EKC Schools Trust

Trustees Board Minutes

Meeting	Trustees Board	Date	Tuesday, 14th July 2026
Location	EKC Schools Trust Boardroom	Time	2.00 pm
Membership	Tammy Mitchell (CEO), Bernadette Lax - Chair (Chair), Alan Horton – Vice Chair (AH); Peter Troke (PT), Peter Goldsack (PG), Barbara Conroy (BC), Emma Wilkinson (EW); Ollie Laughton (OL); Paul Sayers (PS); Alison Gray (AG); Lucy McLeod (LM), Kim Stoner (KM)		
In Attendance	Sharon Hollingsworth, Director of Governance (DG) Emma Law, Director of SEND and Inclusion (EL) Jason Howard, Executive Headteacher (JH) Lisa Hogan, Director of Finance (LH) Ian Rule, Interim CFO (CFO)		

	ITEM	COMMENTS	ACTION
1.	Welcome and apologies for absence.	AH agreed to be Acting Chair for the meeting as the Chair was unable to attend. AH welcomed Trustees to the meeting and apologies were noted from BL, PS, BC and OL.	
2.	Declarations of Interest	There were no declarations declared other than those standing.	
3.	Minutes of the meeting held 10 March 2026, including confidential minutes	The minutes of the meeting held on the 10 March 2026 were considered to be an accurate record and will be signed after the meeting. APPROVED – Minutes from the meeting held on the 10 March 2026	
4.	Matters arising not covered by this agenda	JH attended the meeting to give an update on the outcomes of the Trust's Precision Project, which has been the Trust's strategic teaching and learning priority during 2025/26. Trustees heard that the project comprised four strands: leadership, expert teachers, classroom teachers and support staff, with the support staff strand continuing into the next academic year. The project had focused on bringing	

		colleagues together across the Trust to strengthen teaching and learning and promote greater consistency in classroom practice. Trustees noted that school leaders had undertaken self-evaluation exercises at three points during the year against an agreed set of criteria. Trustees sought clarification on how the data had been gathered and whether the findings reflected the views of wider teaching staff or Headteacher self-assessment. It was confirmed that the evaluations had been completed by Headteachers on behalf of their schools. Whilst acknowledging the value of professional self-evaluation, Trustees questioned whether this created a risk of leaders effectively "marking their own homework" and challenged how Trustees could gain independent assurance regarding the reported impact. In response, JH explained that the evaluations measured organisational clarity and consistency rather than individual staff perceptions. The project had helped schools to explicitly define and communicate expectations around teaching and learning, something that had not previously been consistently articulated across all settings. Trustees further challenged how the Trust measures the longer-term impact of strategic initiatives and questioned whether annual project reports provided sufficient evidence that improvements were translating into sustained gains for pupils. JH proposed that future reports include graphical representations of performance indicators to enable Trustees to track trends more easily and assess whether improvements were being sustained. The CEO acknowledged the challenge and explained that the Trust already collates longitudinal data through its annual performance dashboard, which is reported to Trustees following publication of validated national outcomes data. Trustees discussed the complexity of measuring educational improvement. The CEO highlighted the Trust's commitment to supporting vulnerable and disadvantaged pupils and noted that many of the most significant outcomes, including improved life chances, successful transitions, positive destinations and reductions in exclusion, are not always reflected within national performance tables. Following further discussion, it was agreed that JH would continue to explore how longer-term performance information could be presented to Trustees in a more accessible format. The CEO offered to work directly with the Trustees to better understand the specific information Trustees wished to see and to consider whether existing data could be presented differently to provide greater assurance. Trustees welcomed this approach and agreed that the discussion had been constructive and beneficial. ACTION: CEO to review existing dashboard reporting and explore options for presenting longer-term impact measures and improvement trends in a format that provides enhanced assurance to Trustees.	

		NOTED – Update on the Precision Project	
5.	Chairs Communication	The Acting Chair reminded Trustees of the forthcoming Headteacher Engagement Session and strongly encouraged Trustees to attend after the meeting. The Acting Chair reflected on the unusual circumstances surrounding this year's statutory assessment cycle, noting that national delays in the marking and publication of SATs results meant that schools were unable to provide outcomes in the usual way. The Acting Chair advised that he had attended the Kent School of the Year Awards and expressed pride in the success achieved by EKC Schools Trust schools, noting that the Trust had secured six awards across a number of categories. Particular recognition was given to Sheppey Secondary School, which received the Team of the Year Award. Trustees reflected on the significance of this achievement, particularly given the considerable challenges facing the school prior to its transfer into the Trust. During discussion, the CEO reflected on the journey undertaken by Sheppey Secondary, noting that exactly two years earlier the school had been experiencing industrial action and significant instability. Trustees requested that formal letters of congratulations be sent on behalf of the Board to all schools and staff receiving awards and external recognition during the year. Trustees agreed that it was important that staff understood the Board's appreciation of their hard work and commitment to improving outcomes for children and young people. ACTION: Director of Governance to issue letters on behalf of the Trust Board recognising and congratulating schools and staff teams that received county and national awards during the year.	DG
6.	CEO's Report	The CEO presented a summary of the annual report, highlighting key areas of strategic significance across the Trust. Trustees were advised that, whilst the report contained a considerable volume of statutory and performance information, the intention was to focus discussion on the most significant developments, risks and areas for Board assurance. <u>Pupil Numbers and School Context</u> Trustees noted that pupil recruitment remained strong across the majority of Trust schools. Particular attention was drawn to Churchill, where falling pupil numbers had necessitated a planned move to a one-form entry model. The CEO highlighted positive recruitment trends elsewhere across the Trust,	

		particularly at Sheppey Secondary, where Year 7 was reported to be full with waiting lists now evident across all year groups. Trustees also noted the significant growth in pupil numbers at Thornden Wood, where school improvement, rebranding activity and enhanced community confidence had contributed to an increase in admissions and a stronger financial position. <u>Young Carers</u> Trustees were advised that the identification and support of young carers would become a priority area during the next academic year. The CEO expressed concern that current data, particularly within secondary provision, may not accurately reflect the true number of pupils with significant caring responsibilities.. A Trust-wide process for identifying and supporting young carers would therefore be introduced, led by the Director of SEND and Inclusion. <u>Attendance</u> Attendance remained a key strategic priority and featured prominently within Board discussion. Trustees noted that attendance continued to present one of the most significant challenges facing schools nationally and that levels of deprivation and disadvantage remained closely linked to attendance outcomes. The CEO acknowledged that schools serving the most disadvantaged communities inevitably faced greater challenges in securing improvements. Trustees were pleased to hear that attendance at Holywell had reached exceptionally high levels, placing the school amongst the highest-performing schools both locally and nationally. Trustees noted, however, that significant challenges remained at Bysing Wood, where attendance continued to cause concern. The CEO explained that additional external expertise was being commissioned to support improvement. The Board welcomed this intervention and sought assurance that progress would continue to be closely monitored. Trustees also heard that attendance at Palm Bay had improved considerably towards the end of the academic year. <u>Behaviour and Suspensions</u> The Board received a detailed update regarding behaviour and suspensions across the Trust. Trustees noted positively that suspension rates had reduced significantly, particularly at Sheppey Secondary where they have fallen by 50% compared to the previous year and by a further 50% compared to historic levels. The CEO reminded Trustees of the Trust's longstanding commitment to minimising permanent exclusions and supporting even the most vulnerable and challenging pupils. Trustees challenged the impact of suspensions and isolation arrangements on pupils' learning. The CEO explained that inclusion	

and reintegration spaces were regularly scrutinised during school visits and that arrangements increasingly ensured pupils continued to undertake meaningful learning aligned to classroom activities. The CEO acknowledged that arrangements for recovering lost learning were not yet consistently effective and agreed this remained a priority area for development.

Internal Truancy and Inclusion

Trustees also explored the issue of internal truancy, particularly within secondary schools. The CEO reported that incidents had reduced dramatically, with a reduction of approximately 93% at Sheppey Secondary since joining the Trust. The CEO advised that improved behaviour systems, stronger corridor supervision, clear expectations and enhanced pastoral support had led to significant reductions in pupils missing lessons during the school day.

Trustees noted evidence from recent visits showing a marked reduction in pupils spending time outside classrooms. The CEO explained that enhanced SEND and pastoral provision had helped ensure that pupils experiencing emotional distress or dysregulation were supported in appropriate settings before returning quickly to mainstream lessons wherever possible.

Regulatory and Legislative Challenges

The CEO drew Trustees' attention to the increasingly challenging regulatory environment facing schools. Trustees heard that approximately sixty new pieces of legislation, guidance or statutory updates had been released since January. Trustees discussed the resulting workload implications and the associated risks.

Educational Outcomes

The CEO reported that, whilst final validated outcomes data remained unavailable, provisional information suggested another highly positive year for the Trust. Trustees were advised that the CEO remained cautious about making definitive judgements until national data was published but was encouraged by the trajectory and internal performance information available.

The Board considered Early Years outcomes and received an explanation of the challenges associated with measuring Good Level of Development (GLD) in schools serving highly disadvantaged populations.. The CEO emphasised the importance of accurate assessment and challenged the validity of externally imposed targets where they failed to reflect children's starting points.

Trustees noted strong phonics outcomes across the Trust and welcomed evidence that schools were broadly performing in line with national expectations despite challenging pupil intakes. Particular

		attention was given to improvements in multiplication check results. The CEO reminded Trustees that multiplication outcomes had been identified by the Board as an area requiring improvement in the previous year. The CEO provided Trustees with an overview of the Trust's biennial stakeholder survey, which evaluates the effectiveness of services provided by EKC Group. Trustees were advised that the results were highly positive and demonstrated strong levels of satisfaction with the support and services received. The CEO then drew Trustees' attention to the increasing volume of parental complaints being experienced both nationally and locally. Trustees heard that complaints have risen significantly across the education sector. Whilst the Trust had experienced an increase in complaint activity, the CEO reported that the majority were being resolved effectively before reaching the later stages of the formal complaints process. Particular recognition was given to secondary school leaders, who were managing relatively low levels of formal complaints despite operating within highly challenging contexts. Trustees were informed, however, that the volume of Stage 2 complaints had increased substantially. The CEO explained that the process of investigating and responding to concerns was becoming increasingly time-consuming and resource intensive. The CEO highlighted the growing influence of AI tools in the complaints process. Trustees heard examples of complaints containing generic wording or references that appeared unrelated to the school concerned. In response to these emerging trends, the Trust had strengthened its Complaints Policy and Procedures, with revisions due to be presented for Trustee review in September. The changes were intended to ensure that complaints remained specific, evidence-based and capable of meaningful investigation. Trustees acknowledged that complaints can be highly stressful for school leaders, especially where allegations are serious or sensitive in nature. The CEO outlined the support systems currently in place across the Trust. The Board noted that the Trust had recently managed at least one particularly serious and sensitive complaint which had required careful handling and significant professional support for those involved. Trustees were reassured that Headteacher wellbeing remained a priority. NOTED – CEO Report	
7.	Alternative Provision – Strategic Duties	Trustees received the Alternative Provision paper and a verbal update from the CEO regarding the significant challenges that had recently emerged in relation to the Trust's current alternative provision arrangements. The CEO advised that circumstances outside of the Trust's control had created a	

		potentially precarious situation and that Trustees needed to be aware of both the risks and the proposed response. The Board heard that, at the point of conversion, the Trust had been strongly encouraged to secure access to alternative provision and had worked extensively with external providers to establish appropriate arrangements. However, following changes to the Ofsted inspection framework and expectations regarding oversight of alternative provision, the external provider had withdrawn funding arrangements across a number of provisions operating throughout Kent and South London. Trustees recognised the potential impact on some of the Trust's most vulnerable pupils if suitable provision could not be secured. In response to the changing circumstances, the CEO presented an emerging proposal to develop a Trust-led alternative provision model. Trustees heard that, rather than continuing to rely on external provision, a more sustainable solution would be to establish and manage provision directly under the Trust's oversight. The CEO explained that detailed plans had not been included within the published papers because of the sensitivity of ongoing discussions. However, the strategic direction of travel was clearly towards developing an in-house solution that would provide greater control, stability and responsiveness for pupils requiring alternative provision. Trustees explored the feasibility of this proposal and whether an off-site model could be developed whilst maintaining clear links to existing school provision. The CEO confirmed that this was the preferred approach and explained that an initial site review had already taken place. Trustees were informed that a potential location had been identified on land owned by Queenborough School. The site sits separately from the main school footprint, benefits from its own access from the public highway and offers sufficient space to accommodate a modular building solution. The CEO considered the site particularly well suited to alternative provision due to its accessibility, flexibility and potential for future development. Trustees sought clarification regarding the role of the local authority and whether any additional funding or support might be available. The CEO advised that the local authority had indicated that it was unable to provide direct financial support due to wider funding pressures and concerns about creating precedents across other districts. Trustees agreed that maintaining appropriate alternative provision remained strategically important to the Trust's ambition to avoid permanent exclusions wherever possible and to ensure that pupils with complex needs continued to access education and support.	

		Following discussion, the Chair sought formal approval from the Board to allow the CEO to continue development work and bring back detailed proposals for consideration at a future meeting. RESOLUTION: Trustees unanimously authorised the CEO to continue exploring and developing a Trust-led Alternative Provision model.	
8.	Strategic priorities on SEMH	Trustees received a detailed presentation from EL regarding the Trust's SEMH (Social, Emotional and Mental Health) Project. The Board heard that the project had focused on two pupils within each Trust school, including secondary provision, who presented with the most significant SEMH needs. Trustees were advised that the project had combined specialist support, staff training, curriculum review and provision evaluation. Work undertaken during the year included analysing the needs of individual pupils, reviewing the appropriateness of learning environments, strengthening staff understanding of SEMH needs and ensuring that behaviour was understood within the context of underlying emotional, social and mental health challenges rather than being viewed solely as a behavioural issue. Support had been enhanced through the involvement of a former Specialist Teaching and Learning Service (STLS) practitioner, who worked alongside schools to evaluate provision and identify effective approaches. EL explained that the project had been designed not only to improve outcomes for individual pupils but also to generate evidence-based approaches that could be embedded across all schools. Trustees heard that work undertaken with the targeted pupils would now inform a Trust-wide SEMH toolkit and training programme for the next academic year. This would include a trauma-informed approach based on educational psychology principles, developed in partnership with an Educational Psychologist, which would form a central part of future professional development. Trustees challenged whether focusing on a small number of highly complex cases risked developing practices that were disproportionately specialised. EL explained that the purpose of selecting pupils with the greatest needs was to understand the most complex barriers to learning and engagement. Trustees questioned how parents had been involved in the project and sought assurance that any improvements in support extended beyond the school environment. EL explained that considerable effort had been invested in engaging families, particularly those who had previously been difficult to reach. Trustees heard that feedback from families had been highly positive. Trustees also explored the relationship between the SEMH Project and the Precision Project. In response, EL explained that the projects were highly complementary and increasingly interdependent.	

		The CEO acknowledged the importance of supporting parents and families and outlined a range of existing initiatives. Trustees heard that additional work was planned through community partnerships, emotional wellbeing services and future implementation of the government's "Experts at Hand" model, which would provide further opportunities to engage and support families. Trustees questioned whether schools had the capacity to absorb further change and were advised that significant work had been undertaken to reduce competing priorities and focus schools on a smaller number of impactful initiatives. NOTED – Strategic Priorities on SEMH	
9.	Director of Governance Report to incl. Trust Board & Committee Membership update	The Director of Governance provided a Report prior to the meeting. <u>Trustee and Member Appointments</u> Trustees were formally advised that today was the final Board meeting for EW. Members reflected on the significant contribution she had made during her tenure as Trustee. The Board expressed its appreciation for her commitment and wished her every success in the future. The Director of Governance advised that the annual self-nomination process for the election of the Chair and Vice Chair of Trustees would commence during August in accordance with the Trust's governance arrangements. Trustees noted the timetable for the process. Trustees noted that members had approved the appointment of Lindsey Biggs (LB) to the Trust Board with effect from 1 September, succeeding EW. LB will join the RAC Committee, ensuring continuity of expertise and governance capacity. The Board further noted the reappointment of AH and BC for further four-year terms of office. Trustees were also informed that Tobi Oyediji (TO), Chair of Governors at Aylesham Primary School, had been recommended for appointment as a Diocese Trustee. The Board also noted forthcoming changes to Trust membership arrangements. Trustees heard that Charles Buchanan (CB) would step down as a Member of the Trust following the conclusion of his term as Chair of EKC Group but would join the Trust Board as a Trustee. Trustees further noted that Tim Kent, as incoming Chair of EKC Group Board, would replace CB as a Member of the Trust in accordance with existing governance agreements between EKC Group and EKC Schools Trust.	

Christian Distinctiveness Committee

Trustees received an update on the establishment of the new Christian Distinctiveness Committee. Members noted that the committee had been formed in response to Diocesan expectations and the evolving governance requirements of the Trust's church schools. Membership would comprise KS, BC and TO (following his appointment to the Trust Board).

Trustees heard that the committee would meet three times annually, rotating across the Trust's church schools. The Terms of Reference had been incorporated within the revised Scheme of Delegation and appropriate supporting documentation and visit schedules were being developed. Trustees noted that members serving on the committee would not be expected to undertake additional Trustee visits beyond those associated with the committee's work. During discussion, Trustees suggested that outcomes from the committee should be shared widely with the Board.

Scheme of Delegation

Trustees considered proposed revisions to the Trust's Scheme of Delegation, which had previously been approved in March and subsequently reviewed by the Director of Education at the Diocese. Trustees were advised that a number of amendments and clarifications had been proposed following that review and were now presented for formal approval.

Trustees identified a minor omission within the governance structure diagram relating to the Deputy Chief Executive role. The CEO acknowledged the oversight, noting that the appointment formally commenced from September, and agreed that the diagram would be amended before publication.

RESOLUTION: **Trustees approved the revised Scheme of Delegation, subject to the inclusion of the Deputy Chief Executive position within the organisational structure diagram.**

Trustees also formally noted the Special Resolution previously approved in April, which was included within the report for information and recording within the minutes.

Trust Board Development Plan and External Board Review

The Director of Governance presented the Trust Board Development Plan and update arising from the External Board Review. Trustees heard that no significant concerns had emerged through the review process and that a detailed response had been developed against each recommendation. Actions identified had largely been implemented and embedded within existing governance practice.

		A discussion followed regarding the relatively new Trustee and Headteacher Engagement Sessions. Trustees reflected positively on the sessions but agreed that there was an opportunity to strengthen the purpose and structure of future meetings and to establish a more formal mechanism for triangulating information received through Board reports. AGREED: Trustees agreed that actions arising from the External Board Review had been completed satisfactorily and formally closed the improvement plan. <u>Trustee Visits and Governance Assurance</u> Trustees considered recent visit reports, including feedback from a visit to Sheppey Secondary School. Discussion arising from the visit focused heavily on leadership sustainability and workforce wellbeing, particularly in relation to the Headteacher of Sheppey Secondary. Trustees noted concerns regarding the intensity of workload carried by the Headteacher and sought assurance that appropriate support mechanisms were in place. The CEO provided detailed reassurance and outlined the support offered. Trustees also discussed the forthcoming inspection of the school and reflected on the possibility that inspection outcomes may not fully capture the extent of the school's transformation. Trustees agreed that the progress achieved over a relatively short period was significant and should continue to be recognised regardless of any eventual inspection outcome. <u>Trustee Development and Policy Review</u> Trustees noted that the annual programme of mandatory governance training had been issued and thanked those who had already completed the required modules. DG also advised that annual policy reviews had been allocated to individual Trustees based on their backgrounds, skills and areas of expertise, following feedback received the previous year. Trustees noted that a number of policies contained significant amendments as a result of legislative change. NOTED – The Director of Governance report.	
10.	Trust Budget 2026-27 and 3-year Budget Financial Return	Trustees received a report from the Interim CFO and the Director of Finance on the proposed Budget for 2026–27, together with the three-year financial forecast. It was noted that these had been subject to detailed scrutiny by the Finance and People Committee prior to being presented to the Board for approval.	

		Trustees considered the proposed Trust Budget for 2026–27 and the associated three-year financial forecast. Trustees were advised that the budget had been developed using a zero-based budgeting methodology, requiring schools to build budgets from first principles rather than relying on historic assumptions. The Board noted that most schools were forecasting healthy and sustainable contribution levels and that budget assumptions were considered prudent and realistic. Trustees were advised that some exceptions existed, particularly where school reorganisation plans were under development. Whilst these budgets had been prepared before the full impact of reorganisation proposals could be reflected, the CEO was confident that any future changes would be financially beneficial and would strengthen longer-term sustainability. Trustees undertook detailed discussion regarding reserve levels across the Trust. Trustees challenged whether holding excessive reserves represented the best use of public money. In response, the CEO explained the strategic rationale underpinning current reserve levels. Trustees heard that the Trust was consciously carrying a higher level of reserves to mitigate a number of foreseeable risks. These included supporting a secondary school currently operating under a financial recovery and drawdown arrangement, managing the future funding of central services, and providing resilience against unforeseen pressures as the organisation continued to grow and develop. During scrutiny of the reserves table, Trustees queried the reported reserve percentage attributed to EKC Schools Trust itself, which appeared significantly higher than that of individual schools. The CFO clarified that the percentage was distorted because the central Trust entity does not generate income in the same way as individual schools. Consequently, the calculation was not directly comparable and reflected the accounting treatment of central reserves rather than excessive levels of funding. Having considered the reports and received assurances from the Finance and People Committee regarding the robustness of the budgeting process, Trustees confirmed that they were satisfied with the proposed financial plans and reserve strategy. The Chair formally sought approval of the budget. RESOLUTION: Trustees unanimously approved the Trust Budget for 2026–27 and the accompanying Three-Year Financial Return. NOTED – Trust Budget 2026-2027 and 3-Year Financial Forecast	

11.	Trust Management Accounts May 2026	Trustees reviewed the May 2026 financial position and noted that the overall financial outlook remained positive. Trustees heard that comparisons between current performance, forecast positions and previous budgets were influenced by the recent addition of new schools to the Trust and that this should be considered when reviewing headline figures. Despite these variables, the Trust remained in a favourable financial position, with an improved year-end projection and a positive variance against forecast. The Board noted that the year-to-date position showed a number of small positive balances across schools and services. Trustees were advised that apparent positive variances occasionally masked timing differences or funding drawdowns which required ongoing monitoring. Trustees were reassured that there were no emerging issues expected to significantly impact the year-end outturn. The Finance and People Committee confirmed that improvements to financial reporting were already being considered and would be introduced during the next financial year. NOTED – Trust Management Accounts 2026	
12.	Feedback from Committee meetings	Risk, Audit and Compliance (RAC) Committee Trustees received feedback from the RAC Committee meetings held during the spring and summer terms. Trustees noted that a significant proportion of committee business had focused on Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) matters, reflecting the growing importance of sustainability and social responsibility within the education sector. Whilst recognising the complexity of the topic. The Committee had also reviewed health and safety compliance across the Trust. Trustees heard that a revised assurance framework was now being implemented, based upon the successful safeguarding model already operating within the organisation. Trustees welcomed the introduction of the model and agreed that its alignment with established safeguarding processes should support effective implementation. Trustees further noted a report on safeguarding audits undertaken across the Trust. The audits continued to demonstrate strong performance and safeguarding remained an area of significant strength. Finance and People Committee The Board also received feedback from the Finance and People Committee. Trustees noted that the Committee had undertaken detailed scrutiny of the Trust Budget and Three-Year Financial Return before recommending both for approval by the Board. Trustees were satisfied that appropriate challenge	

		and oversight had been exercised throughout the budget setting process and that the Committee's recommendation provided additional assurance regarding the financial robustness of the plans presented. Trustees were pleased to hear of the continued progress being made within the Trust's People Strategy. Particular attention had been given to workforce diversity and inclusion, including detailed analysis of disability and ethnicity data across the Trust. <u>Financial Reporting and Future Development</u> During the discussion, Trustees received an update regarding leadership arrangements within EKC Group Finance Team and noted the appointment of a permanent Group Director of Finance. Trustees welcomed the appointment and expressed confidence in the continued development of financial reporting and strategic financial oversight. Trustees commented positively on proposals to further improve the presentation of financial data., Trustees thanked both Committees for their continued scrutiny and assurance work and noted that the reports provided confidence that key risks, compliance requirements and strategic priorities were being monitored and challenged appropriately. NOTED – Feedback from Committee Meetings	
13.	Any other business	There was no further business.	
14.	Matters considered confidential.	There were no matters considered confidential.	
15.	Date and time of next Meeting	Date and time of next meeting: 15th September 2026	

There being no further business the meeting closed at 4.05 pm.

Signed [signature] Print: Bernadette Lax Dated: 15th September 2026