

**Minutes of a Meeting of the STEP Board of Trustees
Held on Wednesday, 3 June 2020 at 5.00pm
Zoom Video Conference**

Name	Position	Attendance
Trustees		
Ben Bartlett (BB)	Non-Executive Trustee	Present (for items 4-7)
Kate Chhatwal OBE (KC)	Non-Executive Trustee	Present (for items 1-7)
Mark Ducker OBE (MD)	Executive Trustee - CEO	Present
Angela Farrell (AF)	Non-Executive Trustee	Present
Ross Gardner (RG)	Non-Executive Trustee (Vice Chair of Trustees)	Present
Peter Lilford (PL)	Non-Executive Trustee	Present
Rory Nath (RN)	Non-Executive Trustee	Present
Navdeep Sanghara (NS)	Non-Executive Trustee	Present (for items 1-4)
Shelley Stuart (SS)	Non-Executive Trustee	Present
Rama Venchard (RV)	Non-Executive Trustee (Chair of Trustees)	Present
Attendees		
Jennese Alozie (JA)	Director of Effectiveness and Performance	Present
Paul Glover (PG)	Deputy CEO	Present
John Halliwell (JH)	Director of Leadership and Development	Present
James Hooper (JH)	Director of Operational Services	Present
Philippa Jackson (PJ)	Governance Clerk	Present
Ben March (BM)	Chief Finance and Operations Officer	Present
Tim Mills (TM)	Director of Teaching and Learning	Present

1	<p><u>Welcome, Apologies and Housekeeping</u></p> <p>RV welcomed everyone to the meeting. NS would leave the meeting at 6.00pm. BB had been delayed at a previous meeting and would join shortly.</p>
2	<p><u>Quorum</u></p> <p>The Clerk declared the meeting quorate.</p>
3	<p><u>Review of Pecuniary and Conflicts Interests</u></p> <p>There were no pecuniary or other potential conflicts of interest declared.</p> <p>Trustees confirmed they had updated their personal and pecuniary interests on the Trust Governor system.</p>

4 Return to School

Re-opening of STEP Schools

Trustees noted the briefing paper on the reopening of the STEP schools which had been circulated prior to the meeting.

PG provided an overview of the Trust's response to COVID 19 during the period of March – May. During this time, the Trust had ensured that the Government's guidance had been followed by the schools and was in line with the STEP Compass. The STEP schools had remained open during this period to support the children of key workers and vulnerable children. PG advised that the attendance across the Trust had been monitored. The attendance figures for the specific groups of children was around 80 children per day during March and April. This increased in May to around 200 children per day. Some of the schools had closed during the spring term but the children had continued to be supported by other local STEP schools, but all schools closed for half term.

The Government had announced their intention to further reopen schools on 10 May 2020 before the guidance had been issued to staff and parents. This had been a particularly difficult time for the Trust and the messages of support from the Trustees had been very well received. During this difficult time, the Trust and the schools had remained united and operated as 'One Team' in line with the STEP Compass.

PG provided an update on the strategy for reopening the STEP schools from 1 June 2020. He explained that a clear and strategic approach was required to guide the schools. The overarching principles had been communicated to the schools to work towards reopening on 1 June, these were:

1. The safety of the children, parents and staff had been put first. This would continue and had been well received by the staff and families.
2. The partnership within the community remained at the heart of the schools. Along with the commitment to continue to provide education to the children of key workers and vulnerable children. The key role was to support our communities and enable parents to return to work.
3. To respect the parents' choice as to whether their children returned to school or to continue home learning.

A decision had been made to return the oldest year groups back to school first. We felt that it would be easier to implement the logistics with the older children and they could more easily comply with the social distancing. Year 6 children returned first when the schools reopened on 1 June. Year 1 returned where there were no Year 6 children within the school. So far across the Trust, there had been approximately 30% take up for those children returning to school. The highest number of children to return to school was at Tudor Academy in New Addington and Hawkes Farm Academy in Hailsham.

Trustees were invited to ask questions to the Executive Team:

Q: Of the 30% take up, do you know whether these were the right groups of children in terms of supporting the educational gaps and transition to secondary school?

A: Each school has targeted vulnerable children and children who they felt needed to be in school as priority children. It varied from school to school and within the different communities. Some of the Year 6 children had not returned to school. Staff had been in touch with these families to touch base and offer support for the transition to secondary school.

Q: The Trust had implemented a good strategy for the schools to reopen. What lessons had been learned that had not previously been anticipated?

A: The confidence of the staff had grown. The staggered and measured return to school had been well received by parents and staff. The take up of children returning to school was low but this was in line with our predictions.

JA provided an update on the risk assessment. In relation to the children, the risk assessments for child protection, SEN and vulnerable children were on-going. The schools had encouraged the parents and carers of these vulnerable groups to bring their children back to school. The continued risk assessment of these children would be carried out by senior leaders and relevant staff within the schools. There would also be opportunities to talk to these vulnerable children once they returned to school.

In relation to the staff, risk assessments had been completed for staff to ensure a safe return to work. 1-2-1 meetings had been held with specific staff to assess their needs, particularly for the BAME and male staff. JA confirmed that safeguarding measures for BAME staff and children had been put in place. In an East Sussex school, a male BAME leader had returned to school but had been given the option to be shielded within an office to minimise contact with others. Some staff had continued to work from home. BAME resources and the NHS Guidance had been followed to support vulnerable staff and to ensure our duty of care.

BB joined the meeting.

Q: Had a view been taken on the capacity to take back additional year groups?

A: Discussions were currently being held on capacity and this would inform the decisions to widen the provision further, in line with the year groups stipulated by the Government.

Q: The BAME communities were more highly susceptible to COVID 19. Had an equalities assessment been carried out as part of the risk assessment?

A: We had drawn on the resources from the BAME Educators network to ensure our duty of care. The more vulnerable staff had been identified and creative work solutions had been put in place.

Q: Had calls and communication with all families taken place or just the more vulnerable families? How often had these calls taken place?

A: All pupils and families had been contacted and some of the more vulnerable families had been contacted every few days.

Q: Good support had been put in place for the phased approach to reopening. Had some parents been frustrated that all year groups had not returned?

A: There had been some questions from parents about the return of the other year groups but the majority of parents had been very supportive of the phased return.

Q: The number of key worker children returning to school had increased quickly in May once the return to work had been announced. Had it been difficult to keep them in separate bubbles? Had this impacted some of the smaller schools?

A: The number of key worker children increased in April to May. This was planned for in the risk assessments and so appropriate bubbles could be formed whilst keeping the correct ratio.

Q: Had there been any push back from parents on the return of Year 6 rather than the other year groups stipulated by the Government?

A: No.

Q: Had many children been referred to the Local Authority social services since returning to school?

A: Three referrals had been made across the Trust within the first few days of reopening. As the number of children returned we would expect to see an increase in referrals.

Q: Had any issues been raised during phone calls to families? Had there been opportunities to speak to some of the children directly on these calls?

A: Some issues had been raised during these phone calls and some during the discussions held with children when they returned to school. One particular concern around neglect had been raised with the Local Authority which they had not been previously been aware of.

Q: Was there anything that the Trust could do to support these children further?

A: There was little that the Trust could do in terms of social care but staff were well trained and extremely aware of the risks during this time. It was evident that the Year 6 children were extremely happy to return to school.

Q: A large number of children may not return to school and would continue with the home learning. How would this impact staff resources?

A: The teaching in class had returned to 40-50% of the usual capacity but staff continued to ensure that on-line learning was available to those children still at home. As things progressed, it would become increasingly difficult to ensure that capacity and resources were in place. There was some additional capacity within the Trust to address these issues. Different options would need to be considered as the phased return of year groups continued. The biggest challenge for the longer term was how to continue the blended learning approach, particularly into the Autumn term. This would require careful consideration.

Q: What percentage of teaching staff were in the 'at risk' category and could not return to work?

A: This data would be available at the end of the week.

COVID Testing Pilot

JH provided an update on the COVID testing pilot which STEP had been selected to take part in. He apologised for the delay in circulating the paper to Trustees, as he had only received final confirmation of the arrangements at the beginning of the week.

JH advised that the pilot involved four Academies across the Trust. Weekly COVID testing would take place for all front line staff on site and the test results would be available within 24 hours. The main aims were to reassure staff returning to work, identify symptomatic staff within the schools and to prevent an outbreak. The testing pilot would commence next week in the London Academies. JH explained that the tests were administered and overseen by a healthcare professional.

Trustees raised the following questions:

Q: Could we buy the testing service for the East Sussex schools?

A: No. The majority of healthcare professionals were tied up in other areas. We would need to find a healthcare professional to oversee the testing within the schools.

Q: What plans had been put in place if a staff member had tested positive?

A: The Guidance advised that there was no need to evacuate a school with just one case but to follow the plans set out in the risk assessment. Plans were in place to move the class and carry out a deep cleaning process. If a number of cases developed within the school a decision would be taken based on the risk at that particular time.

Q: What plans had been put in place in terms of cleaning within the schools?

A: The schools would go through resilience checks and a combined approach. The Government guidance would be followed and work had been carried out with the health and safety consultants. A STEP First approach had been taken to cleaning and staff capacity. A collaborative approach had been taken to minimise the risks. Cleaning rotas had been set up within the schools to carry out additional cleaning measures which reflected the Guidance. The Teaching Assistants would also assist with additional cleaning.

Q: Had parents been communicated to about the COVID testing pilot?

A: Not yet but this would be communicated to parents next week to provide reassurance.

Q: Could you confirm whether our insurers would defend any claim on the Trustees' behalf and indemnify the school/Trust in the event of any COVID related claim?

A: STEP's public liability policy covered third party injury/disease claims resultant from its negligence. As COVID claims are unprecedented/untested, there were a lot of unknowns at this stage, but the key was that the onus was on the third party to prove that the disease was contracted within our premises/working environment, and this was due to some negligence on your part. The advice from insurers on defensibility of COVID claims was to follow the Government guidelines as closely as possible for example, implementing vigorous risk assessments and cleaning programmes.

Next Steps

PG provided an update on the plans in place to return the next year group to school. The Guidance on this was expected soon but the same overarching principles would be applied.

The Trust's intention was to reopen the Academies to the next year group from 15 June. He confirmed that the Trust had capacity to do this and the logistics of how this would be done would be communicated to the Academies at the beginning of next week. The current consolidated arrangements would continue to 15 July when the next named year group would return.

Trustees raised the following questions:

Q: There was a chance that the Government's guidance may be changed. What were the contingency plans in respect of the guidelines changing? How would this be communicated?

A: The Trust and the Academies would ensure that the Government guidance was always followed. The plans would be amended and recommunicated if the guidance changed. The Academies would be provided with a 2 week notice period of any changes.

Q: There had been late clarification that Free Schools could take back additional year groups?

A: The Trust remained in line with the Government guidance of the named year groups and communicated this to parents.

Q: A 2 week notice period to the schools seemed like a sensible approach. Was this in line with STEP's mission?

A: We would wait to see whether there had been an increase in illness. A child usually took 10 days to show the symptoms which was why we had given a 2 week notice period. The Executive Team felt comfortable with this. It also allowed plenty of time to communicate to staff and parents.

Q: Would the availability of staff impact the number of children that could return to school?

A: Yes. We had written to the unions and explained the principles in which STEP would reopen further. STEP staff had not been forced to return to work and that the availability of staff would impact whether the schools could reopen to the specific year groups.

Q: There had been a co-ordinated approach within the schools across the Trust. Had STEP been in touch with other schools within the Local Authority to co-ordinate the approach to re-opening the schools?

A: Yes. The STEP schools had been in touch with other local schools to share and discuss any concerns. STEP had not been working directly with other Local Authority schools but were in regular conversations. Discussions had been held with some of the schools that STEP had supported within the Newhaven network. STEP had been able to offer more support than the Local Authority. We felt comfortable with the approach to only return Year 6 and this had been well received by parents.

Q: Had any parents complained that the other year groups had not been invited back to school?

A: We had received requests from some parents that had been expected to return to work on 1 June and where their children were not in the returned year group. We continued to ensure that the vast majority of vulnerable children and key worker children were in school.

Q: Trustees were aware of their obligation to ensure staff well-being, regular staff breaks and health and safety. What measures had the Executive Team put in place to ensure this?

A: A number of measures had been put in place to support this. The schools had decided to close for half term to ensure that staff took a break. The Executive Team maintained regular contact with the schools. This ensured that the line management structure continued to be in place for the senior leaders even if the Headteacher was not in school. The Executive Team were very aware of the pressure that this had placed on senior leaders across the Trust. We would ensure that staff took a long break over the summer to recharge for September.

NS left the meeting.

Q: Trustees also had a duty to ensure the well-being of the Executive Team. Had the Executive Team taken a break?

A: Staff well-being had been a constant concern and this was continuously reviewed. The Executive Team members had worked very hard recently and had also taken some time off during half term.

Q: When the schools return in September, how would the new intake of pupils be handled? Had there been any thoughts on this yet?

A: These would be the next steps to consider. Discussions would take place between now and July.

Q: From a financial perspective, how would the Government guidance impact the Trust's financial plans?

A: The management accounts showed reserves of £0.5 million. Staff structures and budgets had been set up and staff resources would be flexible. School funding would not be impacted in the shorter term but may be impacted going forward into the longer term.

Trustees confirmed that they were comfortable with the decision to return the next year group from 15 June 2020, although this would be dependent on each individual academy's capacity. This approach would be consistent with STEP Way, as determined by the STEP Compass.

PG confirmed that a further update would be provided to Trustees by 19 June once they had a clearer picture on the school data, specifically staff and pupil numbers.

Action: Provide further update to Trustees on the wider reopening of the STEP schools by 19 June 2020. (DCEO)

Trustees thanked the Executive Team and the STEP staff for all they had done to support the children and families. They were delighted to hear that the Trust had gone above and beyond the Government guidelines and thanked them for this. They were also reassured to hear that the safeguarding and well-being of children and staff continued to be a priority during this challenging time. The Executive Team thanked the Trustees for their continued support.

STEP First – We are all one team

5 STEP Compass Priorities 2020/21

Trustees noted the draft STEP Compass Priorities for 2020/21. The Compass Priorities had been revised following the last Board meeting to consider the education priorities in light of the COVID 19 pandemic, specifically to reflect how education could support the community given the context of the pandemic. Discussions had been held with the Executive Team and it was felt that the Compass Priorities should be viewed and framed as the Trust's recovery plan, to recognise the extraordinary context, rather than an improvement plan. Following a familiar strategic planning process would enable consistency, as well as support leaders within the STEP schools.

MD took Trustees through the Compass Priorities linked to the current situation.

Trustees raised the following questions:

Q: Do we need a remote learning policy and would it be focused on the vulnerable children?

A: We had discussed this and whether we focused on this as a Trust or whether the individual academies would focus on this as part of the STEP Way. We had looked at ways of sharing best practice across the Trust. It had been decided not to have this as a key priority for the Trust but

to ensure that children had access to on-line learning through the Academies. The disadvantaged children were less likely to have access to on-line learning. We would need to review the impact of on-line learning once the children returned to school and before we had launched a Trust wide on-line approach.

Q: Was it worth considering the STEP Standards expectations in terms of the type and quantity of home learning and also the expectations in terms of the contact with the families and children? I understood that some of the unexpected groups of children had demonstrated high performance in home learning. How could the challenge be captured?

A: The STEP Standards would need to be tailored to the new ways of working. It was important to consider what the Trust wide expectations were so that leaders could be held to account through the STEP Standards.

Q: The mental health of the children would be prioritised. Do the schools have the appropriate resources to deal with this?

A: The mental health of staff and children had been prioritised across the Trust. This would be a priority for the Trust during the recovery period. A STEP First Lead had been appointed to increase the provision and support for mental health across the schools, through on-line resources. Support and academic research about mental health and well-being had also been provided by a STEP Head teacher. Health and well-being would also be considered as part of the timetables and would be formally embedded as part of the curriculum.

Q: Given the current situation, the gap between the advantaged and disadvantaged children would need to be prioritised. Would there be additional resources to support the schools during this difficult time?

A: We recognise as a Trust, that on-line resources had not been distributed in the same way. This would be considered as part of STEP First to ensure that resources were distributed equitably and to identify where additional support was required.

Action: Consider the issues and opportunities for on-line learning and what plans could be put in place to ensure consistency across the Trust. (DCEO)

Action: Consider how resources could be distributed more equitably and, where necessary, released to target identified needs. (CFOO)

Q: How could the STEP Compass factor in teacher training?

A: Although new teachers had missed the class room experience, the training for the new teachers would continue until the end of term.

Q: Trustees acknowledged that staff resources were limited. What would the Trust prioritise in terms of resources? Could it be done strategically enough as reflected in the Compass Priorities?

A: The Trust would need to re-prioritise as part of the recovery period. In some respects, this would be reflected in the STEP Standards. Some of the expectations in terms of Year 6 outcomes would need to be moderated and this would be reflected in the recovery plan. The key priority would be to narrow the attainment gap between the advantaged and disadvantaged children.

Q: Would the Trust consider opening the schools over the Summer to allow the children to catch up?

A: The Executive Team would not support opening the schools over the Summer period. Staff had worked intensively, albeit differently over recent weeks. It was felt that a Summer break was

	<p>necessary for their well-being, as well as to enable much needed improvement works to be carried out.</p> <p>Q: In light of the prolonged social distancing, would any other policies need to be updated? A: Addendums had been included with some policies. This continued to be reviewed in line with the Government guidance.</p> <p>MD thanked Trustees for their feedback. He agreed to amend the 2020/21 Compass Priorities in light of the discussions and circulate to Trustees for approval. The Compass Priorities could be shared with STEP SLT to support their recovery and improvement planning.</p> <p>Action: Revise the 2020/21 STEP Compass Priorities and circulate to Trustees by email for approval. (CEO)</p>
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STEP Ahead – We invest in our future

6	<p><u>Potential Partnerships</u></p> <p>Confidential discussions on potential partnerships were recorded in the confidential set of minutes.</p>
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STEP Up – We all succeed together

7	<p><u>Meeting with Education Secretary</u></p> <p>The Chair of Trustees and CEO had joined a round table meeting with the Education Secretary, DfE Policy Advisers and other MAT’s on 20 May 2020. They were keen to understand what had enabled small to medium sized Trusts to grow and also how the Trusts had coped in the current crises. It was recognised that the lack of clarity and confusion about the Government’s academisation programme had been an issue and a more co-ordinated approach with the RSC was required.</p> <p><i>BB and KC left the meeting.</i></p>
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STEP Down – We all work together

8	<p><u>Any Other Business</u></p> <p>There were no other matters of business to report.</p> <p>Q: I really enjoyed reading DB’s blog last week. As a blog was meant to be something that resides online, would it make sense to publish these on the STEP website or in an appropriate forum? A: This was a good suggestion. Perhaps we could discuss the impact of the blogs and communications more generally following the meeting.</p> <p>Q: Was there anything to show that the pupils and families within the Academies had been impacted by recent events in America? A: The Executive Team had discussed how recent events may impact our communities. We had not seen any impact as yet but we could potentially see some developments in the South London schools and communities. Some of these issues had been previously addressed in our curriculum and we were in the early stages of discussing some further potential areas of improvement. We were aware that some children and families could return to school with additional anxiety and anger and we would need to carefully consider the next steps. We were also concerned about</p>
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	<p>some of our East Sussex schools, which were less ethnically mixed, where some negative views within the communities could impact the children.</p> <p>Action: Report back to Trustees on an interim and co-ordinated response across the Trust on the recent events in America. (CEO)</p> <p>Q: What plans were in place for the Central Team from September? A: Heathfield Academy needed classroom space back for the children and the Central Team would be required to find a new location. Discussions were currently being held with the Croydon based Academies to find some office space for the Central Team.</p>
9	<p><u>Meeting Impact</u></p> <p>The Trustees thanked the Executive Team and the STEP staff, for all they had done to support the children and families during the crises. They were pleased to hear that the Trust had carefully considered the longer term priorities to focus on the recovery and wider challenges within the communities. They were also reassured to hear that the safeguarding of children and staff continued to be a priority for the Trust. The Executive Team thanked the Trustees for their continued support.</p> <p>MD thanked Trustees for their ongoing support and challenge. The meeting demonstrated the quality of questioning, which would have an impact on the Executive Team’s strategic thinking and subsequent actions. At a time of particular challenge, this was hugely beneficial.</p> <p>The Chair thanked everyone for attending the meeting by video conference.</p>
10	<p><u>Date of Next Meeting</u></p> <p>The next Board of Trustees meeting would be held on Monday, 20 July 2020 at 6.30pm by Zoom video conference.</p>
11	<p><u>Confidential Matters</u></p> <p>Confidential discussions on strategic and financial matters were recorded in the confidential minutes.</p>

Action List	
Action	Owner
Provide further update to Trustees on the wider reopening of STEP schools by 19 June 2020.	DCEO
Consider the issues and opportunities for on-line learning and what plans could be put in place to ensure consistency across the Trust.	DCEO
Action: Consider how resources could be distributed more equitably and, where necessary, released to target identified needs.	CFOO
Revise the 2020/21 STEP Compass Priorities and circulate to Trustees by email for approval.	CEO
Report back to Trustees on an interim and co-ordinated response across the Trust on the recent events in America.	CEO

Signed as a true and accurate record of the meeting

Chair's signature	
Chair's name	
Date	