THE CHALLENGE ACADEMY TRUST

Finance, HR, and Operations Committee Meeting Minutes
Thursday 4th December, 5:30-7:30pm

Venue: TCAT Professional Development Centre
Chair: Peter Winter
Clerk: Melissa Alexander m.alexander@tcat.uk.com

Committee Membership

Name	Category	Term Ends	Present
Linda Boys (LB)	Trustee	31.08.2028	✓
Andrew Moorcroft (AM)	**CEO,** Trustee	N/A	✓
Anita Pailing (AP)	Committee Associate	N/A	X
Howard Platt (HP)	Trustee	01.07.2029	✓
John Warren (JW)	Trustee	11.01.2028	✓
Stephen Whatmore (SW)	Trustee	01.07.2029	✓
Peter Winter (PW)	**Chair**	11.01.2028	✓

Also in Attendance

Name	Role
Adrienne Laing (AL)	Operations Director
Ben Logan (BL)	Head of HR
David Halsall (DH)	Chief Finance Officer

Documents Shared Prior to the Meeting:

Item 8a. TCAT Management Accounts Item 8b. TCAT Funding Strategy Item 9. HR Report Item 10. Business and Operations Report December 2025 Item 11. Item 11 Estates Management Report December 2025 Item 12. Data Protection Policies Item 12(a-c) HR Policies Overview Dec 25 Item 12a. TCAT Redundancy Policy 2025 Item 12b. TCAT Support Staff Appraisal 2025 Item 12c. TCAT Staff Capability 2025

Agenda Items		Time Allocated
1	**Welcome** MS welcomed the Committee to the second meeting of the academic year.	**MS**
2	**Any items for AOB/ Part Two – Confidential:** MS confirmed that there was one item for Part Two.	**MS**
3	**Absence / Apologies / Non-Attendance:** MS confirmed that AP shared apologies in advance due to a clash with an LGCB meeting at Bridgewater High School. AP's apologies were accepted.	**MS**
4	**Register of Interests:** There were no Registers of Interests declared.	**MS**
5	**Declaration of Pecuniary Interests:** There were no declarations of pecuniary interests in relation to the agenda items.	**MS**
6	**Membership & Organisation:** MS confirmed that there have been no amendments to the committee's membership.	**MS**
7	**Minutes of the Finance, HR and Operations meeting held on Thursday 9th October 2025** a) Acceptance of the minutes: The Committee confirmed the minutes from the previous meeting were an accurate reflection of the meeting and the minutes were approved.	**10 Minutes**

b) Matters arising: **Chair's Action – The Sutton Academy's catering contract renewal Jan 2026. Formal approval of new caterers following tender process and approval for HP, Chair of Trustees.**
DH added that there was a requirement for the Chair's action to be implemented and this was supported in full by the Committee.

c) Review of Action Log: All actions were reviewed and assigned individuals confirmed that actions had been completed.

Minute Reference	Action to be taken	By Whom	Completion Date
7	MA to record the committee's formal approval of the asset management plan on Governor Hub.	MA	09.10.2025
8	BL to evaluate and select an applicant tracking system (ATS) for recruitment, aiming to have it in place for the spring transfer window.	BL	Ongoing
9	DH to ensure GAG and Reserves are explicitly noted in the Funding Strategy Paper.	DH	ASAP
9	DH to initiate the phased procurement of iPads for teachers and students using school reserves, starting with schools that are ready.	DH	ASAP
11	AL to develop a Centralised Estates and IT Working Group.	AL	W/C 10/11
13	MA to confirm the timing of the next meeting via a GovernorHub announcement.	MA	W/C 10/11

8	**Finance Update:** (For information and discussion) **TCAT Funding Strategy:** DH led a comprehensive discussion on the trust's financial strategy, with reference to aligning funding allocation with organisational goals, addressing equity across academies and introducing more robust financial planning tools. DH emphasised the importance of ensuring that financial allocation and management are closely aligned with the trust's organisational objectives, highlighting the risks of misalignment and the need for proactive management to drive equity and provision across all schools. DH shared that he recently met with DELTA Trust whose approach is to treat all academies as one organisation. DH stated that inequalities in reserves cannot dictate the experiences of all students. DH added that the Trust are only as strong as their weakest link. DH stated that it is upon the Committee to safeguard the integrity of the future of academies and explained the strategy is in line to support with organisational objectives. DH presented the key objectives for the Funding Strategy and outlined the following priorities: • Academy budgets managed consistency and fairly • Value for money • Create capacity and invest within the Central Team to support the Trust with growth • Equity of spending across IT and Estates with enhanced consistency in resource models • Extend centralisation • Invest in championing of business mindset • Create funding for the initial rollout of teacher iPads DH provided the Committee with a verbal overview of the key enablers that would allow key priorities to be achieved. DH explained that the enhanced management of financial management processes and operating models would drive consistency, result in cross-Trust savings and drive growth. DH introduced the Committee to the Integrated Curriculum Financial Planning (ICFP) tool and explained its role in modelling staffing and curriculum needs, identifying potential overstaffing, and using benchmarks to guide budget discussions and drive efficiency. DH shared that DELTA have reviewed TCAT's current staffing models and concluded that TCAT are employing 78 more full-time equivalent staff (FTE's) across the secondary academies, thus equating to an overspend of approximately £5.6 million.	**DH 30 Minutes**

	DH explicitly shared that careful planning and implementation of guidelines and benchmarks are required to guide the Trust in moving forward. The Chair stated that a common assessment of resources is useful as a starting point. ***The Chair challenged*** that all academies have key variances such as Free School Meals and Special Educational Needs. ***The CEO stated*** that a common standard approach has always been implemented and this has always been reviewed via budgets. The CEO explained the Trust have always referred to national benchmarks, but Heads and Principals have been given the opportunity to operate as long as affordable. The CEO added that the Trust have not previously imposed consequences if benchmarks are not applied, in comparison to other Trusts who require Heads and Principals to stick to national benchmarks. The CEO stated all Heads and Principals should be assured that there is equity of support to ensure there is no disparities, adding that academies need to be managed equitably. ***A Trustee asked*** how the DfE decide on staffing benchmarks. ***The CEO confirmed*** that these benchmarks are developed by national data. The CEO added that many Heads inherit staffing models from previous Heads and have not necessarily considered the staffing required for their own academy. The CEO stated that the benchmarks will not come as any surprise to Heads and Principals. ***A Trustee asked*** if the full-time equivalent (FTE) model covers Teachers and Teaching Assistants. ***The CEO confirmed*** that the FTE model covers all staff, adding most of the TCAT academies are below the benchmark for non-curriculum support staff, adding that a large proportion of this functionality is done centrally, which is not always recognised as an academy saving. ***A Trustee asked*** what the current levy is. ***DH confirmed*** this is 4 %. The CEO explained that the Trust have never strategically demonstrated or captured money saved for individual academies, adding the Central Team have never explicitly articulated the savings that are made and used the example of insurance. There was a discussion amongst the Committee that many Trusts run at much higher levies, with some as high 15%. The Chair commented that this approach has to be explicitly explained to Heads and Principals prior to implementation.	

	The CEO explained Heads and Principals are aware of the national benchmarks. The CEO provided the example of Dallam Community Primary School, who joined the Trust with a surplus income but have of a staffing model that is unaffordable in the next two years. The CEO highlighted the significance of taking action to support academies with financial stability. ***A Trustee asked*** if ICFP scores are shared with Heads and Principals at present. ***The CEO confirmed*** this system is currently in place but is done manually. The CEO explained the ICFP software provides an automated process. The CEO provided the Committee with the example of class sizes/ formation of class sizes that support with the staffing and budget controls, highlighting the significance of careful curriculum model assessments. The CEO stated that the ICFP software will sophisticate the curriculum models moving forward. ***A Trustee asked*** if this would help academies with 'sleepwalking into losses. AL confirmed this is correct and will ultimately save academies money. DH explained that TCAT's approach will be a firmer mechanism for an approval process to govern processes and standards. DH added that all strategies must work together to ensure fairness across all academies. ***A Trustee asked*** if ICFP's only relate to secondary academies. ***AL confirmed*** this is not the case. ***A Trustee commented*** that there is a high level of staff at upper pay scale at Bridgewater High School and Beamont Collegiate Academy. A Trustee stated that behind the statistical analysis, there is huge opportunity to save money at both academies, adding this would take time. ***The CEO stated*** that this can be mitigated by increasing teacher timetables or increase class sizes. The CEO referred to the national benchmarks and the significance of using these to guide Heads and Principals. AL added that if 'contact ratio' is low this can also have a significant impact on financial pressures. **Reserves:** Sector Context: • DH shared that approximately 80% of Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) do not operate GAG pooling, while around 50% pool their reserves.	

- DH added the direction of travel towards more centralised operations across Trusts nationally.

Strategic Considerations:

- DH introduced the concept of ring-fencing reserves, linking this to the benefits of pooling reserves for optimal collective outcomes.
- DH emphasised that reserves are legally owned by the Trust, while acknowledging the cultural attachment academies have to their individual reserves.

DH outlined the spectrum of options for reserve pooling, noting that neither extreme full central control nor complete autonomy for academies is appropriate. DH stressed that if academies retain full control of reserves, equity of provision cannot be achieved. Both extremes were deemed unsuitable and DH advocated for a balanced approach that meets organisational objectives while respecting academy-level considerations. DH presented the spectrum to the Committee which were as follows:

- Continued approach: equity of provision will remain unequal
- Pooling all reserves: may lead to incorrect behaviours with the provision of the example of academies spending all reserves.

DH presented potential methods to enhance the equity of provision which covered the following:

- Implementation of a Sinking Fund which included each academy contributes on annual basis to support with the replacements of iPads in three years' time.
- Funding for iPads and TCAT Central Reserves position. DH confirmed that he would like to reapportion the academy reserves to help balance TCAT and put funding in place for purchasing iPads and remove the deficit position of TCAT Central.

A Trustee asked if academies would have reserves if GAG pooling was implemented.
DH confirmed that this is correct and commented that GAG pooling is not the appropriate solution.

A Trustee queried the process of GAG pooling.
DH explained that benchmarks are used and budgets are given based on the data presented.
The CEO explained that the Trust would be required to build in headroom to dictate the budget to an extent.

A Trustee asked if thoughts have been collected from Heads and Principals such as their thoughts on raising the levy.
DH stated that the creation of funding is required and needs to be developed in a strategic manner for the purchasing of iPads. DH added that the Trust would like to be offer further support for the academies who require it most and would like academies to implement centralised offers, such as IT, that will ultimately save the individual academies money.

Legacy:

The Committee discussed how to address the legacy central deficit and engaged in a debate as to whether all academies should contribute or if certain academies should be excluded based on their historical participation and benefit from central services.

DH stated that SOU and TSA have been excluded within the draft proposal, adding that this could be reviewed, and requested the views from the committee on this. DH asked for the consensus on this proposal.
The CEO stated that this decision is the responsibility of this Committee.
The Chair asked if South Wirral High School and The Sutton Academy were omitted due to only recently joining the Trust.
DH responded that was deliberate as a result of the perception of fairness.

The CEO acknowledged that some academies/ Local Governing Challenge Boards may challenge the utilisation of reserves.

A Trustee sought clarification that the Trust central is currently in deficit. The same Trustee commented that The Sutton Academy and South Wirral High School asked for clarification regarding both academies' direct benefits from the legacy central services.
DH confirmed the Trust Central is currently in deficit and that the named academies were not in receipt of equal centralised services in comparison to all other academies, thus resulting in those academies not being included in the legacy charge.

A Trustee stated that SCA exists for all schools and is held by LA for Community Schools.
AL commented that the allocation of SCA comes through an application process which would not have covered all TCAT academies.

The Committee ultimately agreed on an incremental and context-sensitive approach. DH explained that a collective Trust fund will be in a strengthened position to support academies where required.

	A Trustee sought clarification for what the Committee is being asked to approve. DH confirmed that the following are seeking approval: 1) Implementation of ICFP: The implementation of the ICFP was approved by the Committee on the provision of assurance of individual academy settings ***A Trustee asked*** what happens if there is money left over in the central pot. DH explained that this creates a reserve and if required could be used if required for academy projects. A Trustee commented that the development of a central surplus should be shared as a positive to Heads and Principals. A Trustee challenged that this is a disingenuous as the central surplus might be required to support the Trust with growth. 2) Reallocation of £2m of academy reserves: ***DH requested*** Committee approval for the reallocation of 2 million of reserves ***This was accepted*** by the Committee. ***A Trustee asked*** if these will also go to Trust Board. ***DH confirmed*** that the final decision will be taken to the full Trust Board. 3) Reviewing of level of centralisation and operating models: A discussion took place regarding centralisation, and all Committee members supported the direction of travel for the implementation of centralising services. ***A Trustee raised*** that an IT request was made at Local Governing Challenge Board level at Beamont Collegiate Academy for a WiFi update request totalling £85,000. The Trustee requested greater clarity regarding IT spending. AL added that the IT infrastructure is part of the IT Plan and that this IT request will be approved to ensure the academy has the IT infrastructure to support with the implementation of the iPads. A discussion took place regarding the significance of upgrading Wi-Fi systems to mitigate risk. AL added that SCA funding cannot be spent on IT. AL explained that comparison benchmarks had been presented to both academies who require updating Wi-Fi. DH highlighted that governance of reserves is required to maximise IT enhancements and the centralisation process.	
9	**HR Report:** (For information and discussion) BL provided a verbal update relating to the Trust's strategic objectives which covered the following:	**BL** **20 Minutes**

	• Application Tracking System: BL confirmed that the implementation of an Applicant Tracking System will support the Trust in modernising and streamlining recruitment processes. • Leadership Essentials Programme: BL confirmed that this programme is being piloted on 07/12 and 08/12, adding that this offer will be ongoing and will be offered to staff across the Trust covering a range of roles. • Staff Offer (EAP): BL explained the Trust are doing a body of work to highlight the TCAT Staff Offer covering offers such as TCAT Plus, career development and health and wellbeing services. • HR Systems: Further enhancements are required with Civica to make most effective use of this platform such as automated workflows. • Teacher Pay: Confirmed that all national pay agreements are complete. • Business Support Meetings: BL explained that generally, areas are well managed. BL added that trends are being analysed. • Workforce Information: BL stated that sickness has slightly increased, adding that this has been impacted by a number of long-term sickness. BL explained that trends will be further analysed. ***A Trustee challenged*** that there is a higher turnover of support staff roles. ***BL explained*** that Support Staff roles are typically lower paid, and this is a challenged that has been acknowledged by TCAT, which has resulted in TCAT's expansion of the Employer Offer. AL added that there were a number of retirements that have impacted on this data. A Trustee	
10	**Building and Operations Report:** (For information and discussion) AL referred to the presentation of a Trust-wide Business Support Scorecard. AL explained the Trust-wide Scorecard is in the process of being developed by Laura Fletcher with the hope that this will be presented at the next meeting in March. ***A Trustee asked*** who discusses the Business Support Scorecard. AL confirmed that the Business Support Scorecard is discussed with Heads, Chairs of Governors, CEO, AL, BL, DH and Lisa Gannon. ***The Chair queried*** if the Heads are open to the review of the Business Support Scorecard.	**AL 25 Minutes**

	AL stated that the purpose of the Business Support meeting is to support academies with their key operational priorities, not to pose risk. A Trustee commented that from their previous experience as a Chair of Governors at a TCAT academy, the process is thorough, but not a threat to Headteachers. AL concluded by stating that the Business Support Scorecard will be more meaningful going forward. ***The Committee made the decision that the individual academy Business Support Scorecards are an effective tool which presents high-level data to drive meaningful discussion.*** Capital Projects: AL shared that academies have always had a 'Five-Year Management Plan' and added that the Estates and IT Planning proposals will form a more strategic direction of travel. AL shared that this plan will feed into the Capital Projects Plan that will be shared with the Committee in March 2026. Solar Update: AL shared that six academies have been granted solar panel funding via the Great British Energy Project, led by Head of Estates, Paul Sinnottt. ***A Trustee asked*** how much money is required to fund this. AL confirmed that for the six academies who have been selected by the Great British Energy Project, there will be no charge for these particular schools due to this being a fully funded project. AL added that TCAT are liaising with Solar for Schools for the implementation of solar for the remaining academies to support with further significant cost savings. iPad Tender: AL shared that there are 825 iPads required for teaching staff across the Trust as part of the Digital Strategy, one that has been carefully developed with a huge amount of research incorporated into the planning and preparations for this strategy. AL explained the procurement process has been followed and the key drive for the supplier appointment has been the high-quality training for TCAT staff to ensure strong implementation. AL assured the committee that an effective project plan has been developed by Sync, the preferred provider, adding Sync will start the iPad rollout in December. ***AL requested formal approval from the Committee to purchase the 825 iPads required for the implementation of the TCAT Digital Strategy.***	

	The Committee gave their formal approval to proceed with the purchasing of iPads. AL added that the roll-out of iPads will be gradual, with primary academies being the first to receive the devices. ***A Trustee asked*** if the selected company will be responsible for setting up the devices. ***AL confirmed*** that Sync would be leading on all parts of the implementation in collaboration with Abtec, TCAT's third-party IT support provider. ***The CFO asked*** if devices will be tagged. AL confirmed that all devices will be tagged and tracked. ***The Committee made the decision that clear governance is required to ensure security and insurance measures are in place once staff have been allocated a device.*** Centralisation of IT Service: AL referred to a paper that had been presented to the committee in June 2025. AL explained that detailed research has taken place as well as discussions with the Executive Team to discuss the way in which IT could be centralised. AL explained that due to one tenancy and one network, IT can be managed anywhere. AL added that HALO, the Trust's IT Helpdesk has allowed the Trust to monitor IT requests. AL shared that primary academies are serviced through the third-party provider, Abtec, often resulting in slower response times when HALO (IT Helpdesk) tickets are raised. AL referred to the disparity in secondary academies and the volume of support on site at secondary academies.AL shared that the Trust's proposal is to look at bringing the IT into a centralised service, based on three levels which are as follows: - Field Technicians - Senior Leaders AL shared that if the Trust moved towards this structure, there would be a much more streamlined, consistent approach. AL explained that the approach that has been taken by the Trust has been implemented across a range of Trusts where the centralised approach has been effective. AL offered to take questions. ***The Chair asked*** if any IT movements would need to be made AL confirmed the only example would be Priestley College, due to their MIS system being SIMs.	

	A Trustee asked if staff will be allocated a base AL explained that colleagues will have a member of staff based at the academy, and where required, may be deployed to support other academies ***The Chair recommended*** that cross-collaborative opportunities need to be made. AL confirmed that the IT Hub structure allows this. ***A Trustee asked*** if the HALO platform is virtual. AL confirmed that HALO is virtual and can be tracked and monitored anywhere. ***AL sought approval from the Committee for the centralisation of IT.*** ***The Committee unanimously approved this centralisation of IT, adding that this will be a more effective process.***	
11	**Policies:** (For approval): BL briefly presented a number of HR policies for the Committee's approval. BL shared that recommendations had been received by a Trustee prior to the meeting, and that all recommendations have been considered and will be applied. The policies were delivered as follows: TCAT Redundancy Policy: BL explained that due to legal changes, there have been some amendments to the policy. BL added that this policy was shared with JCNC who TCAT will work in collaboration with ***A Trustee asked*** if redundancy payments are in line with national. ***BL shared that*** TCAT redundancy is slightly higher **The TCAT Redundancy Policy was approved by the Committee.** TCAT Support Staff Appraisal Policy: BL shared the reference to the sixth form legacy and role of the Local Governing Challenge Board has been acknowledged with the support of JCNC. **The TCAT Support Staff Appraisal Policy was approved by the Committee.** TCAT Staff Capability Policy: BL explained that this policy is a refresh to avoid repetition. BL added more guidance has been added to acute performance, Early Career and	**BL/AL 10 Minutes**

	The TCAT Staff Capability Policy was approved by the Committee. Data Protection Policies: AL shared that recommendations from the ICO. AL shared that a request was made for the ICO to review the updated policies • TCAT Data Protection Policy • TCAT PRIVACY NOTICE - Child Friendly • TCAT PRIVACY NOTICE Adult Learners • TCAT PRIVACY NOTICE Alumni • TCAT PRIVACY NOTICE Alumni • TCAT PRIVACY NOTICE Job Applicants • TCAT PRIVACY NOTICE Parents and Carers • TCAT PRIVACY NOTICE Pupils • TCAT PRIVACY NOTICE Staff • TCAT PRIVACY NOTICE Staff • TCAT PRIVACY NOTICE Trustees and Governors • TCAT PRIVACY NOTICE Visitor and General Public Statement ***AL sought approval*** for the Data Protection policies. ***All Policies were unanimously approved subject to ICO approval on 16/12/2025.***	
12	**AOB:** There was no other business discussed during this meeting.	
13	**Date and time of next meetings: (For information)** The Chair confirmed the next meeting is scheduled to be held on Thursday 12th March 2026, 5:30-7:30pm.	
14	**Part Two: Confidential Items** Part Two Confidential Items have been captured in a separate Part Two document.	

The meeting was closed by the Chair at 19:06.

Minute Reference	Action to be taken	By Whom	Completion Date
8	Present TCAT Funding Strategy to Trust Board.	DH	11/12/2025
10	Place the order for 825 iPads with the selected supplier (Sync) and commence rollout starting with the primary academies.	TL	
10	Coordinate with Sync to finalise the project plan for iPad rollout, ensuring the training offer and implementation schedule meet trust requirements.	TL	
10	Prepare and initiate the staff reorganisation process for centralising the IT service, including drafting the restructure plan for	AL	

	next term and communicating with affected staff.		
11	Implement amendments to Redundancy, Appraisal, and Staff Capability policies.	BL	ASAP
11	Present the updated data protection policies and privacy notices to the ICO on 16/12/2025 for their review and incorporate any required changes following their feedback.	AL	19/12/2025