

Minutes

Meeting of the Audit & Risk Committee

Wednesday 4 March 2026, 17.30 in the Meeting Room at Collyer's

Present: Pat Colombo, Denise Maurice, Dom Valente, Jonathan Wharton

In attendance: Dan Lodge (Trustee & CEO), Stacey Kearns (Chief Financial & Operating Officer), Russha Sellings (Director of Governance/GD)

Amanda Cannell (Forest Network Manager), Christian Garland (Collyer's IT Manager) both to Item 5 only via Teams

External: Scott McCready (Internal Audit Manager, Wbg, to Item 5 only via Teams)

Apologies: None

Chairperson: Dom Valente

1. Welcome, Apologies for Absence

The Chair opened the meeting. Pat Colombo was not present at the start, arriving during Item 5. The meeting was declared quorate from the outset. Wbg and the Forest and Collyer's IT Managers were welcomed for updates in Item 5.

2. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations made relevant to the agenda.

3. Minutes of the last meeting

The minutes including confidential Part II of the meeting that took place on 26 November 2025 were approved without amendment.

4. Matters Arising

The Chair had a matter to raise, however he would delay this until all Committee members were present.

5. Internal Assurance

i) HLA Cyber Security audit

The Internal Auditor gave an overview of the recent audit. The review tested the arrangements within the framework of National Cyber Security Centre's (NCSC) Cyber Security guidance and made assessments based on predefined objectives. The report provided was detailed and the overall conclusion provided a substantial level of assurance over the Trust's cyber security and the associated policies,

procedures and controls. There were also several areas of good practice to note on pages 13-14 of the report.

In terms of development, the internal auditor identified 5 recommendations for improvement and 8 observations for consideration. Data leakage prevention was one area in the sector that required a vigorous response in terms of mitigations.

[17.38 – Pat Colombo joined the meeting]

The CEO wished to thank the IT Managers for their swift input into the management responses as well as overseeing ongoing actions to achieve the implementation dates. They both spoke of how useful the review had been to improve practice. Forest were currently undertaking vulnerability testing and phishing simulations with a view to working towards Cyber Essentials accreditation before the end of term. The Collyer's IT Manager referred back to the College audit prior to conversion. Collyer's had already secured Cyber Essentials, however it was due for renewal and the compliance was becoming more rigorous. The review had provided an opportunity for assessing continuous improvement.

Questions were invited. The Committee wanted to know if the IT teams had the resources to deliver the actions and whether these were achievable within the recommended timeframe. At Forest, the scope was wider than they were used to and required more staff awareness and direction which would build over time starting with some immediate key actions. For Collyer's the IT Manager said the biggest issue in terms of capacity was hardware rebuilds which required physical intervention, challenging with the current number of FTE. Trustees observed that in time it would be useful to achieve a consistency in approach between the organisations as the Trust evolved. They commented on the work and commitment of both teams to ensure the safeguarding and management of the IT networks. There was a further discussion on risks arising from third party suppliers and a Trustee suggested that prioritising larger suppliers who hold commercially sensitive data could be a beneficial and the timelines staggered to ensure the response was manageable. Trustees were thanked for the feedback, and this suggestion would be considered. **ACTION: CFOO/IT.**

[17.50 – The IT Managers were thanked for their work and the updates and they left the meeting]

In response to the observations raised in the report and by Trustees regarding capacity, the CEO wished to highlight that currently the Trust was without a senior IT lead which would be addressed through the imminent appointment of a Digital Director. The CFOO was invited to give an update on the recruitment process and said she was pleased with the interest and level of candidates.

ii) Next review Overall Financial Controls

The timing had been adjusted, and the review would be completed in early May so it could be reported back at the next Committee meeting in June.

iii) Third review and timing

The Committee considered the third review in the context of recent scrutiny including the external DfE Financial Management & Governance review which

provided a high degree of assurance on compliance with the ATH. Another audit on the 'Must's' was not considered an effective use of the Trust's Internal Auditor resources. In considering this, Trustees referred also to the Risk Register. The Chair had asked if some of the remaining days could be repurposed for training on strategic risks at the Strategy event which the CFOO confirmed with the Internal Auditor was possible. There was also a suggestion to use some of the remaining days to undertake a desktop exercise to reevaluate the scoring of residual risks.

ACTIONS: CFOO

RECOMMENDATION: Refer to the Board on allocating the remainder of the internal auditor allocated time to risk management activities.

6. Internal Controls

i) School Resource Management Self-Assessment

It was noted that there were a number of regulatory self-assessment returns required to be completed in the sector. The latest one was included for information which generated an action plan. The CEO drew Trustees' attention to some of the responses which were so because this was a new Trust or the answers in some cases were not applicable as the Trust had not yet undertaken a full year of governance activity.

It was confirmed following a question that this was an annual return. Trustees queried the progress on Integrated Curriculum Financial Planning (ICFP). The CFOO responded that the aim was to achieve this through budget planning followed by integrating the timetables into the software. This would benefit the Trust when considering staffing structures from a strategic perspective. More time was needed for the implementation. A further question arose about the requirements for a Finance Committee which had been a recommendation from the FMG review. This was advisory but not mandatory and was likely to develop over time aligning with growth. The GD advised it was possible to have a joint Audit & Finance Committee due to the income level of the Trust.

More thought was given to sources of internal assurance. The Committee considered that first level management assurance such as returns were helpful, building on quality discussions alongside the work of the Internal Auditor.

7. Risk Management

i) HLA Risk Register (termly review)

The CFOO presented the Risk Register with highlights showing the updates from the last review. There was an error noted on T5, as per the previous update, Forest's Cyber Essentials was not yet complete and this would be corrected.

The risks were considered in order:

- T1 (growth) – overall financial position was strong which was an important factor in growth and the recent Government policy on schools joining MATs as well as SEND reforms and other top up funding. There was an update on collaborative work with the primaries and the position of other local schools.
- T2 (educational outcomes/Forest) – this risk level had decreased. There would be further updates in the CEO report at the next Board meeting.

Trustees observed that the residual risk had in fact increased and the CFOO took an action to check the scoring.

- T3 (financial sustainability) – this risk remained the same and was largely driven by factors outside of the Trust’s control.
- T4 (staff capacity/central teams) – the CFOO reported that while static, there had been some recent improvements. The Executive considered that the finance resource was adequate for the size of the Trust. Due Diligence would need to ensure that the impact was taken into account at the growth stages. There had been some delay to strategic development in particular for HR where the caseload was high due to a number of complex employee relations issues. The CFOO said that the Trust had recently bought into a core package with a legal firm which would help and there was a point made on the return on investment of SLAs. Trustees asked about the payroll related actions which had been completed and more capacity added. The CEO added the team had managed remarkably well during the formation of the Trust where they also had to implement multiple staggered pay awards. Trustees asked about the residual score decreasing, however the CFOO advocated more time was needed to address the gross risks.
- T5 (cyber security) – covered earlier in the meeting. It was accepted that this risk was constantly evolving and Trustees commented that AI would generate both positive and negative associated risks.
- T6 (accommodation at Collyer’s) – external factors had caused the gross risk to increase. The CEO gave a brief update on the loan and the launch of the P16CF. There had been a recent meeting with HDC and a positive way forward on the Tech Centre design. An options appraisal would be developed. It was agreed to add contingency planning to the Risk Register.
- T7 (staff recruitment) – this risk was recognised as a national issue. Hybrid working had been received positively however, it was too early to assess impact. The Executive team were considering further initiatives which Trustees agreed would be better positioned Trust-wide.
- T8 (systems) – the Digital Director was a dependency of this risk. The CFOO explained some challenges being resolved around implementation of VAT treatment.
- T9 (student numbers/Forest) – currently well mitigated and the school was at capacity in terms of the PAN.
- T10 (specialist facilities/Forest) – there had been no movement and the CEO informed Trustees that a CIF bid might need to be considered. The Trustees suggested that further approaches to WSCC may be appropriate post the relatively imminent county elections.

The CFOO provided some insight following a review of related risks reported across the sector. SEND, regulatory and risks associated with the introduction of the new Employment Act were common themes. The Committee were keen to incorporate SEND as a risk to due to its far reaching impact especially in earlier key stages of education.

ACTIONS: CFOO

Trustees thanked the CFOO for all her work on the Risk Register and for the updates.

ii) Scoring of residual risks

To be taken forward as part of the internal audit work.

8. Trust Compliance reporting

i) Operations report inc. H&S reportable incidents, Data/cyber breaches, Fraud, Public disclosures (whistleblowing), NCR transactions, Complaints

The CFOO said there was an unavoidable timing issue with the dates of the meeting which meant it was not always possible to provide a full term's data in time for Committee meetings. There was a brief update. The cyber incidents, which were detected and resolved as part of standard operating procedure with no adverse impact, were considered to be low level and commonly occurring in organisations. While the Trustees felt reassured that this was good evidence of cyber controls operating, it was requested that only those of significance, i.e. those causing an actual adverse impact, should be reported. There was a current live complaint at Forest.

A Trustee asked if the timescales to respond to statutory requests such as FoI and SARs was achievable given the workload arising from such requests. The CFOO explained that IT used a legal firm to support with redaction of SARs for example where there were large amounts of information.

ii) Policy schedule

There was a discussion on policies that required personalisation and the GD advised where it was possible to have one Trust policy, in terms of business and operations, these would be fixed policies, however education specific policies such as SEND would require a framework with areas for adaption to each setting.

The next area of development would be HR policies which had transferred as part of TUPE. The model HR templates provided would be helpful and the CFOO said staff would need to be consulted.

9. Policies

i) Updated Disaster Recovery / Continuity Plans

The Collyer's plans had recently been updated and provided for information. The template shared with Forest.

ii) Development of HLA Business Continuity Plan

A Trust wide strategic plan would be developed by the end of the academic year and the CFOO had started looking at some exemplars.

10. AOB

The Chair said it was his last meeting as he succeeded the Chair of the Trust. He had really enjoyed the experience of leading the Committee and historically at Collyer's. He encouraged Committee members to come forward to express and interest in the role to be agreed by Board.

11. Next Committee Meeting

The Committee would next meet on Thursday 11 June 2026, 17.30 at Collyer's.

The meeting concluded at 19.14

Signed.....

Dated.....

Action Log

Minutes ref	Action	Owner	Date
Item 5(i)	Third party supplier cyber risk management	CFOO/ IT Managers	Within audit schedule
Item 5(iii)	Strategic risk planning	CFOO/ CEO	This term
Item 07(i)	Various updates to the Trust RR	CFOO	This term