

THE GOVERNING BODY OF ALMA PRIMARY

MINUTES OF THE VIRTUAL MEETING HELD BY ZOOM ON 15 July 2020

Present:

Ilan Jacobs (Chair and chairing this meeting)
Deborah Brooks (Vice Chair)
David Steadman
Sophie Fenton,
Jean Linsky
Samantha Rosehill

David Grunwald
Natalie Grazin
Andrew Sutcliffe,
Marc Shoffren (Headteacher)
James Burns
Ed Lewin
Katie Abrams

In attendance:

Colin Grazin - Clerk to the Governors

1. WELCOME

Ilan welcomed all members of the Governing Body. Formal notice of this meeting had been duly given and this would be the last meeting of the Summer term.

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Emma Davies.

3. DECLARATION OF ANY DIRECT OR INDIRECT PERSONAL INTEREST (INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO ANY PERSONAL FINANCIAL INTEREST) , CONFIRMATION OF ANY CHANGES TO REGISTER OF BUSINESS INTERESTS AND RELATED PARTIES

There were no such changes declared by any member of the Governing Body.

4. MINUTES OF EARLIER MEETINGS

The minutes of the GB meetings held on 12th February 2020, 2nd June 2020, (amended as agreed on 14 June), and 14th June 2020 were approved.

5. HEAD TEACHER'S REPORT

The Head spoke to the written report he had previously tabled and highlighted various issues which required further explanation

- Leadership and Management

There had been various changes in the staff but he expected all staff to be back in work in September. There had been various problems with the site but he expected to obtain help from CST and from the original builders to resolve those.

- Learning

The school had been operating in three different and separate manners during the last term. The position changed as more children began to attend in more year groups. Almost all the children had been in school at some point but not all at the same time. This had presented a major challenge for all of the staff because so many different types of activities were going on at the same time. There had been a large increase in the number of vulnerable and key worker children attending school, for varying periods of time.

A Governor congratulated the Head on the work of the Senior Leadership Team, who had all worked extremely hard to achieve these aims

- Inclusivity

Rachel Clark had written this section of the report. She was now back from her maternity leave. There had been a lot of work with SEND children, including attending a meeting with two of the Governors, to consider the results of a survey on the impact of the lockdown on those children and what might be the effect upon them if the school has to close again.

A Governor said it had been helpful to see feedback which highlighted the impact of the lockdown on vulnerable children against other children.

Governors were able to consider the weekly report on attendance levels. This had been reviewed by the two Co-chairs on a regular basis. Attendance rose from 45% to 80%. The number of key workers' children attending at school had increased dramatically from 9 to 93, because of changes in Government guidelines and definitions of critical workers status. In addition, many parents wanted to return to work. They had checked with families before allowing children back to school to ensure it was appropriate for those children to be at school.

- Nurturing

There had been a feeling among some families that the school had not been as helpful with children as had other schools. To ameliorate that, there had been a Zoom meeting with parents, which seemed to have had some beneficial effect and it was intended to repeat a meeting of that sort in early September, after school re-started.

- Safeguarding

There had been only one incident on which Sammy reported, involving Tik-Tok. The Assistant Head had sent an email to all relevant parents and spoken to the children. She was confident the issue had been fully resolved.

- September Staffing

Contrary to the usual practice, it had been decided to advise parents who the relevant class teachers would be for the forthcoming year. There had been a number of concerns from parents of Year 4 children and the Head will meet individually with parents who have raised the concerns.

A Governor challenged about the Year 4 issues and the need to address parents' concerns. The Governor stressed the importance of the staffing plan for the next year normally being presented to the GB before it was published to parents. The Head accepted the point made by the Governor as to sharing staffing arrangements before they were advised to parents. The Head explained that in the particular circumstances of Covid 19, that had not been practicable in the current year. The Governor said that the Governing Body would fully support the Head on these issues.

There will be one new member of staff in the next academic year, who is joining under the Schools Direct Teacher Training Scheme

A Governor challenged as to whether this change was in line with the budget and whether the school could afford the new teacher. There might have been cheaper solutions but he did not want to change a class teacher in midyear. This was best for the children.

Another Governor agreed with the approach of hiring a Schools Direct teacher. The allocation of teachers to particular classes was an operational matter for the SLT and not a matter for the Governors. That had been the ethos of recruitment and staffing from the

commencement of the school. The Governor asked the Head to put on record the elements which he considered important in using the Schools Direct process.

The Head explained that the core elements included:

- it is a training programme. He had to be confident that the person had the capability to work effectively in the school as a trainee and be able to stay the course. In this case they had obtained evidence to support that belief
- there had to be an appropriate level of in-school support. Appropriate arrangements had been made and he was confident that that level of support would be available

A Governor thanked the Senior Leadership Team and the Chair and Vice Chair for addressing the issue of the Y4 parents' concerns. The Chair said he was confident in the decisions the Head and the SLT had made and that this was the right approach if it was believed the school should "grow" its own staff

6. BUDGET PRESENTATION 2020/21

The Governing Body looked at the monthly financial figures, as part of its responsibilities.

The Head spoke to a presentation previously tabled to Governors, setting out the school's budget plan for 2020/21 which will include a deficit of £81,600.

There had been a drop in income from Quality Contributions, from clubs and from donations. Year-on-year the school relied upon QCs for some 15% of its overall income and in the last few years, the actual receipts from these donations were lower than budgeted and Covid-19 had made that situation worse. The effect of Covid 19 had been the loss of all club income and a drop in the level of QC donations.

In previous years, the school has managed to break even and, on occasion, achieve a surplus, which has gone into reserves. While all efforts had been made to reduce expenditure in the proposed 2020/21 Budget, there was now no ability to reduce expenditure without cutting services. It was important to ensure that the school did not run out of money.

It was important for Governors to appreciate that there was an obligation upon them to run a balanced budget. It was possible to use reserves to cover short-term loss this year but that could not be continued indefinitely. There was a responsibility to run the school as a going concern. It was necessary therefore to increase the income or to cut expenditure.

The documents set out the proposed budget with the £81,600 deficit. The Head went through each of the three items

- the rise in staff costs;
- the expected shortfall from activities (likely to be a one-off item);
- and the expected shortfall from QC donations.

The FOP committee had looked at this issue and felt there were no easy options. The Head summarised the FOP debate on this issue They believed it was necessary for there to be more input from the Governing Body. The FOP favoured a mixed approach, accepting that there could be a deficit of up to 10% of revenue, but that would require an extra £30,000 to be raised to close the gap.

It followed that there were three options

- To reduce the level of provision, by not spending the whole of the £81,000;
- Increase fundraising by some £30,000, by a commitment to increase fundraising activity and make small changes in the school to save some £20,000
- Do nothing and just spend money from the reserves

The Head said everything possible had already been done to cut costs.

A Governor asked whether it might be possible to reduce the level of Ivrit teaching without stopping it altogether. Another Governor suggested there should be a mix and match approach, of a granular nature. He challenged that the school had not provided enough information to enable decisions properly to be made. The Chair referred to the Four Year Budget Report which had been sent to Governors. He stated that it would not be possible to avoid the deficit by making cuts alone without seriously affecting the ethos of the school. It was likely therefore that most Governors will prefer a mix and match approach. However, even that would require some changes to the way in which the school was run and would also require a serious increased fundraising activity if the deficit was to be removed altogether

The Chair said that it would not be possible to raise a further £81,000 from Quality Contributions unless a major donor was found. It was therefore necessary to make serious efforts to make up the gap by certain cuts being made which did not change the nature of the school.

A Governor challenged that the school needed to be more systematic in collecting Quality Contribution donations. It was possible to do better by better liaison with the parent body even if that was unlikely to fill the entire gap. Reference was made to other schools who had embarked on serious fundraising drives over weekends and raised very large sums of money. He suggested that approaches should be made to the wider school body outside parents e.g. grandparents. That had not been seriously attempted by Alma and the school, measured against those other schools, had not performed well. He believed the school could do far better and could raise some £40,000 a year as additional QC income. It had not been tried in the past because it had not been necessary.

A Governor challenged as to whether the school could cut more resources. The Head thought that any further changes in this area would seriously affect the quality of education in the school. Staff were already under serious restrictions on their use of resources. It was not possible to save £40,000 in that area. There had already been serious cuts in this area but further cuts were just impracticable.

The Chair stated that while certain further cuts could be made within the school but the real answer was for the members of the GB to accept their responsibility to be involved in serious fundraising. There had been some very good ideas about methods of fundraising and associated Gift Aid but there had been no attempt seriously to put this push this through. The Chair and Vice Chair could not continue this responsibility without the support of the rest of the Governing Body

A Governor believed that it was not unrealistic to raise the money needed and that it could be obtained if the school embarked on serious fundraising in the manner that other schools had done. However, she was concerned that this might not be the appropriate time to attempt to do so because emotions were running high with both parents and teachers in the light of recent events and it might perhaps be more practicable to embark upon such a fundraising effort in the following year.

Another Governor agreed with these views but was cautious about approaching the parent body. He believed it was necessary to approach major donors, grandparents and

those donors who had given money to fund the school when it started. He believed they were likely to contribute if asked. There had been no need to make that request up to now because of the level of the reserves, but the position was now very different.

A Governor thought it was realistic to raise a further £30,000 by combination of different methods. However, he believed there needed to be a contingency plan if more normal methods did not work. Those might involve telling parents and other donors that, unless money was raised, then services would necessarily have to be cut. In his professional experience, that approach had worked.

A Governor challenged that this was an opportunity to put across a positive message about how the school operated and, accordingly, why the additional funds were necessary. Positive communication was the essence of being able to raise additional funds and those Governors who had not taken an active role in fundraising now needed to do so.

A third Governor agreed with these views. He noted that serious and substantial work had been done to build up the reserves to some £200,000 and those responsible for that should be thanked. He accepted that there was a potential option of spending £81,000 from the reserves but accepted that was not realistic. He thought the suggestion that parents might have to be told that there would be cuts in services was a strong motivating factor in raising further funds.

A Governor suggested that, although this may not be the right time to revisit the issue of the school joining a MAT, this might be one way of cutting the costs of running the school and that it should be considered again in due course. The Chair accepted that this might be an option if the school was not financially viable as it stood but it would represent a drastic change in how the school operated.

The Chair summarised the discussion. There are clearly a range of options. If there were volunteers to deal with fundraising, then it was realistic to ask the school to make savings of £20/£30,000 per year and plug the rest of the deficit through this fundraising. In addition, there should be a contingency plan if the fundraising did not go as expected. It was certainly possible to survive on reserves for one year but for no longer. He asked for volunteers to step up for fundraising and a number of Governors put their names forward as a subgroup to deal with this issue. The Chair thanked those Governors who had volunteered for this role.

Governors discussed the suggestion that the suggested asking level for QCs should be retained at £1545 per annum, on the basis that the most important issue was the retrieval rate rather than the annual requested figure. That had been the view of the FOP Committee. It would send a strong signal to parents that we understood their position.
The Governors unanimously approved that proposal.

Governors then unanimously approved the 2020/21 proposed budget and decided that a new sub-group of governors would urgently meet to address the issue of fundraising.

7. RISK ASSESSMENT

The Head spoke to the risk assessment which had been provided to Governors in some detail. The revised document had been prepared on the basis of bubbles of children of 30 per class, in accordance with Government guidelines and was based upon input from the London Borough of Barnet.

The risk assessment was based upon distancing where possible and the use of bubbles and an enhanced cleanliness regime.

Staffing concerns were rated as a moderate risk and the Head was also conscious of the earlier concerns about the effect upon children of not attending school. This was now included as a risk but since the risk assessment was a forward-looking document and it was anticipated these children would now be at school, this was now deemed to be a minor risk.

There were two areas where the risk is rated at 12, the highest level. The first was cleaning, particularly in relation to the common parts such as bannister rails and doors. It was envisaged that this would be carried out by an external contractor. External advice from PAJES was that regular cleaning was an important factor and a significant issue. The budget included the cost of an external cleaning contractor.

The other risk rated at 12 was the mental health of staff. The Head was very conscious that the staff team had worked extremely hard during the summer term but there was a risk that they would be “burnout” if the level of the last three months was continued into the autumn term. There could be long-term absences as well as short-term absences. Any reduction in the number of support staff would impact upon the full-time teachers.

A Governor who is also a teacher at a different school was aware of the strain on teaching staff generally and believed the problem was worse in primary schools. She was concerned about the effect upon teaching staff and upon the SLT of the current level of pressure but wished to thank the SLT for all they had done during this crisis.

The Head referred to discussions he had held with the Chair and Vice Chair. There is not a major problem if a teacher was on long-term sickness absence because insurance covered that eventuality. The real problem was if teachers were off sick for 2/3 days, creating a potential domino effect upon other staff. That had been the situation immediately before lockdown when three or four members of staff had been absent. This was a very serious issue which is why it had been rated at 12 in the risk assessment. If there were absences of this sort, it would not be possible to take the usual, pre-COVID measure of distributing children in affected classes through the school.

A Governor challenged that teachers who had not expected to deal with such things as pastoral responsibility were now necessarily involved in providing that level of care, particularly with vulnerable children and that put extra strain upon them at their work

The Head noted these concerns, which he accepted. He and the Assistant Head had spent a very large amount of time dealing with these issues and he was very grateful to her for her help.

The Head summarised the position. It was clear that the school would return to full numbers in September. That was the Government expectation and he believed it would be safe to do so provided there was appropriate cleaning provision in place. He had been advised of the possibility of a further COVID spike in the Autumn and that needed to be taken into account.

A Governor asked whether staff would have their full holiday allowance over the summer. The Head and the SLT were determined that that would be the case, although there would be some work for the SLT during the holiday period. There was a possibility of working with other organisations to provide some on-site activities for some children, particularly vulnerable children, but any school staff who worked on that would do so in a very different capacity and entirely voluntarily.

The Head spoke to the plan for return to school in September. He suggested there might be a need for a further GB meeting in August. The alternative was for delegated authority to be given to the Chair and Vice Chair. It was suggested and **agreed that if there are minor changes to the risk assessment, those be dealt with under the delegated**

authority. If it is deemed that there are material changes, then the GB will be asked to consider the matter at a further meeting.

The Governing Body was asked to give its formal approval both to the risk assessment and the plan for reopening the school in September **and unanimously approved both documents and both proposals**

8. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

The Chair or Vice-Chair will be writing to Governors to ask them to join in thanks to the staff for the work they have done recently.

A Governor reminded the GB of the scheme agreed whereby feedback would be sought from teachers when they left the school. The Head was grateful for that reminder and said that would occur.

The Chair and the Governing Body thanked the retiring Clerk for his various services and non-minuted contributions outside formal GB meetings over the last four years and the Clerk suitably responded.

.....