Knott (DK) (MS Teams) Jake Lines (JL) Paul Martin (PM) Rick Olver (RO) Gilly Salmon (GS) Marco Steel (MS) Saskia Haas-Lee (SHL) Student Governor
Minutes:	Carrie Brown (CB)- Head of Governance
Clerk to the Corporation:	Ed Hossack (EH)- Interim Director of Governance
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
Apologies:	Jayne Sheehan- Vice Chair Innovation

Item

- 00.00 Agenda**
- 01.00 Chair's welcome and introduction.**
SD welcomes attendees and opens the meeting and brief introductions were made. The Chair noted that the meeting was quorate and duly convened.
- 02.00 Preliminary items.**
 - 02.01 Apologies for absence and declarations of interest.**
Apologies were received from Jayne Sheehan- Vice Group Chief Executive Officer – Innovation and Employer Engagement.
 - 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 FORMAL RATIFICATION OF NEW CORPORATION BOARD MEMBERS.**

The Corporation Board **FORMALLY RATIFIES** the appointment of **Saskia Haas Lee** to the Corporation Board for a year term.

04.00 MINUTES AND MATTERS ARISING OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

04.01 Minutes of the meeting 9 December 2025.

The Minutes of the meeting held on 9 December 2025 were **APPROVED** as an accurate reflection of the meeting.

04.02 Matters Arising.

ACTION: CB to check that the presentations from the Away Day were emailed out.

05.00 Review of the January Away Day.

The Corporation Board added the following reflections from the January Away Day:

- PM comments that the format of the session worked well and that the agenda was appropriately balanced, allowing meaningful discussion without feeling overly busy.
- RO reflects positively on the strong level of Governor engagement but notes that the Year Planner needs to progress earlier, ideally before Easter, to enable the timely release of key dates.
- DD expresses a desire to undertake further visits across the College Group and to see more of the different sites.
- SHL comments that DB's presentation was particularly helpful in framing the discussions.
- DB notes that the quality of contribution from Corporation Board members was highly stimulating and added real value to the day.
- SD reflects that the Away Day provided an important opportunity to get to know Corporation Board members outside of the formal meeting environment.
- GB comments that although this was the first development session of its kind, it represents a strong foundation on which future sessions can build. He adds that he gained as much from the informal elements as from the formal agenda.
- AM notes that it was refreshing to see such high levels of Governor engagement throughout the day.
- GS suggests that future Away Days could include deeper-dive sessions into particular topics to support more focused exploration.
- JL reflects positively on the productive nature of the session, noting that there was no sense of hierarchy and that all contributions were welcomed. He requests that more notice be provided for future events and expresses interest in touring other College sites.
- ZM reflects on the natural anxiety associated with engaging a newly formed Corporation Board but notes that the facilitation was strong and that the "big picture" session was particularly valuable. He suggests that further discussion around organisational purpose would be beneficial.
- SH notes the high levels of engagement and synchronicity within the room.
- SA reflects positively on the Away Day overall, describing it as the best one to date and welcoming the forward-looking nature of the discussions.

SA joins the meeting 18:21

STRATEGIC ITEMS

06.00 Group CEO report.

SD reflects on the new style of Ofsted reports and encourages Corporation Board members to take time to review recent Ofsted publications to familiarise themselves with the emerging format and focus areas.

ACTION: CB to circulate the Sandwell College Ofsted report.

DB presents her report. AF adds that the consultation on the proposed Level 1 qualification reforms is still underway, meaning implementation is unlikely before post-2027. DK requests a deeper session in May to explore the upcoming qualifications reforms in more detail and asks about the Government's intent. DB notes that the Government's position is that qualifications other than A-Levels are considered to be of equal quality, while SD observes that lower retention at university is often linked to economic disadvantage rather than qualification type.

JL reflects that the reforms offer an opportunity to refresh and redesign courses. PM highlights the significant volume of work required to meet the reform timeline. DB notes that rollout from September 2027 is extremely ambitious given the scale of curriculum redesign, resource planning, and Ofqual ratification required.

The Corporation Board discuss the respective roles of T-Levels and Apprenticeships and how these serve different sectors and learner needs.

ACTION: CB to add the Accountability Statement to the July meeting.

DB provides an update on pay, confirming that a 2.5% pay award has been applied for the current academic year based on affordability, noting that the AoC recommendation sits at 4%. MS asks how SECG intends to retain staff within this pay environment. DB confirms this will be addressed through the emerging Pay Strategy, though this may have implications for staffing structures.

MS enquires about additional staff benefits. DB highlights the broader total reward package, including the four-day on-campus week, free parking, and flexible working arrangements.

ACTION: CB to add the Pay Strategy to the July meeting.

MS asks whether the AI Working Group is considering the ethical implications of AI use. DB confirms that ethical considerations are embedded within the AI Policy.

DB reports that internal progression from FE to SECG's HE provision remains an area for improvement. PM asks whether this is a capability issue or a marketing challenge. DB explains that the rising cost of university remains a significant barrier, compounded by the closure of the University of Essex halls of residence. SHL confirms that affordability is a key concern for learners. GS notes that despite demographic decline, university applications nationally are increasing. DB emphasises that SECG degrees are validated by the University of East Anglia, which holds a strong international reputation.

SA queries the financial impact of lower HE numbers. DB outlines that in addition to financial implications, there may be potential consequences for the TEF rating. She adds that the lack of on-site accommodation is a limiting factor, and SECG is exploring potential partnership options for student housing with Anglia Ruskin University.

The Corporation Board **NOTE** the Group CEO report

07.00 SECG 2023-2027 Strategic Plan and Strategy Achievement Report.

DB introduces the report, noting that the development of the current Strategic Plan represented a significant organisational undertaking, particularly given the starting point for SECG in early 2023. She highlights that the plan was built from first principles, following the Board Development Day on 7 February 2023, during which the Board and Executive Team collaborated to create a new vision and mission rather than revising previous iterations. This work established a strong alignment between the Executive and the Corporation Board and helped define a clear “golden thread” running throughout the organisation.

DB emphasises the ambitious vision of SECG as “the heart of community transformation,” and notes that the five strategic goals reflect this ambition — covering teaching and learning, workforce and culture, sustainability (financial, technological, and environmental), curriculum growth and efficiency, and partnership-driven innovation.

DB advises that of the 17 strategic projects, 10 have now been delivered, reflecting substantial organisational progress across areas such as teaching, learning and assessment, personal development, sustainability, brand equity, staffing, and curriculum reform. She notes that these projects were designed to drive impact and form the work plan for the entire organisation until completion.

DB highlights that the estates-related strategic project is currently off track, primarily due to sector-wide financial constraints and ongoing recruitment challenges in specialist technical and estates roles.

GB reflects that significant collective effort — from both the Board and the Executive Team — went into shaping the Strategic Plan and that this shared endeavour has contributed to a clear organisational direction. RO comments that the adoption of the Plan marked a “sea change moment” for SECG and expresses positive reflections on the scale and impact of the work undertaken.

DB cautions that while substantial progress has been made, the next phase of the Strategic Plan may prove more challenging, as the journey from “good” to “excellent” requires deeper organisational change, sustained focus, and cultural consolidation.

The Corporation Board **NOTE** the SECG 2023–2027 Strategic Plan and the accompanying Strategic Achievement Report.

08.00 HE Student Protection Plan.

SD notes that approval of the Student Protection Plan (SPP) is a regulatory requirement under the Office for Students (OfS).

AF presents the updated Plan and highlights that all amendments have been clearly marked within the document, including updates responding to the recent OfS guidance issued following the reportable event relating to the closure of the University of Essex halls of residence. AF adds that the Plan has undergone internal review and external scrutiny, including confirmation from the University of East Anglia (UEA) that they have no further comments on the revised version.

DB notes that the amendments are highlighted in yellow and reflects that the strengthened Plan provides clearer assurance to students regarding how SECG will manage the continuation of study in the event of course changes, campus disruption or other material risks. DB also notes that the revised Plan strengthens compliance with OfS Condition C3 and incorporates lessons learned from recent operational changes.

SA asks what measurable evidence demonstrates that the Plan is fit for purpose. AF responds that the OfS would formally intervene if the Plan did not meet regulatory expectations, and that the external review undertaken by UEA also provides assurance of its robustness.

The Corporation Board **FORMALLY APPROVE** the HE Student Protection Plan.

09.00 Quality Improvement Plan.

AF presents the Quality Improvement Plan which sets out both areas of strength and areas requiring improvement, and includes a separate English and Maths Quality Improvement Plan, noting that it is a living document overseen and regularly updated by the Ofsted Working Group. AF highlights that the new Ofsted Toolkit requires broader involvement from across the College, rather than the work sitting solely with the Quality and Curriculum team.

SD asks whether AF is satisfied with the QIP and whether he believes it will deliver the required improvements. AF responds that while the plan is robust, further development will be needed to progress SECG towards achieving an Outstanding judgement.

SD seeks the Corporation Board's view on whether the QIP assists their understanding of the improvement journey.

DK comments that the document is clear but asks for greater insight into the reasoning behind the selection of elements included in the QIP, and whether these represent the priority areas for SECG. AF uses attendance as an example, noting that SECG has never met its attendance target and that this forms part of the rationale for its inclusion. AF adds that the QIP provides a Group-level overview, with further detailed work undertaken at individual College level. KG echoes the need for clarity around the

rationale for areas included in the plan, and SH agrees that understanding the analytical reasoning is essential.

GS reflects that learner experience remains a significant concern and stresses the importance of addressing issues swiftly. DB notes that teaching and learning is a fundamental driver of learner experience, and strong practice in this area positively influences all other aspects of provision. GB comments that the QIP is forward-looking and that this iteration is a more manageable and workable document.

SHL expresses positive feedback regarding the English and Maths section.

SA asks whether a policy underpinning the QIP process would be beneficial. DB responds that this could be explored if it adds value and strengthens the approach.

RO notes that the Self-Assessment Report (SAR) informs the QIP and provides the analytical foundation for its development. DB agrees and notes that further refinement may be required.

PM requests that a prioritisation order be included to aid understanding of which actions should be tackled first.

AF observes that QIPs can sometimes include either excessive detail or insufficiently specific actions and notes the challenge of determining the level of detail the Corporation Board wishes to see. PM suggests that a column explaining *why* each action is included would be helpful. SD agrees, adding that a column explaining *how* the issue will be addressed would also support a deeper understanding; identifying that a target is missed is only the first step — the plan also needs to articulate the underlying causes and actions being taken.

The Corporation Board **FORMALLY APPROVE** the Quality Improvement Plan.

FINANCE.

10.00 Finance Report.

ZM presents the Management Accounts and highlights the continued improvement in the Group's financial position. He notes that the Group's forecast EBITDA stands at 14.23%, significantly ahead of the sector benchmark of 6.06%, and that the Q2 forecast shows EBITDA at £7.8m, an improvement against the budgeted £6.5m. ZM further notes that cash days have strengthened, with the Group now holding 28 days of cash in hand, demonstrating strong liquidity and effective cashflow management. ZM provides an update on broader financial performance, noting continued improvements across key indicators.

SD reflects that she does not consider it necessary or desirable for SECG to pursue an "outstanding" financial health grade, emphasising that the priority is a stable and sustainable financial position rather than maximising financial surpluses.

PM asks whether the 2.5% pay award poses a flight risk for staff. ZM responds that staff turnover has reduced significantly from 28% to 18%, noting that under the previous CEO turnover had remained persistently high for over a decade. He highlights that the improved turnover demonstrates increasing organisational stability.

DB explains that, in some specialist areas such as construction and engineering, a market-forces supplement has been used to recruit and retain staff. While this approach is not ideal, it has been necessary to maintain provision in skills-shortage areas. DB notes that the new pay strategy will provide a more equitable and coherent long-term solution.

DK seeks clarity on the main reasons staff leave. DB confirms that the primary reasons are pay or better career opportunities, with dissatisfaction at local management level as the secondary factor. She adds that some staff do return due to SECG's broader total reward package and that current turnover levels are nowhere near the concerning levels experienced three years ago.

SD notes that national research consistently shows that the majority of staff leave due to dissatisfaction with their manager. DB agrees and adds that the perception of poor pay persists within SECG even though the actual position has improved considerably.

PM asks whether staff are routinely reminded of the progress made on pay. DB confirms that this is communicated through internal channels and strengthened in recent months. AF notes that discussions with the Trade Unions focus consistently on affordability, and SECG remains transparent and honest in these conversations.

SD thanks ZM for his work in strengthening the College's cash position to 28 days.

SA asks whether there are any items outside of the agreed budget that require Corporation Board approval. ZM and DB confirm that there are no such items at present.

The Corporation Board **NOTE** the finance report including cashflow and cash days.

OPERATIONAL AREAS OF CONCERN.

11.00 Risk Register.

ZM presents the Risk Register which includes updates on the land sales and a focused exploration of Ofsted-related risks and mitigating actions, drawing attention to the estate-related risks. DB emphasises that the estate remains a key strategic issue for the Corporation Board, particularly in relation to Southend College and, increasingly, the Luckyn Lane Campus. SD asks whether an Estates Strategy is in place. ZM confirms that this is currently in development.

ACTION: Estates Strategy to be added to the June Away Day.

SH asks about progress within the Facilities and Estates teams. ZM provides an update on current work and confirms that the estates team have made contact with the external lead recommended by SH. SH and ZM will follow this up outside the meeting.

GS queries Risk 19 and the identified weakness in cyber security. AM responds that SECG has achieved Cyber Essentials accreditation and recently received positive findings from an Internal Audit undertaken by Scrutton Bland.

MS notes that the covering paper is helpful but requests that future iterations of the Risk Register include either a simple visual matrix or a short explanation of the scoring methodology, specifically how likelihood and impact combine and the thresholds defining red, amber and green risks. ZM agrees to include this in the next cycle and notes that forthcoming governor training will also cover the 1–5 scoring scales and how mitigations influence current risk ratings.

SD highlights the need for a clearer articulation of risk appetite for each risk area and suggests this could be incorporated into the Risk Register to strengthen strategic decision-making.

SA asks whether executive tracking against key mitigations could be shown with clear timelines. SD notes that this could be developed further and reviewed at the Corporation Board Away Day.

The Corporation Board **NOTE** the Risk Register.

COMPLIANCE.

12.00 Governance Matters.

EH reports that an updated induction plan for governors is currently being developed. He notes that this work aims to strengthen the onboarding process, ensure consistency across the Corporation Board, and

support governors in gaining a clear understanding of their roles, responsibilities, and the strategic priorities of SECG.

13.00 Student Voice.

SHL presents a verbal student voice update, and reports that she has been engaging with the Southend Local Voice group, noting that the key topics raised locally are also being discussed at the National Youth Council.

SHL provides some negative feedback regarding the GCSE English and Maths resit experience, particularly in relation to the teaching approach and learner experience during the resit process.

SHL highlights the value of developing a networking showcase event at SECG involving employers, with the aim of promoting work experience opportunities and celebrating the strengths of SECG's large creative learner cohort. She notes that this could support student progression and visibility of their work.

DB welcomes this suggestion and agrees it is a strong proposal the College would like to take forward.

JL adds that photography learners could have taken the Corporation Board headshots during this meeting as a form of real-life work experience. SD comments that such opportunities would need to be coordinated effectively with staff.

The Corporation Board **NOTE** the verbal student voice update from SHL.

FORMAL APPROVAL OF POLICIES.

14.00 Policies.

Covered in item 18.00

15.00 Any Other Business

None.

There being no further business the meeting ended at 20:26 hrs

Signed 

Dated 12th May 2026

Item	Actions	Deadline	Lead	Status
Actions from 10 March 2206				
04.02	CB to check that the presentations from the Away Day were emailed out.		CB	Completed
06.00	CB to circulate the Sandwell College Ofsted report		CB	Completed
06.00	CB to add the Accountability Statement to the July meeting.		CB	Completed
06.00	CB to add the Pay Strategy to the July meeting.		CB	Completed
08.00	CB to PDF all papers moving forward.		CB	Ongoing
11.00	Estates Strategy to be added to the June Away Day.		CB	Completed