

MINUTES

**South Essex Colleges Group Corporation Board
07.03E Southend College, Luker Road
Tuesday 12th May 2026 at 17:30**

Date and timings: 17:30 to 20:41

Location: 7E.03 Southend College, Luker Road

Present (Governors): Sally Dicketts (SD) (Chair)
Gerry Bender (GB)
Denise Brown (Group CEO)
Denise Darrell (DD)
Kate Green (KG)
David Knott (DK)
Jake Lines (JL)
Rick Olver (RO)
Gilly Salmon (GS)
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
Paul Goddard (PG) Scrutton Bland (pre meeting training only)
Zed Mohammed (ZM) Group Deputy CEO
Ansar Mahmood (AM) Group Deputy CEO- Chief Information Officer
Jayne Sheehan- Vice Chair Innovation

Sharon Dunphy (SDu) Deputy Executive Director of HE and Quality (HE Items only)

Apologies: Seye Awolusi (SA)
Steven Hemmings (SH)
Paul Martin (PM)
Marco Steel (MS)

Item Pre-meeting Training Risk Register.

The Board received a presentation from PG from Scrutton Bland on Strategic Risk Management, which emphasised that risk management is a key decision-making tool to support the achievement of strategic objectives, rather than solely a mechanism for avoiding risk. Members noted the distinct governance responsibilities, with the Board responsible for setting risk appetite and culture, and Committees providing scrutiny and assurance on the effectiveness of mitigations through regular review of the Risk Register and associated policy. It was highlighted that risk management is a shared organisational responsibility, with management accountable for monitoring and mitigating risk. An update was provided on current arrangements, including the implementation of a new Risk Register, the development of a revised Risk Management Policy, and the need to reset and embed the College's risk appetite at Board level. The concept of target risk was outlined, aligning risk scores to mitigation activity and agreed appetite. The Board noted that a balanced approach is required, recognising that the College cannot be risk-averse in all areas and must take considered risks to enable innovation and delivery of its strategic priorities

PG left the meeting 18:00.

00.00 Agenda

01.00 Chair's welcome and introduction.

SD welcomed attendees and opens the meeting noting that the purpose the Corporation Board to try and get the very best for SECG and all comments are not personal they are about us all working together to deliver the best for our learners.

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 Seye Awolusi, Marco Steel, Paul Martin and Steve Hemmings

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 the meeting 10 March 2026.**

The Minutes of the meeting held on 10 March 2026 were **APPROVED** as an accurate reflection of the meeting.

03.02 Matters Arising.

There were no matters arising not covered elsewhere on the agenda.

STRATEGIC ITEMS**04.00 Group CEO report.**

The Board received the CEO's report, which focused on the quality of teaching and learning as the central driver of organisational performance.

DB reported that the Group continued to monitor teaching and learning rigorously, with a small number of staff identified as underperforming. The Board was advised that this number was proportionate in the context of the overall workforce and that targeted support, including mentoring and continuing professional development (CPD), was in place to support improvement.

The Board discussed the increasing importance of digital innovation within teaching and learning, including the use of artificial intelligence and the development of digital capability across the organisation. Plans to enhance digital inclusion and further develop Learning Resource Centres were also outlined.

Members explored the role of Governors in gaining assurance on the student experience. SD emphasised that Governor involvement should remain strategic and not become operational, noting that structured visits and opportunities to experience the College environment would be arranged to support Board understanding.

KG asked for further detail on the staff performance process. DB confirmed that this was managed through a Performance Improvement Plan (PIP), which included CPD sessions, in-person support, access to the "Know To" programme, and a four-week improvement period. The process also incorporated lesson observations and coaching.

GB asked whether English and Maths support could be offered as a drop-in within the new Learning Support Centre. DB noted that this was a positive suggestion and could be factored into planning. SHL asked how underperformance was assessed. DB advised that this was determined through a combination of lesson observations, teaching and learning materials, learner feedback and class attendance.

DK sought clarification on the Learning Resource Centres. DB confirmed that these would operate as modernised library environments, incorporating digital access. DB also noted that mobile phone use within classrooms presented a challenge and that increased availability of tablet devices was being considered to support learning.

SD noted that dates would be provided for Governor visits to Thurrock, Southend and Basildon campuses, including opportunities to review the new Learning Centres and associated English and Maths support, with visits planned for November and February.

DB confirmed that further work was required to strengthen organisational culture at SECG.

DD asked about the analysis of the cultural divide. DB advised that Southend College had a significant proportion of long-serving staff who had experienced a challenging period of change. DB further noted that recruitment to a Chief People Officer role was underway, with an anticipated start date by September. It was also noted that facilities at Southend College were more dated and that capital investment would be used to improve the overall environment.

GB asked for clarification on the scope of the Chief People Officer role. DB confirmed that the role would provide strategic oversight of people strategy across the Group and offered a broader remit than a traditional HR Director role.

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

05.00 People Services Report.

AM introduced the People Services report, which considered a range of workforce metrics and organisational development issues.

The Board noted that sickness absence remained a key challenge, with an average absence rate of 9.64 days per employee. The Executive confirmed that action was being taken through strengthened management practices, revised policy implementation, and increased engagement with occupational health and staff wellbeing support.

RO commented on the improvements in Performance Development Review (PDR) completion rates and the high levels of compliance with mandatory training. It was further confirmed that the Group was now fully compliant with DBS requirements following a comprehensive review, which KG reflected positively on.

SHL asked about the frequency of DBS checks. AM advised that checks were undertaken more frequently for staff who had regular contact with learners.

The Board discussed organisational culture in detail, noting that variation across campuses and the presence of long-serving staff presented both opportunities and challenges in relation to change. The planned appointment of a Chief People Officer was welcomed as a key enabler of strategic workforce development and cultural transformation. GB requested that future reporting include a breakdown between professional services staff and teaching and learning staff.

JL asked whether the absence of end dates for ongoing legal cases reflected their early stage. AM confirmed that this was the case. GB asked whether legal claims were insured. AM advised that the Group held insurance cover up to £25,000.

DD asked whether there was any indication that sickness absence may be linked to organisational factors. AM advised that this was difficult to determine, as work-related stress was a broadly used category; however, affected staff were being referred to occupational health and supported through the Employee Assistance Programme, VivUp.

SD sought greater clarity on trend data and external benchmarking to support more effective scrutiny, particularly in relation to sickness absence and workforce performance. The importance of middle managers in driving performance improvement and cultural change was emphasised.

The Corporation Board **NOTE** the People Services Report and the areas of focus identified.

FINANCE.

06.00 Finance Report.

Estates- Wellstead Gardens.

ZM notes that the Wellstead Garden sale has fallen through due to the SEN school not being approved. ZM comments that SECG have another offer of £1.1m six week turnaround offer which is unconditional offer.

The Corporation Board **FORMALLY APPROVE** to the sale of Wellstead Gardens with unanimous support.

Estates- Thurrock.

ZM notes that Thurrock College ground lease land has a red book value of £100k.

The Corporation Board **FORMALLY APPROVE** SECG to go to the Department of Education to request to purchase the of the Thurrock College ground lease- this was unanimously agreed.

Estates- Thurrock- Additional Land.

ZM details that there is a plot of land at £30k-£50k that SECG would like to have permission to purchase.

DB notes strategic value of this land in supporting future curriculum expansion, particularly in technical and construction-related provision. DB adds that a SECG purchase prevents competition from purchasing the land and building on it.

The Corporation Board **FORMALLY APPROVE** SECG to go to the Department of Education to request to purchase the of the Thurrock College additional land- this was unanimously agreed.

During discussion, the SD noted that these decisions were being taken without supporting papers and emphasised that, in future, decisions involving public funds should be supported by formal papers circulated in advance to ensure full transparency and good governance.

SD asks what happens if Thurrock Council ask for a much higher book value? DB notes that SECG have a ceiling and will not get into wider debt to acquire these pieces of land.

Finance.

ZM presented the Management Accounts and highlighted an EBITDA position of 14.2%. ZM reported that the Group was experiencing an income shortfall of approximately £1.4 million, primarily driven by underperformance in 16–19 income, apprenticeships and international recruitment. The Board acknowledged the challenges associated with forecasting in these areas, particularly in light of changing market conditions and government policy.

ZM outlined mitigating actions, including strong cost control measures, careful management of pay awards and continued oversight of expenditure. The Board noted that the Group remained in a stable financial position, with cash days improving significantly and approaching sector norms.

Governors explored the assumptions underpinning income forecasts and emphasised the need for realism in target-setting. Particular attention was given to apprenticeship delivery, with discussion focusing on employer engagement, contractual arrangements and the need to strengthen commercial income streams.

AF noted that High Needs (HN) learner numbers had increased and that the Local Authority was increasing the funding allocation. AF confirmed that the allocation was 170, of which 132 had already been assigned. SD commented that the SEND White Paper would support this growth.

SD asked how realistic SECG target-setting was and how learner numbers could be increased through marketing, given the income shortfall. JS advised that the international shortfall equated to five learners, although these represented high-value recruitment. JS further noted that apprenticeships remained an

area for improvement, with plans in place to strengthen delivery through modular learning and new programme development. JS advised that the introduction of government incentives for SMEs, due from October, was influencing employer behaviour, with some delaying apprenticeship recruitment.

DB noted that a 16–19 capacity bid had been submitted to support expansion at Basildon and Thurrock, including for apprenticeships and 16–19 learners. DB advised that Higher Technical Qualification (HTQ) targets had previously been set ambitiously and were being revised to more realistic levels, with delivery now also taking place online via Pearl.

SD asked about potential clawback relating to T Levels. AF confirmed that this related to learner withdrawals.

SD noted that cover policies required review, given the high level of agency costs. DB advised that increased English and Maths teaching hours, driven by national policy requirements, had contributed to these costs.

SD congratulated ZM on the improvement in cash days and the achievement of a 'Good' financial rating.

The Corporation Board **NOTE** the finance report.

07.00 Department for Education Financial Statements Review 2024-2025.

The Board reviewed the DfE financial information, including the Governors' dashboard and related benchmarking.

It was noted that performance has improved and that the Group is now demonstrating more consistent financial stability compared to previous years.

The Corporation Board **NOTE** the Department for Education Financial Statements Review 2024-2025.

08.00 Student Voice.

The Board considered the Student Voice report and associated survey findings.

It was noted that response rates remained strong; however, recurring themes continued to emerge, particularly in relation to the consistency of feedback, the level of stretch and challenge, and clarity around progression and next steps.

Members discussed the limitations of survey-based feedback and the need to enhance the quality of insight gathered from students. The Executive confirmed that a review of the Student Voice approach was underway, with a focus on strengthening engagement mechanisms and ensuring that feedback resulted in visible change.

Governors emphasised the importance of closing the feedback loop, ensuring that students were informed of actions taken in response to their views.

SD asked SHL whether she recognised the themes outlined in the report. SHL advised that survey results should be treated with some caution, noting that some learners completed them quickly at the end of lessons, which could impact their reliability. AF asked SHL to review the survey questions and provide further feedback.

DK commented that the response levels would be considered strong in other sectors and asked whether there was a free-text element within the survey. AF confirmed that this was in place, although responses were often limited in detail.

SD asked how SECG was working with teaching staff to address learner feedback and how actions were being communicated back to students. AF advised that this would be reported at a future meeting.

GS suggested that the use of video feedback, potentially supported by AI, could provide an alternative method for capturing richer student insight.

The Corporation Board **NOTE** the student voice report.

CURRICULUM PLAN

09.00 Curriculum Plan.

Curriculum Reform Update.

AF presented the Curriculum Plan, including an update on the ongoing consultation. It was noted that, from 2027, a new Level 1 'Stepping Stone' qualification in English and Maths would be introduced. AF advised that, whilst these programmes supported learner confidence, they were less effective in preparing learners for GCSE-level study.

AF outlined a number of strategic risks to the organisation should curriculum changes not be implemented, particularly in relation to Creative Industries and Public Services provision. It was noted that changes in these areas could have a significant impact on the Group's curriculum offer. AF emphasised the importance of Creative Industries to the UK economy and noted that high-quality provision in this area required sufficient depth of study to support excellence, rather than limited delivery models.

SD commented positively on the verbal update provided by AF and suggested that, in future, video updates could be incorporated into governance documentation to enhance Board engagement and understanding.

DK asked about scenario planning for a worst-case position. AF advised that this would be addressed within the forthcoming transition plan, for which the College was awaiting a template. It was confirmed that the completed transition plan would be presented to the Corporation Board in due course.

The Corporation Board **NOTE** the Curriculum Reform Update and **AGREE** to write to the Prime Minister to highlight there concerns about the proposed reforms.

Curriculum Plan.

AM presented the curriculum plan against allocation, outlining trends in growth and areas of reduction. It was noted that 16–19 learner numbers had increased, supported in part by subcontracting arrangements, while adult learner numbers had remained broadly stable.

RO asked about the current levels of subcontracting. DB advised that Knights and Southend United FC were the current subcontractors; however, the quality of provision at Southend United FC was of concern and was being closely monitored.

SD noted that the volume of information shared verbally at meetings was significant, particularly for new Governors, and emphasised the need for greater clarity and completeness within Board papers to support effective scrutiny.

AM highlighted concerns regarding student attrition at SECG, noting the importance of improving retention in order to meet contractual targets without reliance on subcontracting.

AM also outlined changes to subcontracting rules introduced by the Greater London Authority (GLA). It was noted that these changes placed increased restrictions on the use of subcontracting, including a stronger expectation that provision be delivered directly by the lead provider. The revised rules also required greater transparency, strengthened oversight of subcontractor performance and a clear rationale for any subcontracting arrangements in place. The Board noted that these changes would require the Group to further reduce reliance on subcontracting over time and strengthen in-house delivery capacity.

Marketing Plan.

AM presented the Marketing Plan, outlining the key elements of the paper. It was noted that the approach had become more targeted, with an increased focus on 'keep in touch' activity. AM highlighted that applications had increased and advised that Level 1 learners would be enrolled earlier within the admissions cycle.

AM further advised that an online enrolment process would be implemented from the next academic year.

DB noted that, if SECG were able to reduce attrition by half, the Group would have in excess of 5,000 learners.

KG provided feedback from a parental perspective, noting that enrolment communications lacked sufficient context and that there had been limited prior engagement with learners before email contact was issued.

Lower Thames Crossing.

The Board received the update and noted the strategic opportunity presented by the Lower Thames Crossing project in supporting regional skills development and employment pathways.

JS provided context on the Lower Thames Crossing, noting that the project involved the development of a new road route via Thurrock to reduce congestion at the Dartford Crossing.

GS asked about the expected duration of the project. JS advised that the project was anticipated to last approximately 15 years.

SDu joins the meeting 20:27

10.00 HE COMPLIANCE.

10.01 HE Compliance- including reportable events.

SDu presented the HE Compliance and Reportable Events report and confirmed that the College remained compliant with all Office for Students (OfS) Conditions of Registration (A–G), with established governance structures providing ongoing oversight and assurance.

The Board noted that strengths were evident across academic quality, assessment and external examiner feedback, with no major concerns raised and all revalidations confirmed as successful.

The Board acknowledged areas for continued monitoring, particularly in relation to student outcomes on a small number of programmes, declining NSS engagement and learning resources performance when compared to sector benchmarks.

Members noted that targeted interventions were in place, including enhanced academic support, wellbeing provision and strengthened monitoring arrangements, and agreed that these would be critical in addressing identified risks.

The Board took assurance from the overall robustness of governance, quality assurance and financial oversight arrangements supporting compliance.

GS congratulated SDu on the NSS results, acknowledging that outcomes were particularly challenging in a college setting where provision was assessed against university-level expectations.

The Corporation Board **NOTE** the HE Compliance report.

10.02 HE Student Experience Report.

AF presented the HE Student Experience Report and advised that the overall student experience remained positive and stable, with strong feedback relating to teaching quality, staff accessibility and student support.

The Board noted that safeguarding and wellbeing arrangements were effective, with no current concerns requiring escalation, and that the College remained fully compliant with relevant regulatory requirements. The Board further noted that a number of structural challenges continued to impact the consistency of the student experience, particularly in relation to learning resources, IT infrastructure, student engagement and cross-campus consistency.

Members noted that these areas were currently assessed as Amber risks, with mitigation activity underway, and recognised the potential impact on NSS performance, Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) outcomes and reputational assurance if not addressed.

The Board received assurance that clear mitigation plans were in place and agreed that sustained strategic oversight would be required to ensure continued improvement.

The Corporation Board **NOTE** the HE Student Experience Report.

10.03 HE Student Fees.

SD presented the HE Student Fees report and outlined the strategic context of declining undergraduate applications and a weakening internal progression pipeline, highlighting the associated risks to recruitment and financial sustainability.

The Board considered the proposed revisions to Higher National fees, the proposed HE fee levels for 2027–28, and the introduction of a time-limited internal progression discount designed to support recruitment and improve affordability.

The Board noted that the proposals sought to balance market competitiveness, student affordability and long-term financial sustainability, with a targeted focus on strengthening internal progression pathways.

Members discussed the financial implications of the proposed discount model, including the requirement for increased student recruitment in order to achieve cost neutrality. DB highlighted the associated risks and noted that the approach would support market development and maximise utilisation of existing HE capacity.

RO commented that maintaining the status quo was not a viable option in the current operating environment. SD added that the proposed approach could influence prospective learners who were undecided. SD further reported that initial student feedback on the proposals had been positive.

DB emphasised that the proposals aligned with the core mission of SECG, particularly in relation to supporting social mobility and widening access to higher education for local communities.

The Corporation Board **FORMALLY APPROVE** the revised Higher National fees for 2026–27:

- £6,350 (standard delivery)
- £6,850 (with international trip)
- £6,000 (distance learning)

The Corporation Board **FORMALLY APPROVE** the 20% internal progression discount trial for FE learners entering HE from 2026-27 for intake in 27-28

The Corporation Board **FORMALLY APPROVE** the proposed fees for 27-28 as set out in appendix A.

The Corporation Board **FORMALLY APPROVE** international fees to stay at current pricing.

SDu leaves the meeting 20:40.

11.00 Governance Matters.

11.01 Governance Meeting Timetable 2026-2027.

CB presents the Governance Meeting Timetable 2026-2027.

The Corporation Board **APPROVE** the Governance Meeting Timetable 2026-2027 apart from 13th October Corporation Board meeting which will need to be rearranged.

11.02 Governance Matters.

EH reports that an updated induction plan for governors is still 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. EH notes that this will be completed by 23rd June 2026.

EH notes that the AoC SPH Code has been updated and work is being done to ensure SECG is in line with these changes.

12.00 **Any Other Business**

Forthcoming Events

- a) June 2026 End of Year Show
- b) 23 June 2026 Board Development Day

The meeting moved to Confidential Business. There being no further business the meeting ended at 20:26 hrs

Signed.....Dated.....

Item	Actions	Deadline	Lead	Status
Actions from 12 May 2206				
	Estates Strategy to be added to the June Board Development Day- carried over from 10 th March 2026 meeting.		ZM	