

MINUTES

**South Essex Colleges Group Corporation Board
7E.03 Southend College
Tuesday 14th October 2025 at 17:30**

Date and timings:	17:30 to 20:18
Location:	7E.03 Southend College
Present (Governors):	Sally Dicketts (SD) (Chair) Rick Olver (RO) (MS Teams) Denise Brown (DB) (Group CEO) Jo Brooker (JB) (Staff Governor) Kate Merritt (KM) (MS Teams) Aaron Thompson (AT) Gerry Bender (GB)
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 Jayne Sheehan (JS) Vice CEO- Innovation Mark Kidd (MK) RSM
Apologies:	Tina Booth (TB) (Staff Governor) Kianna Smith (KS) (Student Governor) Seye Awolusi (SA) Marco Steel (MS)

Item

PRE MEETING BRIEFING- RSM Anti-Fraud Briefing

MK gives the Corporation Board a briefing on the *Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act*.

MK notes that the Act impacts a number of organisations and that they can no longer turn a blind eye. The emphasis is on organisational accountability. MK confirms that SECG falls within the scope of the Act and therefore must have appropriate controls and procedures in place. MK explains that fraud must be committed for the benefit of the organisation or a person to whom the organisation provides a service, and gives examples to illustrate this.

MK outlines the definition of an *associated person* as including employees of subsidiaries, employees of the organisation, and any individual who performs services for or on behalf of the organisation. MK details the two base fraud offences to the Corporation Board.

ZM notes that the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act is already embedded within the Anti-Fraud Policy.

DB asks about the consequences of failure to comply. MK responds that this could result in an unlimited fine and reputational damage for the organisation. ZM adds that it could also lead to a *Notice to Improve* from the FEC.

SD comments that an organisation's culture heavily influences the likelihood of fraud occurring, particularly where there is a culture of fear. DB gives an example of fraud occurring in relation to marked registers.

AT asks whether the Act covers genuine mistakes. MK clarifies that it does not cover genuine mistakes, only intentional fraud.

ZM notes that there will be lessons to learn from emerging examples. MK adds that there is an *International Fraud Awareness Week*, to which he will invite Board members.

SD thanks MK for his time and presentation.

18:00 MK leaves the meeting.

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 Tina Booth, Seye Awolusi and Kianna Smith.

SD confirms that Andrew Overs Dowsett has **formally resigned from the Corporation Board**.

02.02 Declarations of Interest.

No additional declarations of interest other than those already registered.

02.03 Urgent business notified in advance.

None.

18:03 DK, PM and SM leave the meeting

03.00 FORMAL RATIFICATION OF NEW CORPORATION BOARD MEMBERS.

The Corporation Board **FORMALLY RATIFIES** the appointment of **David Knott, Gilly Salmon, Denise Darrell, Paul Martin, and Steven Hemmings** to the Corporation Board for a four-year term.

SD reports that the field of applicants for Corporation Board membership is very strong, noting that all candidates live within the Essex area. SD provides a detailed background on each of the proposed Corporation Board members.

AT asks why the CVs have not been circulated to the Corporation Board. SD explains that she wanted the Corporation Board to reflect on its overall needs rather than reviewing the individual applications. DB adds that the search was conducted via Peridot, who carried out an extensive due diligence process.

RO notes that SD and DB were given delegated responsibility to oversee this process.

18:11 DK, PM and SM rejoin the meeting.

Formal introductions are given to the newly ratified Governors.

04.00 MINUTES AND MATTERS ARISING OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

04.01 Minutes of the meeting 15 July 2025.

The Minutes of the meeting held on 15 July 2025 were **APPROVED** as an accurate reflection of the meeting.

04.02 Matters arising not covered elsewhere on the agenda.

There were no outstanding matters arising from the minutes of the meeting 15 July 2025 that were not discussed elsewhere on the agenda.

STRATEGIC ITEMS

05.00 Recruitment Update.

The Corporation Board **RECEIVE AND DISCUSS** the South Essex Colleges Group recruitment update.

AF presents the report to the Corporation Board, noting that although recruitment has increased compared to the previous academic year, it remains below the planned stretch target but over the contractual target.

SD asks whether the recruitment data factors in 42-day attrition. AF confirms that overall attrition is currently around 6.3%, with 16–18 attrition at 7.5%, which is too high, although an improvement from 8.3% last year.

SH asks whether the current tracking is higher or lower than last year. AF explains that attrition is not time-stamped but agrees that adding this would be useful for future analysis.

PM asks whether withdrawals and cancellations are surveyed. AF responds that cancellations are tracked and that most are due to learners transferring to other institutions. SD comments that this is often influenced by learners following where their friends choose to study.

ZM and DB provide a detailed assessment of how attrition affects financial planning for the academic year and the financial impact of higher attrition rates. DB notes that the FE market in Essex is highly competitive.

DK asks whether SECG's attrition rate is similar to that of other colleges in the area. DB confirms that SECG's rate is slightly higher.

GB asks about the percentage impact of learners being prevented from progressing from Level 2 to Level 3 due to lack of attendance in English and Maths. AF advises that the data is not currently available but acknowledges that there will be some impact.

SD expresses concern that SECG is the population is currently in a growth period which is expected to plateau by 2030 and therefore emphasises the need to analyse the reasons behind learner dropouts.

SD highlights that some curriculum areas perform better in preventing attrition and asks which courses these are and what strategies they use that could be replicated elsewhere.

ACTION POINT: A report identifying curriculum areas with lower attrition rates, outlining the strategies they use to retain learners, to be presented to the Corporation Board.

SH asks what investment and direction SECG can take to become a “cool and innovative” brand, suggesting that brand development will be key to sustaining growth. SD adds that learners who fail to make friends within the first two weeks are more likely to leave. SH proposes exploring gamification or a partner ecosystem to improve retention beyond the 42-day mark.

PM echoes SH's comments, emphasising the importance of brand distinctiveness and awareness.

JB notes that for learners at higher levels, teachers often assume that students already have note-taking and study skills, which is not always the case.

DB confirms that the biggest contributor to attrition is cancellations, and questions whether SECG's offer process is swift and engaging enough. DB highlights SECG's unique strengths in construction and creative and performing arts, but notes that capacity for growth in engineering and construction is constrained by staffing and space, meaning difficult choices will be required.

ZM comments that SECG's institutional history could be built upon to further strengthen learner development.

AM reflects on SECG's marketing progress, noting that applications have doubled compared to the same time last year due to improvements in the marketing department. AM adds that SECG should better promote the positive differences between college and school environments.

AT asks whether there is an appetite to create a distinct brand around the construction provision similar to the NCCI for Creative and Performance. DB confirms that this is being explored.

DK asks about the level of contact between application and enrolment. DB acknowledges that SECG's contact processes are currently too slow and need to be reviewed to improve efficiency.

DK also asks whether AI poses a threat to the Performance and Creative Arts sector. DB notes that AI is beginning to affect art and creative design, but not yet the physical performing arts.

KM reflects on her son's experience joining SECG, confirming that it has been much improved compared to her daughter's experience two years ago.

06.00 Group CEO Report.

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

DB presents her report to the Corporation Board, noting that the Essex Chamber of Commerce provides excellent support to SECG as a patron member. DB reflects on the Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP), which is managed by the Essex Chamber of Commerce.

DB outlines the upcoming devolution in Essex and the election of the Greater Essex Mayor, who will hold responsibility for allocating the skills budget. DB reports that she has been meeting with USP to explore opportunities for collaboration in response to the devolution changes and notes that establishing a joint venture company may be an appropriate route forward.

ACTION: *FEDC Manifesto to be circulated.*

DB informs the Board that SECG's Office for Students bid for £685,000 to support sustainable construction methods has been approved. JS provides additional detail on this project.

DB also reports on the Black Leadership Group (BLG) initiative. The BLG/South Essex Colleges Group 10 Point Plan (10PP) Induction Training Event is scheduled for Friday 3 October 2025, from 9:00am–4:00pm online via Teams. This event forms part of the BLG's 10 Point Plan for anti-racism and leadership development, involving a broad cross-section of staff and leaders. The Board notes and supports SECG's participation in this initiative.

DB provides the Corporation Board with an update on Executive Board changes, including:

- Hayley Phare, Executive Director of Curriculum, has now left SECG to take up the role of Deputy Principal (Curriculum) at The Sheffield College. Reporting to Adam Fahey, recruitment is underway for a new Executive Director of Curriculum Innovation, supported by an external search agency. This reflects SECG's strategic focus on curriculum development and innovation at executive level.
- Reporting to Zed Mohammed, the Head of Financial Control role has been updated and advertised, with a new role specification published in September 2025. This post is central to ensuring financial compliance, audit readiness, and strategic financial support for senior leaders.
- Reporting to Ansar Mahmood, the Group Director of People Services position has been under recruitment, and Susanne Datta has now been appointed to the post on an interim basis. Her focus will be on policy updates and HR structural development.

AT asks about the Local Government Reform and seeks clarification on the potential impact and associated risks. DB explains that the transfer of the adult skills budget to the Mayor presents a potential risk to SECG, and that it will be essential for SECG to position itself as a favoured provider. DB adds that the Essex division presents additional complexity, as Southend differs significantly from rural Essex. GB echoes that Essex is a large and diverse area. DB notes that SECG is the largest FE college in Essex.

07.00 Key Quality Improvements.

The Corporation Board **RECEIVE AND DISCUSS** the South Essex Colleges Group Key Quality Improvements Paper.

AF presents the report to the Corporation Board, noting that this will be further developed in the Quality Improvement Plan (QIP), which will be presented to the Corporation Board in December. AF identifies English and Maths (E&M) as the key area for improvement and reflects on the introduction of the new Ofsted toolkit, which differs significantly in both approach and tone from the previous framework.

GB comments that Ofsted does not appear to recognise the fundamental difference between FE and schools, noting that FE colleges deal with different cohorts of learners each year, unlike schools where learners remain for longer periods. GB also reflects on the inclusion aspect of the framework and suggests there may be a training need for the Corporation Board in this area.

SD notes that the Corporation Board had a spotlight session on E&M last year, but the results have not improved as significantly as hoped. SD emphasises the need for serious consideration of design thinking around E&M delivery.

AT asks whether low achievement in E&M within the subcontracted provision falls under SECG's responsibility. AF confirms that it does and provides a detailed explanation of the issues, including the lack of specialist E&M teaching and the expectation that learners attend E&M sessions independently. AF reports that the subcontractor has been issued with a Notice to Improve, which has led to the recruitment of specialist E&M staff and a quality manager to oversee improvements. JS adds that there is a Quality Subcontracting Board to which the subcontractor must now report.

DK asks whether E&M achievement is a sector-wide issue. SD confirms that it is, particularly as many learners prioritise vocational courses. The Corporation Board discusses E&M performance, the bell curve model for grading, and its wider impact. The Board agrees that there is a need to revolutionise the delivery model for E&M.

JB comments that E&M lessons are often delivered at a very fast pace.

DB notes that this is an important time for SECG, as Phase 1 of the quality turnaround has been completed with significant improvements in vocational areas. Phase 2 aims to position SECG among the top ten FE colleges in the country, and to achieve this, there must be a breakthrough in E&M — one that originates from classroom-level innovation. DB emphasises that there must be a breakthrough in E&M and that the Corporation Board must hold the SECG Senior Officers to account for progress in this area.

SD advises that the QIP in relation to English and maths should include three long-term strategic priorities for change, outlining *what needs to be done and how it will be achieved through pockets of innovation*, alongside a focused set of actions that are deliverable within nine months.

SD thanks JB for her time as a Governor and for her valuable contribution to the understanding of governance.

JB leaves the meeting 19:27.

OPERATIONAL AREAS OF CONCERN.

08.00 Indicative Outcomes of 2024-2025.

The Corporation Board **RECEIVE AND DISCUSS** the South Essex Colleges Group Indicative Outcomes of 2024-2025 Report.

AF presents his report to the Corporation Board, noting that overall, in 2023/24, South Essex Colleges Group (SECG) achieved its best year to date in terms of learner outcomes, with an overall achievement rate of 89.1%, comprising 83.3% for 16–18 learners and 93.6% for adults. With 99.6% of results confirmed, outcomes for 2024/25 currently stand at 90.4% overall, 84.1% for 16–18 learners, and 95.7% for adults.

AF reports that Basildon College's performance has improved by 3% when English and Maths (E&M) are excluded, noting that E&M has had a significant impact on overall results. AF provides a breakdown of SECG's offer across each campus and adds that Southend College's results have also been affected by E&M performance. AF highlights that Thurrock College is progressing well through its improvement journey and continues to make positive strides. AF further notes that outcomes at the Adult College have improved.

AF comments that apprenticeship outcomes for learners aged 24+ have shown a notable decline, with a significant reduction in new starters.

SD requests that future papers include more context and background information to enable Governors to ask more informed questions. AF acknowledges this and notes that there has been a marked improvement in adult E&M outcomes.

SD adds that it would be helpful for future reports to include national comparison figures or national league tables to provide clearer context on SECG's position. **ACTION:** Future reports to include national comparison figures or national league tables

COMPLIANCE.

09.00 Governance Matters.

09.01 Keeping Children Safe in Education.

The Corporation Board **CONFIRM** that they have read and understood the Keeping Children Safe in Education Act. The newly ratified Governors will be receive this in the upcoming days.

09.02 Confirmation that the following forms have been completed and returned: Declaration of Interest and Eligibility Forms (incl. PEP) Skills Audit Self-Assessment Forms Committee Self-Assessment Forms Code of Conduct.

The Corporation Board **CONFIRM** that they have completed and returned the forms outlined above. The newly ratified Governors will be receive this in the upcoming days.

FORMAL APPROVAL OF POLICIES.

10.00 Policies.

10.01 Governance Policies, Standing Orders and Instruments and Articles.

The Corporation Board **APPROVE** the Governance Policies, Standing Orders and Instrument and Articles.

LJ gives an introduction to the Governance polices, standing orders and Instruments and Articles.

SD asks that the section for the Chair of the Corporation Board is recruited via a national advert is removed.

11.00 Any Other Business

11.01 Utility Bills.

The Corporation Board **APPROVES** the tendering process via a broker for the utility bills with 1, 3, 5 year options.

11.02 Corporation Board Committees and Local College Board meetings.

SD notes that this conversation has been deferred to the Corporation Board away day.

The Audit and Risk Committee will need to be reviewed outside of the Corporation Board meeting.

There being no further business the meeting ended at 20:01 hrs

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

Item	Actions	Deadline	Lead	Status
Actions from 14 October 2025				
05.00	A report identifying curriculum areas with lower attrition rates, outlining the strategies they use to retain learners, to be presented to the Corporation Board.	9/12/25	AF	
06.00	FEDC Manifesto to be circulated.	ASAP	CB	Completed.
08.00	Future reports to include national comparison figures or national league tables	9/12/25	AF	