



EASTON COLLEGE CORPORATION

Minutes of the Meeting held on Friday 9 March 2007

Present: Sir Nicholas Bacon (Chairman), Mrs F Baugh, Mrs V Bowyer, Mr J Burrage, Mr M Gamble, Mr B Grindrod, Mr D Lawrence (Principal), Mr B Miners, Mrs J Moss, Mr D Ramsay, Mr G Rivers, Mrs J Strudwick, Mr D Young.

In Attendance: Mrs P Bell (Deputy Principal), Mr T Cawkwell (Clerk), Mr G Lambert (Director of Finance) [part meeting]

1. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Mr M Andrews, Mr R Baines, Mr D Browning, Mr J Hepburn, Mr P Medhurst, and Mrs C Sadler (Assistant Principal).

2. Minutes of the Meeting held on 8 December 2006

The minutes of the meeting held on 8 December 2006 were approved and signed as a true record by the Chairman.

3. Matters Arising

(a) Letter sent to Secretary of State for Education

The Principal confirmed that a letter had been sent and a reply received which would be attached to the minutes.

Action: Clerk

(b) LSC PFA Audit Review of Governance at Easton

The Clerk reported that a start had been made on following up the action points arising from the PFA Audit made as part of the Ofsted inspection. Firstly, he was discussing with the College how the Corporation might best have a presence on the College website. Secondly, a complaints procedure to deal with Corporation matters ought to be put in place. Thirdly, he had talked to the Deputy Principal about how the annual SAR for Members might be improved: he hoped to produce a shorter questionnaire, but one which would encourage Members to comment more fully on particular points of concern.

Action: Clerk

(c) **Management Representation Letter**

The Chairman confirmed that he had signed the Management Representation Letter on behalf of the Corporation.

(d) **Committee Membership and Membership Position**

The Chairman confirmed that the Search and Governance Committee would be meeting later that afternoon to discuss these matters. He then explained his desire to retire at the end of the year owing to the fact that other commitments were taking him away from the county more, and stated that he would not be available for re-election after the October meeting.

4 Register of Interests

The Register of Interests was passed round those present, and Members were asked to update their entries. The Clerk said he would write separately to those who were not present.

Action: Clerk

5 Inspection Reports

The Chairman introduced this item by expressing the congratulations of the Corporation to the College staff for the results of the inspection reports. The Principal reiterated his thanks to those Members who had met up with the inspectors, and circulated to those present the briefing which had been prepared in advance of the inspection.

(a) **Ofsted Report** In noting the good result in this report, the Principal said that it had been a collective effort by all involved at Easton to achieve this.

(b) **Report of Commission for Social Care Inspection** The Principal emphasised the positive nature of this report. It had been a challenge to College staff to achieve it in an adult, rather than a school environment. It was noted how well the different departments were subscribing to the programme. Mrs Bell explained the point about teas was that there was not enough choice of food at the weekend. Students needed to be given more, and the Principal added that in view of the uncertainty about numbers at weekends, the College had become too concerned with waste of food, and not enough with the service offered. This would need to change.

(c) **Matrix Inspection Report** This inspection involved the inspector talking to a number of staff and students about the impartial provision of information, advice and guidance to adults. The results were important because they fed through to other contracts. However, nothing negative had been picked up in the report.

6 Principal's Report

- On the performance against LSC funding targets for 2006/7, the Principal explained that the College was ahead of its targets, and that more enrolments would take place during the year although it was very unlikely that additional funding for those enrolments would be forthcoming. Adult students were over the financial target, and while the College was under target on numbers of students assisted through learner support, he was confident that the College would reach it. The increased number of 16-18 enrolments over target would be recognised through funding growth next year.
- LSC additional support funds were well ahead of the financial target despite a lower number of enrolments. This is due to the College running more programmes at Foundation Level 1: this has led to more support costs. There was no likelihood of

additional learning support funds from LSC during the year to meet the costs in excess of budget. The LSC are in the process of reviewing the methodology for additional support funds and this should resolve the issue, although the revised system would probably not be implemented until the 2008/9 academic year. Mr Young said that the Finance and Enterprises Committee had looked at the course costings in detail. While the College lost something this year, the success with numbers would build a baseline for next year, which should result in an increase of around 20% in 16-18 funds if the College gets all it asks for.

- The Chairman asked why the Learner Support Funds were up when numbers were down. The Principal explained that he was not sure that in negotiation with LSC last year we had got the target right. The smaller number of students on learner support needed more help, but the allocation was still out of kilter.
- Mrs Moss asked whether there was any risk of growth being capped. The Principal said that this was indeed the case with some elements of funding, but they were unlikely to cap growth for the 16-18s. It was the 19-plus group that was at risk.
- The Personnel Report was tabled and received. The Principal explained that Peter Caton had retired after many years, and a party had been held in his honour.

7 Academic Report

- Under paragraph 4, Mrs Bell referred to the success of the contract with NCS Ltd. A mailshot had been made to 2500 people following the Food and Farming Conference.
- On Meridian East (para 5), Mrs Bell reported on a recent meeting with Meridian East with Regional LSC. While exact outcomes from this meeting were not forthcoming, the College was being put forward as part of a national project. The College and Meridian East were close on what challenges needed to be resolved. The Internal Auditors would be looking at the matter in the following week. The College would continue to work to find solutions.
- Emma Hill's Highly Commended Certificate (para 6), would help to raise the College's profile.
- On the work with 14-16s from local schools (para 7) Mrs Bell referred to the increased flexibility this programme brought to the College, and the increased profile with Norfolk schools. It had been very helpful that the LSC had made the FE colleges the bankers for this work.
- On the marketing side (para 8), she explained that a DVD had been produced which gave a good snapshot of the College now.

Mr George Lambert joined the meeting at this point.

8 Curriculum and Standards Committee

The draft minutes of the meeting of 26th January 2007 were received. Mrs Baugh explained that on the matter of student retention and achievement, heads of department were addressing the problems, notably how to improve the attractiveness of courses when students faced the lure of paid employment. She then asked that the minutes be amended to show that the heads of department were congratulated for what had been achieved in the inspection.

Action: Clerk

She also referred to the detailed data in the Course Costing Analysis for the Curriculum Plan. She said that the Committee would be monitoring carefully the question of the sum of £340,162 not being funded by LSC income. She also noted the proposal by the LSC to cut funding for national diplomas on the grounds that they were over-funded. The Principal

said that this would reduce the amount of funding generated from the growth in the 16 to 18 numbers. Finally, the 49% actual contribution rate over all curriculum areas, putting the College very close to the 50% target, showed a good trend.

Mrs Bowyer mentioned the case of a mature student being hounded by the Benefits Office to find himself a job, and asked whether this was a general problem. The Principal commented that if the hours of study were close to their permitted limits, the Benefits Office (who have their own targets) had pursued these cases in the past; he asked that the details be passed to him. The Chairman added that if retention levels fell below the benchmark, the College risked losing its grade 2 status. The policies of the Benefits Office could affect this. Mrs Bell felt that overall this was less of a problem in the past two years than previously. She felt it would be advisable for the student concerned to see the Director of Learner Services and Skills.

9 Audit Committee

The draft minutes of the meeting on 23rd February 2007 were received. Mr Miners said the Committee had concentrated on internal audit matters, for which positive reports had been received with very few recommendations for improvements. The major discussion had focused on the handling of the computer networks in the event of a disaster, and Members had been reassured that recovery systems were sound, and that the speed of recovery was governed chiefly by the availability of replacement machinery. The lightning strike of two years ago had been well absorbed by the College. Overall the internal affairs were good, and the challenge faced by the College was how to lift its grade.

It was noted that the College had been selected by the LSC for a rigorous Learner Eligibility & Existence audit, although this would not include the operations with Meridian East, which Scrutton Bland would be looking at in the following week.

10 Finance and Enterprises Committee

The draft minutes of the meeting on 9th February 2007 were received. Mr Young invited Mr Lambert to introduce the management accounts to 1st December 2006 and the mid-year forecast. On the management accounts, Mr Lambert explained that the operating surplus was £70,000 better than the budget. The key variances were in the LSC non-recurrent income, in the HE contract and in Leisure income. There had been a ½% increase in interest rates since the budget was set, which had helped produce a higher amount of interest (£61,000 against a budget of £38,000). On the mid-year forecast, he said this was based on the revised Curriculum Plan which was based on recruitment in October. Other factors were then looked at and an assessment made. The operating surplus was projected to be £33,000 higher than the original budget

Mr Young then referred to the Key Performance Indicators and the increase in debtor days. This was largely due to the arrangements for paying tuition fees for foundation degrees. The debt is incurred when students enrol but payments are spread over a number of terms. The Committee was seeking to present this statistic in a way that takes into account this distortion, and it was suggested that the Key Performance Indicator reflected the problem as one of cash flow rather than bad debt.

11 Capital Statement

The Capital Statement as at 7th February 2007 was received. The Chairman commented that the Jubilee 2 project appeared to be completing on time and on budget. The principal said

this was down to the managers driving the project, in particular Mrs Bell, Mrs Sadler and Mr Nix.

12 Personnel Committee

The minutes of the meeting on 18 January 2007 were received. Mrs Bowyer reported that a number of College policies had been reviewed. She drew the Committee's attention to the work of the Steering Group for Disability Equality (minute 4d). She added that the Committee had asked the Principal to progress the question of employee communication/relations in an appropriate way.

With reference to the Age Discrimination policy, the Principal referred to the fact that recent tribunal decisions were forcing a further rethink of College policy in this area. The College would be looking into this matter further and making revised recommendations in line with advice from the Association of Colleges when this was available.

On the matter of Disciplinary policy, the Principal clarified the position. Since the College's incorporation, Members had been responsible for disciplinary matters with senior post holders; otherwise, the matter was delegated to the Principal (with the exception of appeals by staff when the Principal had conducted the disciplinary hearing personally). The DFES had intended that such an arrangement should continue, but it appeared to have followed a mistaken version of the instrument and articles which meant that the Corporation had to delegate authority to the Principal formally in order to allow the current arrangements to continue. The alternative was for all appeals to be heard by special committee of governors and could lead to an extended appeal process. He felt the existing arrangements had worked well and he therefore asked the Corporation to delegate authority to him in such cases as a general principle.

Mr Ramsay commented that the College must ensure that the process for investigation and that for disciplinary action were handled separately. The Principal confirmed that this was existing practice. Members then agreed to delegate to the Principal the authority to handle disciplinary matters in the case of all staff except senior post holders.

Mr Ramsay also asked how criminal records were checked. Mrs Bell explained that a form was completed giving evidence of birth, appearance, residence etc., and checks were then carried out by Norfolk Personnel Services through a national database. She confirmed that the College had never been involved in employing foreign nationals, although the College needed to be aware of immigrants using the FE route to residence in this country, while not in fact carrying out their studies. It was noted that the College was not covered in the checking procedure against someone with a criminal record in another country.

Mr Lambert left the meeting at this point.

13 Calendar of meetings October to December 2007

A list of dates was received and noted.

14 Development Plan and Property Strategy

The Principal made a presentation setting out the present policy context for the College (the Foster Report, the FE White Paper, the proposals to personalise FE, the Leitch Review, and national projections on employment and skills). He referred to the low 16-18 participation rates in Norfolk, and the need for a proper 14-19 strategy which would develop existing 14-16 work, create geographical partnerships, and formulate measures to try and solve both the

underachievement in Norfolk in 14-16 results, and the high levels of young people not in education, employment or training.

He emphasised that the content of his presentation was closely reflected in Document E. Opportunities were coming along all the time, and the College was faced with the challenge of how to make priorities, while at the same time remaining involved on as many fronts as possible. In the discussion that followed, several points were made:

- The Chairman emphasised the need to work with employers.
- Mr Grindrod said that these new ways of operating required higher budgets, and asked whether there was any contingency funding available. The Principal confirmed that there was, for example for the transport infrastructure. The College was faced with the challenge of working across the whole of Norfolk. It was noted that there were other ways of doing this, for example through web-based learning, but that this was only part of the answer. The complexity of such arrangements required particular management time.
- Mr Rivers asked whether the growth in the 16-18 full-time student group would mean that part-time numbers were trimmed back. The Principal explained that there was a reducing number of students by this route, and commented that health and safety considerations were tending to drive the College away from part-time learning to full-time for 16-19 year olds.
- Mr Grindrod said that the 14-16 group was key. The College needed to do all it could to raise awareness in this group of the routes available, and how the College could play its part. The Principal agreed with this, but said the challenge was translating that desire into a sustainable delivery. Mr Grindrod said that there were low aspiration levels in Norfolk, and therefore low attainment. Careers information needed to be available, and secondly a programme of work-related learning. The role of parents was critical.
- Mr Miners raised the question of the College making the transition from a specialist to a generalist FE College. The Principal said that the College would be foolish to move from its specialist mission in terms of competition and educational effectiveness, and also from a cost-effectiveness perspective. Small general FE colleges were amongst the poorer performers in each of these respects. Easton would have to work with the other general FE providers. Since the College was involved with industries that were not attractive in recruitment terms, it was even more imperative that, in order to assist recruitment to these industries, the College needed to be a major player in 14-16 work. Since the College already played a leading role in terms of its specialist work and was seen as a leading player in terms of 14-16 work, he felt that it was extremely important that we retain this strong position. To do so may also result in the College being asked to take a lead role geographically (as it is already being asked to do for South Norfolk) which will require it to work collaboratively with other colleges.
- Mr Young asked whether the increase in the over-50 age group presented a target market. The Principal referred to the competitive nature of adult funding. Unless there were substantial extra funds made available to further education, the Government would only fund in its target areas such as Skills for Life or first full level 2 or 3. The College would need a revised business model which achieved a true contribution from adult work.
- Mrs Bowyer referred to the Adult Education service in the past running into problems of having to convert essential courses into fee-paying ones. The Principal reflected on the challenge faced in using limited funds. Should money be used for fee remission in order to put people on a wider range of programmes? There had been discussions with Norfolk County Council and the Learning and Skills Council over the effective use of the limited funds available.

- Mrs Moss said that she was involved in learning projects in Cromer and Sheringham, and referred to government funding for the 19-25 group. The Principal reiterated the fact that an increased number of adult full-time students was using up the budget at a much greater rate than part-time enrolments and that the College would have to devote more resources to full-time ones with consequent lower numbers of funded part-time adult students.
- Mr Rivers asked whether the provision of residential accommodation was of concern. The Principal said that the College would need to see how the new national residential bursary scheme would develop. If rigid rules were imposed about the distance between the College and home, the position of land-based colleges could be affected negatively. He wondered whether affordable housing schemes could be a way round this.
- Mr Burrage asked whether there was scope for broader training packages with practical years in industry, for example for students who were too young for driving combines, for which the minimum age was 21. The Principal said that Easton would have to look at what other colleges were doing. If courses were stretched longer, the students would not necessarily follow them as had been proven with competitive pressure from other colleges in the past. Mr Burrage referred also to the difficulty for students on farms giving up time to attend College.

In conclusion, the Principal summed up by saying whilst there were clearly challenges this was a time of tremendous opportunity for the College to make a major impact both in the recruitment to its industries and the potential contribution from Norfolk's young people to the local economy. The next step would be to work up the projects referred to in Document E and asked for a budget of £150,000 for professional support to undertake this. A more specific/detailed Development Plan and Property Strategy would be completed for consideration at the July meeting. He proposed that the Capital Projects Sub-Group monitor the application of this budget. This was agreed.

Action: Principal

Secondly, the revised strategic goals represented the most fundamental review of the College's operations since 1995. The Chairman commented that these appeared to be sound. Members approved the revised strategic goals

Thirdly, the outline of the capital projections was a preliminary draft, in order to show Members that the College was working in this area. The land sales element was crucial and very much still work in progress.

15 Cheque Signatory

The Principal asked that Mrs Sadler be listed as one of the cheque signatories for the College. This was agreed.

16 Confidential Minute

There were no items of a confidential nature.