Diptford School – Minutes of School Ethos Committee meeting, 13 September 2021 (Adopted 4 November 2021)

Present: Roger Knight (chair), Jodie Churchward, Helen Price, Rebecca Fitness, Lucy Carrol, Rev David Sayle

Apologies: Janet Watts

1. Roger welcomed everybody to the first meeting of the School year. As discussed at the previous meeting, the membership had not been refreshed at this time, although future arrangements are included on the agenda.

Previous minutes

**2.** The draft minutes of the previous meeting of 12 July 2021 were reviewed and adopted, subject to some amendments which Ali Reid had suggested in relation to the discussion of RE. Lucy asked for confirmation that minutes are posted to the website – they are, in draft and then in final form once adopted. The importance of ensuring that the School’s website is kept up to date, for the benefit of parents and prospective parents, and with the knowledge that others, eg Ofsted or SIAMS, might take a ‘deep dive’ was discussed and noted. Roger said that he had noted a discrepancy in the group’s representation and would ask Rachael to correct this.

Matters arising

a) Terms of reference

3. The newly adopted terms of reference have been uploaded to the website.

b) SEF document

4. Jodie had circulated a revised SEF, for information rather than necessarily for review. She emphasised that the SEF is very much a dynamic document, being updated continually.

c) Interaction with Pupil Ethos Group (PEGs)

5. In the new Covid regime it should now be possible to interact with the PEGs. Jodie reported that Mrs Gilbey is taking the lead with the PEGs.

d) Sustainability event

6. Because of other planned events during this term the proposed sustainability event has been pushed back to the Spring term.

e) Music in the School

7. Further to the prior discussion as to recorder lessons, there was a discussion of what is available both in school and outside school hours from the same tutors. Parents are asking, and it was agreed that something should go into the newsletter or onto the website about what is available.

Update from Jodie

8. Jodie reported that she and the teaching staff, with support from Sharon Lord, had utilised one of the inset days at the beginning of term to focus on SIAMS, in the knowledge that an inspection will take place during the Autumn term. Mrs Gilbey will be reactivating the PEGs group and the new teacher, Miss Pritchard, has been briefed in the school’s approach to collective worship. The aim is to be ready for the inspection. Jodie believes that the school stared well the previous week, and that they have a lot in store for the next few weeks.

9. The initiative for Random Acts of Kindness around the village commenced with posies of fresh flowers being delivered to a number of village residents. At least two residents had expressed thanks, with one coming into the School to do so, and this, albeit a small start, was gratifying. Helen reported that her children, who had participated, had told her that the children involved had enjoyed the experience and that they had received thanks on the doorsteps. A big plus had been the discussions with the children as to why they were doing this and how it would make people feel.

10. A lot is planned, with the PEGs and for collective worship, and once things have settled down, after a few weeks, the School would like to arrange for members of the committee to visit the School to observe, participate and talk with staff and pupils.

11. In terms of evidence of this activity and these plans, Jodie noted that this is all discussed at the weekly staff meetings which are minuted.

12. Pupil numbers, excluding the nursery which is overflowing, were up to 64-65 despite some expected newcomers to the village not materialising and other families are showing interest so Jodie is hopeful of getting to 70. The committee saw this increase as a major achievement. Jodie believes that a number of factors have contributed – the school in Harbertonford being full, some unique offerings including the wrap around care, word of mouth from satisfied parents, and a number of families with younger children moving into the Village and its surrounds.

13. Although it’s early days, the new class structure and room allocations appear to be working well for both staff and pupils. Jodie reported a positive vibe around the School and explained that some banners have been provided to be placed at strategic roadside positions around the village to promote the School. The Parish Hall is back in use which is positive.

14. There will be at Open Day later this term but most likely after half term once things have settled down and in particular when Mrs Pritchard is well established.

15. Lucy asked about the school-wide CW moving back into the church. Jodie said that this had not happened yet but with the School being one bubble now she saw no reason why this couldn’t happen, perhaps once every two weeks at first, and that she would like to proceed on that basis. Rev David was in agreement with this. Lucy asked whether any assistance is required with the Harvest and Christmas festivities later this term. Jodie’s plan is for the School to celebrate Harvest in its bubble and to record the event for the parents on this occasion.

16. Becca asked about any plans to get PIPS up and running again. Jodie said that she had had a number of discussions with Rev David about trying to establish something on Fridays for young children (both pre-schoolers from the School and younger children from the village) involving the community, the School and the Church. She needs to discuss this with Angela Wild, who was previously involved with PIPS. Rev David noted that, from the Church’s viewpoint, PIPS, which had been a community and church led initiative, is closed. However he thought that, with the Hall open again, it should be possible to implement a community/Church/School arrangement for the younger children of the village. The focus will be on Stories, Music and Actions. However, because this will involve the community and because there are some residual Covid concerns, this is likely to move slowly for the time being.

Updated SEF, comments

17. Roger wondered whether the SEF made enough of the School’s success in growing numbers which as had been discussed reflected a number of positive factors about the School and its clear Vision and values. Jodie agreed to give this consideration but said also that she doesn’t want to overload the document and would prefer to leave some matters to discussion and demonstration. Roger will meet separately with Jodie to discuss this further. There were no other comments.

Vision and Leadership

18. Roger noted that he had included this on the agenda because the committee’s terms of reference suggested a rolling deeper dive into different aspects of the SIAMS framework. He noted that Vision and Leadership is well covered in the SEF and that the vision in particular has been discussed by this group previously. Jodie reiterated that the approach is continually evolving and the documentation updated to reflect new activity in the School.

19. Roger asked how the School bring new staff members up to speed with the Vision etc. Jodie said that the previous week, in advance of the new term she and Mrs Gilbey (CW) and Ms Reid (RE) had spent a morning going through this, and SIAMS more generally, with Ms Pritchard and the new Nursery assistant. Lucy recalled, from being involved in interviewing Ms Pritchard that she has a CoE background and had presented well on Values at her interview, and so should be a useful resource in this respect.

20. Roger also asked how Jodie was addressing the couple of points raised in the previous SIAMS report. One related to the breath of faiths explored in CW and this had been discussed at previous meetings. The second related to introducing Diptford pupils to increased cultural diversity. Jodie reported that she has recently signed the School up to a Global Neighbours project, providing links to schools in other countries. She will be able to talk more to this at the next meeting. Lucy asked about pen pals etc and buddies in Care and Nursing homes. Jodie is enthusiastic about this type of contact and referred to a friend of hers working at a school in Germany with whom she is trying to establish links. Helen said that her sister is head of a junior school in Switzerland and that she will provide further details to Jodie and make some enquiries about possible links.

FODS Update and other Community thoughts

21. Roger noted that FODS has just about covered the projected cost of the canopy through fund raising and allocation from general funds. Lucy has been taking, with Jodie, the lead on this project on behalf of the wider parent group and she explained the latest plans, including the likely engagement of parents in the construction work, considerably reducing the likely cost and illustrating the value of the parent relationship. The approval of the Diocese is required and this process is commencing but provided the construction does not exceed specified size limits Buildings and Planning consents and permissions are not required. Because of the lead time for the main canopy component and the need for Diocesan review, construction is likely to be delayed until the Christmas holidays.

22. Lucy explained how she is attempting to convince the Trust to do something about the poor state of the gutters and fascias of the main school building, from a Trust/School budget. She and Jodie and seeking quotes for the work, again engaging parents if possible. Lucy also explained the intended programme of regular ‘clean-up’ days to keep the School looking at its best.

23. The committee thanked Lucy for all of her efforts with these initiatives.

24. FODS focus has now turned to replenishing its reserves and possible grant applications for the proposed seating area. Upcoming events are Diptfest, to be held on the School field later in the week, and participation in the Totnes Rotary Raft race on 10 October. Later in the term there will be the normal Christmas Card and Shopping Bag opportunities – Jodie said that if possible she would like to leave preparation for these until after half term – and possibly a disco in the Hall. Jodie will give consideration to arrangements for Christmas lunch and a craft day.

25. There followed a lengthy discussion of how better to engage the Village in School and FODS activities. Whilst a few residents are strong supporters of the School, they are few. It was concluded that we should not be over ambitious and/or have high expectations; the demographics suggest that it will be difficult to change attitudes. Small initiatives that can be sustained, such as the distribution of flowers and the proposed Music, Books and Games project, are probably the best way to proceed. There are signs that the demographics may be starting to change; in particular a number of younger families with children of primary or pre-school age or younger have moved into the village and surrounding areas recently, and most have engaged with the School, contributing to the higher numbers on roll.

26. The Village Advent Fare is to be held this year; this is rarely a successful event for a FODS table and it was suggested that the School might support the event in a different way, perhaps by singing carols or by providing an art exhibition. Jodie is hopeful that the proposed Sustainability event, planned for the Spring Term, will attract village support and Lucy mentioned that she has joined a local committee to plan for Jubilee celebrations during 2022.

Parental concerns and questions.

27. The committee was aware that a group of parents, many of them medics or otherwise familiar with the NHS, had been in correspondence with Jodie and the Trust’s Chief Executive to raise concerns about the Covid precautions in the School for the new term. Helen clearly and concisely explained the parents’ views. She emphasised that this was not a criticism of the School or any of its staff; it was that, whilst acknowledging that the School and presumably the Trust was following Government guidance, with the benefit of their experience dealing more closely with Covid and the prevention of its spread, these parents considered that the procedures could be enhanced and were making a number of recommendations. The committee decided that this was not something in which it should involve itself and noted that the Trust’s Chief Executive was engaging with a representative of the parent group and had offered to host a meeting, at Diptford, to discuss the matter.

28. Some questions had been raised about the arrangements for serving lunches in the new term, which the Hall now being used, and in particular the practice of one group of children assisting another. Jodie explained that the school had been trying different approaches in an attempt to identify the best way of getting the children through the serving efficiently and back as quickly as possible to the fresh air outside. She considered that this had now been sorted out satisfactorily.

29. One parent had expressed particular thanks for the attention provided to her child who had previously been nervous about coming to school each day but was now completely the opposite following individual attention from the teacher.

Committee arrangements for 2021/22

30. Roger acknowledged that Jodie had previously expressed the wish that the committee and its membership remain as is at least until the expected SIAMS inspection but wondered whether some form of communication to parents should be made. It was agreed that Roger would draft something for inclusion in the weekly newsletter bringing the committee to the intention of parents and asking that anybody who required further information or who might wish to participate when membership is refreshed should identify themselves.

Roger Knight