

Company Registration Number: 08330636 (England & Wales)

ASPIRE FREE SCHOOL ACADEMY TRUST
(A Company Limited by Guarantee)

ANNUAL REPORT AND FINANCIAL STATEMENTS
FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 AUGUST 2023

ASPIRE FREE SCHOOL ACADEMY TRUST
(A Company Limited by Guarantee)

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REFERENCE AND ADMINISTRATIVE DETAILS

Members

P Collins
A Dickenson
P Hanson
C Hart
S Powell

Governors

J Bateman
P Collins, Chairman
C Hart, Vice Chair
P Hines
C Lewis (retired 7 December 2022)
M Scriven
P Stephens
S Stevenson, Accounting Officer
C Taylor
D Titterton
L Alexander (appointed 2 February 2023)
B Payne (appointed 2 February 2023)
R Rainbird-Hitchins (appointed 1 September 2023)

Company registered number

08330636

Company name

Aspire Free School Academy Trust

Principal and registered office

Bridgwater Road
Worcester
WR4 9FQ

Company secretary

Lewis Thomas

Senior leadership team

S Stevenson, Head Teacher
A Phillpots, Deputy Head Teacher
L Bowles, Director of Operations -(resigned 31st August 2023)
L Thomas, Director of Lifelong Learning
A Lloyd, Assistant Head Teacher
R Rainbird-Hitchins, Designated Safeguarding Lead

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REFERENCE AND ADMINISTRATIVE DETAILS (CONTINUED)
FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 AUGUST 2023

Independent auditor

Crowe U.K. LLP
Black Country House
Rounds Green Road
Oldbury
West Midlands
B69 2DG

Bankers

Lloyds Bank plc
The Cross
Worcester
Hereford and Worcester
WR1 3PY

ASPIRE FREE SCHOOL ACADEMY TRUST
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GOVERNORS' REPORT
FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 AUGUST 2023

The Governors present their annual report together with the financial statements and auditor's report of the charitable company for the period 1st September 2021 to 31st August 2023. The annual report serves the purposes of both a governors' report, and a directors' report under company law.

The Trust operates an Alternative Provision Academy for pupils aged 11 to 16 serving to accept pupils from schools within Worcester City, the county of Worcestershire and further afield if appropriate. The Academy was funded for 105 FTE pupils; during the year ending 31st August 2023 the Academy worked with and registered 137 young people.

Structure, governance and management

a. Constitution

The Aspire Free School Academy Trust is a company limited by guarantee and an exempt charity.

The charitable company's Memorandum, Articles of Association and Funding Agreement are the primary governing documents of academy trust. The governors of The Aspire Free School Academy Trust are also the directors of the charitable company for the purposes of company law. The charitable company is known as The Aspire Academy and was incorporated on 13th December 2012.

Details of the governors who served during the year are included in the Reference and Administrative Details of the Academy on page 1.

b. Members' liability

Each member of the charitable company undertakes to contribute to the assets of the charitable company in the event of it being wound up while they are a member, or within one year after they cease to be a member, such amount as may be required, not exceeding £10, for the debts and liabilities contracted before they ceased to be a member.

c. Governors' indemnities

During the period, an indemnity from the charitable company was available to the directors against liabilities that might be incurred by them in defending proceedings against them in respect of the affairs of the charitable company. The indemnity is subject to the provisions of the Companies Act 2006 and is set out in the Articles of Association.

d. Method of recruitment and appointment or election of Governors

The Academy's Board of Governors is subject to retirement by rotation. Governors are eligible for re-election at the meeting at which they retire. The governors to retire are those who have served the longest in office since their appointment or re-election. New governors are recruited in accordance with the Articles of Association and 'A Guide to the Law for School Governors'. The term of office for any governor is 4 years, although this time limit does not apply to the Head Teacher.

e. Policies adopted for the induction and training of Governors

The Academy procures governor support services provided by Worcestershire Children First. Additional training is provided as required based on individual or collective need. External advice and support is commissioned where necessary.

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GOVERNORS' REPORT (CONTINUED)
FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 AUGUST 2023

Structure, governance and management (continued)

f. Organisational structure

The full Board of Governors met four times during the period 1st September 2022 to 31st August 2023. The Board establishes an overall framework for the governance of the Academy and determines membership, terms of reference and procedures of committees and other groups. It receives reports, including policies, from its committees for adoption. It monitors the activities of the committees through the minutes of their meetings. The Board may from time to time establish working groups to perform specific tasks over a limited timescale.

The governors are responsible for setting general policy; adopting an annual improvement plan and budget; approving the statutory accounts; monitoring the Academy by the use of budgets and other data; and making major decisions about the direction of the Academy, capital expenditure and staff appointments.

During the financial year two sub committees with delegated powers from the Board of Governors have met:

Finance & Human Resources met Two times during the period and is responsible for monitoring, evaluating and reviewing policy and performance in relation to financial management; compliance with reporting and regulatory requirements of reporting; drafting the annual budget, including setting staffing levels, all personnel issues and the annual review/recommendation of pay; and discussing all resource and premises issues, including health and safety.

Teaching & Learning met twice during the period and is responsible for monitoring, evaluation and review of Academy policy, practice and performance in relation to curriculum planning, communications, target setting and assessment and examinations.

The following decisions are reserved to the full Board of Governors: to consider any proposals for changes to the status or constitution of the Academy and its committee structure; to appoint or remove the Chair and/or Vice Chair; to appoint the Head Teacher and Clerk to the Governors; to approve the annual School Improvement Plan, annual financial statements and the annual budget.

The Board of Governors have devolved responsibility for the day to day management of the Academy to the Head Teacher.

The Academy has a leadership structure which consists of the governors and Senior Leadership Team (SLT). The aim of the leadership structure is to devolve responsibility and encourage involvement in decision making at all levels. The Senior Leadership Team, as described in the Reference and Administrative Details on page 1, operates at an executive level, implementing the policies laid down by the governors and reporting back to them.

The Head Teacher, Director of Operations and Finance and Human Resources Committee are responsible for the authorisation of spending within agreed budgets. The Head Teacher is responsible for the appointment of staff and is the Accounting Officer.

g. Arrangements for setting pay and remuneration of key management personnel

The key management personnel of the Academy are the Senior Leadership Team. The pay and remuneration of members of the leadership team, and those staff who are directors/governors, is set following a system of performance management in accordance with the appropriate Performance Management Policy, which is reviewed annually. In the case of the Head Teacher, performance management was undertaken by the Chair of the full Governing Body and the chair of the Finance & HR Committee. Remuneration budgets are set annually and all recommendations for salary increases are approved by the Finance & Human Resources Committee.

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GOVERNORS' REPORT (CONTINUED)
FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 AUGUST 2023

Objectives and activities

a. Objects and aims

The objects of the Aspire Free School Academy Trust are set out in the Company's Articles of Association.

The Board of Governors continue to set the Academy's strategic aims through the Academy's School Improvement Plan. These aims are monitored closely by the Board of Governors by way of Head Teacher and Senior Leadership Team reports and through the work of sub committees.

b. Objectives, strategies and activities

The aims and objectives of the Academy are derived from its mission statement which is to "work with our community, local employers and providers and voluntary organisations so we can offer the very best opportunities for our pupils".

Our key aim is to provide an outstanding, educational learning experience for pupils, thereby enabling them to progress to further education, employment or training, potentially in apprenticeships.

The objectives for the forthcoming year are outlined in the School Improvement Plan; the headline priorities are to:

- To complete the merger with Esteem Multi Academy Trust once approved by the DfE, West Midlands Region.
- To positively respond to the advice and actions from the 'Good' Ofsted inspection report in June 2023 by creating and completing a Post Ofsted Improvement Plan.
- Continue to develop stronger financial benchmarking and school resource management awareness of leaders following the SRMA visit in December 2022.
- Develop the Outreach programme and Twilight school to fully support our on roll numbers of pupils to secure the highest funding in the 24/25 round of funding from the ESFA.
- Generate a strong extra-curricular programme of sport and activities in 'Beyond Aspire', looking to source grant funding to help with developmental costs.
- Re-establish strong improvement in attendance of pupils to school and to lessons from start points.
- Continue to support the pupils with additional needs in the most appropriate way with interventions and in securing Education Health and Care Plans where appropriate.
- Recruit additional support to meet the increasing needs of the pupil cohort on referral.
- Secure all points established following the review of SEND by Chadsgrove Special School in 2022.
- Deepen the evidence of strong progress for pupils across the curriculum including in reading.
- Baseline pupils and measure progress to this in Social, Emotional and Mental Health.
- Continue to improve the academic outcomes for pupils with smarter targets and an enhanced baseline picture and utilising a more robust academic assessment progression system.
- Drive improvement in the quality of all teaching and learning and up-skill all staff to achieve excellence through in-house training and development.
- Continue to improve the management of behaviours to impact more positively on pupil behaviour and welfare using the ARBOR MIS to generate the evidence base from start point.
- Build staff skills on the de-escalation training received and the restorative training that staff have received so that school is a calmer environment.
- Continue to embed the therapeutic services of the academy in order to meet the increasing mental health needs of pupils more effectively. We are now a Trauma Informed School with a Level 5 qualified practitioner and Mental Health Awareness Lead. Trauma informed practices and restorative Thinking practices are embedded in school processes and policies. In response to the pandemic there has been an increased focus on supporting well being for both staff and pupils. Staff completed another well-being twilight Inset in July 2023 and work is ongoing to cement the best practices and extend support further following the implementation of our Workload and Well Being Charter.

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GOVERNORS' REPORT (CONTINUED)
FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 AUGUST 2023

Objectives and activities (continued)

- Continue to increase the number of pupils sustaining destinations post 16 and to effectively monitor this for the 16 to 18 phase of former pupils.
- Extend and develop all safeguarding practices including contextual safeguarding information.
- Successfully work towards and beyond the targets set out by Ofsted in May 2017 and be in a position to be potentially graded with some outstanding areas at the next inspection.
- To continually look to improve the diversity, skills and knowledge of the governing body as it transfers to a Local Governing Body upon merger with Esteem MAT.
- Build strong relationships with external stakeholders; Worcester Warriors Foundation, the Alternative Provision Head Teacher Group and Worcester Childrens First
- Explore the possibility of making a significant change to the academy by developing a 6th Form

c. Public benefit

In setting our objectives and planning our activities, the governors have carefully considered the Charity Commission's guidance on public benefit.

The Aspire Free School Academy Trust is fully committed to working in partnership with a variety of organisations to ensure that it is at the centre of its community and that it can access a wide range of services, advice and opportunities to support the education and outcomes for its pupils.

We value highly our relationship with the parents/carers of our pupils to ensure better outcomes for them. We have developed systems to provide an effective access of communication between the Academy and home, and also building on strategies to involve hard to reach parents through our contacts with community groups. By working together, we are able to meet our aim of ensuring that all who come to The Aspire Academy will find it challenging, stimulating, supportive, a happy place to be and will enjoy their time here.

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GOVERNORS' REPORT (CONTINUED)
FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 AUGUST 2023

Objectives and activities (continued)

Strategic report

Achievements and performance

In order to secure greater improvement in our outcomes and achievements, we appointed Karen Hayes as our School Improvement Partner in 2022. Karen works for Esteem MAT in Derbyshire, but is a former Head Teacher of an AP Free School (rated Outstanding) and a current HMI with enhanced Alternative Provision training. The visits and interventions Karen suggested went some way to helping us secure 'Good'.

The Annual Prize Giving event moved to the Amateur Worcester Rugby Club this year and was again successful.

The Aspire Academy successfully embedded its own Well Being and Workload Charter for Staff during the course of last year making a commitment to the support of staff as a priority, not a luxury.

The Head Teacher has concluded his NPQ in Executive Leadership. Richard Rainbird-Hitchins is nearing completion of the NPQ in Senior Leadership which complements his role as the Designated Safeguarding Lead. Safeguarding practices were strengthened and enhanced in the last 12 months under his leadership. Zoe Kingston was embedded as our Mental Health and Well-Being Lead and having completed the DfE stipulated mandatory training for Leaders in this role, again to complement the training she had undertaken for TISUK. We are officially a Trauma Informed School, and our ethos, policies and practices reflect the language of a TISUK school. Zoe has successfully established a database of support and interventions for pupils with challenging mental health in need of extensive support in addition to inviting in specialist support staff from sexual health organisation Purple Leaf. Nick Bruton, Head of Maths and Head of Key Year 10 is concluding an NPQ in Teaching and Learning. He has established links with a mainstream school in the city to support the development of maths. Andy Phillpots Deputy Headteacher is concluding his NPQ in Headship. Other staff are considering applications as free courses are still available for 2023/24.

The successful establishment of an induction centre to baseline pupils upon entry proved significant in our development of a greater understanding of our pupils. Pupils complete it before entry to the school and progress is mapped from these baselines in Reading, English and Maths. This is led by Elizabeth Milroy our Examinations Officer.

In June Attendance from baseline was recorded as 13.1% average improvement.

The Health & Safety Committee continues to meet three times per year to ensure compliance to Health and Safety law and statutory functions, including fire safety, legionella checks, risk assessment and latterly RAAC.

The H&S committee Chair is NEBOSH trained, with three other members holding an IOSH training certificate.

H&S and statutory requirement safety checks are carried out as required, including:

- Routine PAT testing on electrical appliances.
- Alarms and security.
- Annual lift safety check and other lifting equipment.
- Gas checks.
- Legionella checks and water sampling.
- Boilers and pressure vessels.

All H&S risk assessments are completed annually, including classrooms and school spaces including DSE (Display Screen Equipment) for regular users.

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GOVERNORS' REPORT (CONTINUED)
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Strategic report (continued)

Achievements and performance (continued)

The Academy has an SLA with Acivico (Property Management Services) who co-ordinate the Academy's routine property service/maintenance requirements and remedial works, and who offer advice and support when required.

Key Performance indicators

In June 2023, a 'Good' Ofsted rating for overall effectiveness was received following a two-day Section 8 inspection. The two main recommendations are included below:

What does the school need to do to improve? (Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- Leaders do not ensure that pupils who are at the earliest stages of reading get the help they need. This means that gaps in pupils' phonic knowledge persist, and they are not catching up quickly enough. Leaders should ensure that these pupils receive the help they need to become more confident and fluent readers.
- Leaders do not systematically check and review the impact of the interventions they implement to support pupils' social, emotional and mental health needs. This limits leaders' ability to identify quickly what is working well and whether changes are needed to support pupils further. Leaders should ensure that they routinely monitor, review and evaluate the interventions they have in place and take action to adapt these interventions where needed, according to what they find.

Alongside our school improvement priorities, we have created a Post Ofsted Improvement Plan.

In December 2022 we hosted a School Resource Management Advisor visit as directed by the ESFA. We provided robust responses to the recommendations and worked incredibly hard to mitigate much of the report, to secure funding and avoid any restructuring and staff redundancies. Reports were sent through to ESFA in the Spring and Summer of 2023 alongside our strengthened budget.

Our census figures ahead of the ESFA November funding application are Term 1 (January) 98 on roll term 2 (May) 113 on roll and at time of writing we have 104 pupils on roll with 30 referrals pending ahead of the term 3 census collection in October.

Following a research project and due diligence on a variety of Multi Academy Trusts the decision to approach Esteem MAT (a SEND and Alternative Provision focussed MAT) was taken by the Full Governing Body. A full Due Diligence Review was undertaken by the Esteem Executive Team in May 2023 to provide evidence for their Trustees to approve a decision to merge, which they duly took. The DfE are due to approve the decision in November 2023 at the Regional Schools Commission HT Roundtable meeting for the West Midlands Region. If approved, then the possibility of the merger happening by February 2024 is a distinct possibility.

We are again 100% compliant to the Gatsby Careers benchmarks, thanks to the hard work of Careers Lead Lewis Thomas.

In January 2023 we took on a new project working with an Outreach cohort of pupils with Worcester Children's First. This cohort was made up of pupils missing education (Children Unable to attend School), previously home educated or deemed vulnerable by virtue of their mental health needs. These pupils were supported with safeguarding, academic support and the opportunity to sit public examinations in English Language, English Literature, Mathematics and GCSE Physics, alongside Functional Skills and Entry Level examinations in English and Mathematics. Results are shared on our website.

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GOVERNORS' REPORT (CONTINUED)
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Strategic report (continued)

Achievements and performance (continued)

At time of writing, 4 pupils out of 23 however did NOT have a secure destination in July 2023. Work is ongoing to establish whether pupils Not NEET (Not in Education Employment or Training). This figure is reported to the local authority and members and governors in December.

Attendance for 2022/23 was 59.3% for all pupils on roll. With lowest 10% of pupils removed, this was 64% for pupils on roll. Whole school attendance YTD (all pupils worked with) 53.6%. With lowest 10% of these pupils removed was 55.8%

The school continues to adopt the practices of "Living with respiratory illnesses" post COVID. This is reflected in Policy and practice throughout the school. The impact of respiratory illness on school performance and outcomes is minimal.

a. Going concern

After making appropriate enquiries, the board of Governors has a reasonable expectation that the academy trust has adequate resources to continue in operational existence for the foreseeable future. Further details regarding the adoption of the going concern basis can be found in the Statement of Accounting Policies.

Whilst the Governors have approved an in principle transfer to a Multi Academy Trust in the future, this has yet to be ratified by the ESFA.

The Governors are satisfied that the Academy has sufficient resources to continue operationally as a single academy trust for at least twelve months from the date of issue of these financial statements. For this reason, it continues to adopt the going concern basis in preparing the financial statements.

Financial review

Restricted General Fund

The Academy's income was received from the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) by way of the General Annual Grant (GAG), Pupil Premium, COVID Recovery Grant and National Tutoring Program Funding; 'Top Up' funding from referring schools, based on actual pupil places; funding from the LA in respect of referred pupil places and the Teacher Pay and Employer ER Pension Contribution grants. The use of this funding is restricted to the Academy's charitable activities – its educational operations

This revenue income, and associated revenue expenditure, are detailed in the SOFA. General Restricted Fund income for the period was £1,866,193; expenditure against the fund was £1,745,593, actuarial gains in the fund were £216,000 and transfers out were £4,923. The overall Restricted General Fund reserves are £125,523 before the pension deficit of (£373,000).

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GOVERNORS' REPORT (CONTINUED)
FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 AUGUST 2023

Strategic report (continued)

Unrestricted Funds

Income received into the Unrestricted Fund was £21,906. Expenditure was £nil for the year. The unrestricted funds are the Academy's free reserves. The overall Unrestricted Fund reserves are £55,264.

Restricted Fixed Asset Fund

The following capital income was received during the year:

- ESFA Formula Capital Funding of £6,126
- Additional ESFA Capital Funding of £12,932

The Restricted Fixed Asset Fund balance is reduced by any disposals made together with the annual depreciation charge over the expected useful life of the assets concerned in line with the Academy's depreciation policy.

The SOFA details a £88,442 Restricted Fixed Asset Fund period end deficit after transfers between funds.

Summary of Financial Performance

Total fund balance as at 31 August 2023 was £4,744,966 comprising £55,264, £821,587 and £3,868,115 in Unrestricted, Restricted General and Restricted Fixed Asset Funds respectively.

Balance Sheet

The Academy's assets are predominantly used for providing education to school pupils. The net book value of the Academy's tangible fixed assets was £3,868,115 as at 31 August 2023. The movement in this account is detailed in note 14.

Cash in hand at 31 August 2023 was £924,448.

a. Reserves policy

The Reserves Policy determines that the Academy should aim to maintain a minimum level of free reserves at an average of three month's average expenditure, for 2023/24 this is expected to be £473k. To provide sufficient working capital to cover timing issues between spending and the receipt of grants, and to provide a cushion to deal with unexpected emergencies such as urgent maintenance, a cash balance of £300k should be maintained. To enable the Academy to maintain this level of free reserves we undertake to uphold the principles of best value, maintain the policy undertaking price comparisons and competitive tendering and make strategic efficiency savings where possible.

A deficit of £373,000 existed in respect of the Local Government Pension Scheme at the start of the period; the 2023 actuarial valuation showed a deficit of £147,000 at the close of the period. The DfE have made assurances that in the event of a school closure, they would meet any deficit in the scheme.

As at 31 August 2023 the fund balances were:

- Unrestricted Fund: £55,264
- Restricted General Fund: £821,587
- Free reserves: £3,868,115

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GOVERNORS' REPORT (CONTINUED)
FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 AUGUST 2023

b. Investment policy

The governing body is responsible for setting the investment policy. The day to day responsibility for managing this function has been delegated to the Director of Operations. To attract additional income, the Academy operates a 32-day notice deposit account. Where cash flow balances indicate a continued cash balance in excess of £300,000 the difference will be available for deposit into the Academy's deposit account.

c. Principal risks and uncertainties

The Board of Governors has a comprehensive risk management process to identify and monitor the risks faced by the Academy. The principal risks identified include governance, statutory compliance, finance, insurance, attainment, attendance, behaviour, health and safety, organisation, operations, safeguarding, reputation, HR and ICT. A risk rating mechanism is in place with greater emphasis directed towards those identified higher risk areas.

d. Risk Management

The Board of Governors has considered the major risks to which it is exposed, in particular those relating to governance, finance, insurance, attainment, attendance, behaviour, health and safety, organisation, operations, safeguarding, reputation, HR and ICT. The review of the Strategic Risk Register: Financial and Reputational Risks is a standing item on Governing Body meeting agendas.

The Board of Governors have implemented a number of systems to assess and reduce the risks that the Academy faces, especially in operational areas in relation to teaching, health and safety (including trips and the Academy's minibuses), behaviour management, and in relation to the control of finances. They have introduced policies and systems for the recruitment, selection and vetting of new staff, continual professional development of staff, child protection, supervision of pupils around the Academy site and internal financial controls to minimise financial risk. Insurance is in place through the DfE Risk Protection Arrangement (RPA) and with Zurich Insurance for vehicle, engineering and Inspection cover.

The Academy has an effective system of internal financial control as explained in the Statement on Internal Control. The Academy has undertaken a full review of the main areas of risk which it faces, including health and safety and child protection policies and procedures.

e. Fundraising

The Academy Trust does not carry out significant fundraising activities.

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GOVERNORS' REPORT (CONTINUED)
FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 AUGUST 2023

Plans for future periods

The Aspire Free School Academy Trust is seeking to merge with Esteem MAT at some point in the future as both trusts have reached an in principle agreement subject to approval by the Regional Schools Commission. The ESFA decision was expected to be made before approval of these financial statements but has been deferred. In the interim the Academy will continue to progress development plans and to build relationships with Esteem MAT to strengthen the performance of the Academy.

The Academy is also seeking to make a significant change to an open Academy in regards to applying for and creating a post 16 provision, following an appropriate consultation and analysis of need with Worcester Childrens First. The first meeting is in October 2023.

The Academy believes that developing the whole pupil is critical to improving levels of attainment and in developing broader skills and character that will develop pupils' commitment to lifelong learning and enrich their quality of life. The academy has developed considerably to the demands of pupils who have experienced significant mental health issues in recent years with developments of its education programme and the provision of its training to its staff. To this extent, the Academy strives to provide exceptional behaviour and attendance management support to its pupils in a relentlessly reasonable way, to offer a broad range of extra-curricular activities through its 'Aspire Plus' holiday programme and to ensure they get the best quality careers education information, advice and guidance. Following the outstanding direction of the careers leader who drives the careers strategy (a statutory Government initiative) we have successfully completed and achieved all the Gatsby benchmarks to 100%.

Funds held as custodian on behalf of others

There are no Funds held as Custodian Governor on behalf of others.

Disclosure of information to auditor

Insofar as the Governors are aware:

- there is no relevant audit information of which the charitable company's auditor is unaware, and
- that Governors have taken all steps that they ought to have taken to make themselves aware of any relevant audit information and to establish that the auditor is aware of that information.

The Governors' Report, incorporating a strategic report, was approved by order of the Board of Governors, as the company directors, on
by: and signed on its behalf



P Collins
Chair of Governors

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GOVERNANCE STATEMENT

Scope of responsibility

As Governors, we acknowledge we have overall responsibility for ensuring that the Aspire Free School Academy Trust has an effective and appropriate system of control, financial and otherwise. However, such a system is designed to manage rather than eliminate the risk of failure to achieve business objectives, and can provide only reasonable and not absolute assurance against material misstatement or loss.

As Governors, we have reviewed and taken account of the guidance in the DfE's Governance Handbook and competency framework for governance.

The Board of Governors has delegated the day-to-day responsibility to the Head Teacher, as Accounting Officer, for ensuring financial controls conform with the requirements of both propriety and good financial management and in accordance with the requirements and responsibilities assigned to it in the funding agreement between the Aspire Free School Academy Trust and the Secretary of State for Education. They are also responsible for reporting to the Board of Governors any material weaknesses or breakdowns in internal control.

Governance

The information on governance included here supplements that described in the Governors' report and in the Statement of Governors' responsibilities. The skills set of the Trustees ensures the Board is focussed, not only educationally, but also in terms of finance, human resources and legal. New governors are appointed with consideration of the above to fill any skills gaps. During the year Trustees were required to complete the NGA Skills Audit. In addition to informal meetings and visits to the school, the Board of Governors met formally four times during the year.

Attendance during the year at meetings of the board of Governors was as follows:

Governor	Meetings attended	Out of a possible
L Alexander (appointed 2nd February 2023)	2	2
J Bateman	3	3
P Collins, Chairman	2	3
C Hart, Vice Chair	3	3
P Hines (appointed 17th March 2022)	3	3
C Lewis (retired 7th December 2022)	0	0
B Payne	1	2
R Rainbird-Hitchins (appointed 1st September 2022)	3	3
M Scriven	2	3
P Stephens	3	3
S Stevenson, Accounting Officer	3	3
C Taylor (appointed 30th May 2022)	1	3
D Titterton	2	3

One governor retired during the year and there were three appointments. There are currently 2 possible governor vacancies, one of which is a parent governor, which are permitted under the Articles of Association.

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GOVERNANCE STATEMENT (CONTINUED)

Governance (continued)

The Governing Body has determined that it is able to convene on a termly basis and maintain effective oversight. In addition to the 3 x Full Governing Body meetings, other committees with delegated terms of reference have met during the year. These additional meetings included 3 x Finance & HR committee, with an additional 2 meetings dedicated to the investigation of joining a MAT and 3 x Teaching & Learning committee meetings. The Chair of Governors visits the school and meets with the Head Teacher on a regular basis to monitor progress and is kept informed of any pertinent matters which may arise from time to time. The Academy has a designated Safeguarding Governor who meets half termly with the Designated Safeguarding Lead, and at other times if necessary. The Chair of Governors and Finance Governors receive monthly Management Account reports relating to the financial position of the Academy. E-mail communications continue to prove an effective way in which to keep Governors informed between meetings. The Academy utilises GovernrHub to share relevant information in preparation for meetings etc. Governors are encouraged to visit the Academy at any time to meet with the Head Teacher and other staff, or simply observe aspects of the school day. Governors, Members and Senior Leaders complete annual Declaration of Interests, which is also a standing item on all Full Governor and sub-committee meetings.

The Trust manages conflicts of interest by maintaining a register of interests. To ensure declarations of interest are up to date, it is a standing item on all Full Governor and sub-committee meetings. Trustees must consider and agree not to take part, or to leave discussions, where a conflict of interest may exist. Trustees will not be included as part of the quorum where a conflict may exist.

The regulatory role of the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) is to ensure Academy Trusts fulfil their safeguarding responsibilities. I have reviewed all the information provided and am content that the safeguarding processes in the academy comply with and have signed the return to the Local authority with respect to interventions.

- The Education (independent School Standards) Regulations 2014
- The guidance issued by the Secretary of State
- Its own policies and procedures

The Finance and Human Resources Committee, a sub-committee of the main Board of Governors, met on three occasions, its remit is to:

- Monitor, evaluate and review policy and performance in relation to financial management.
- Ensure compliance with reporting and regulatory requirements and reporting.
- Draft the annual budget.
- Monitor and set staffing levels.
- Oversee staff Performance Management.
- Discuss all resource and premises issues, including health and safety.

Attendance during the year at meetings was as follows:

Governor	Meetings attended	Out of a possible
J Bateman	5	5
P Collins	4	4
C Hart	3	4
P Hines	5	5
S Stevenson	5	5
C Taylor	3	4
D Titterton	4	5

ASPIRE FREE SCHOOL ACADEMY TRUST
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GOVERNANCE STATEMENT (CONTINUED)

Review of value for money

As Accounting Officer, the Head Teacher has responsibility for ensuring that the Academy Trust delivers good value in the use of public resources. The Accounting Officer understands that value for money refers to the educational and wider societal outcomes achieved in return for the taxpayer resources received.

The Accounting Officer considers how the Academy Trust's use of its resources has provided good value for money during each academic year, and reports to the Board of Governors where value for money can be improved, including the use of benchmarking data where appropriate. The Accounting Officer for the Academy Trust has delivered improved value for money during the year by:

- Continuing to obtain comparative pricing whenever possible. During the year this included competitive tendering for staff absence insurance, internal and external audit services, replacement laptops and external roof repairs.
- Where possible, when purchasing/renewing subscriptions and licences, enquiries continue to be made to secure savings by renewing for periods longer than 12 months where practicable.
- Annual price comparisons are made to compare frequently used curriculum stationary items. A Central Store system has been adopted to stock these items and thus reduce the need for smaller quantity orders; saving both money and time.
- On line price comparisons continue to prove effective with the speed of both obtaining prices and ascertaining market availability.
- The use of an Academy business charge card allows us to take advantage of on-line purchasing to achieve competitive pricing and where it is not practical to set up a credit account.
- Competitive price analysis and negotiation is routinely undertaken to secure best prices. Both online and with current suppliers.
- An internal requisition process is in place, requiring price comparisons on general curriculum resources; this helps achieve best prices and encourages curriculum leaders to reflect on their purchases and monitor budgets.
- The Academy continues to make good supplier contacts and value for money can now be assessed on both price and service received.
- The Academy maintains a strong focus on Health & Safety, which includes estate management, and convenes H&S meetings termly. Discussions, decisions and actions are disseminated to all staff. The H&S committee reports through the Finance & HR committee to the FGB.

The purpose of the system of internal control

The system of internal control is designed to manage risk to a reasonable level rather than to eliminate all risk of failure to achieve policies, aims and objectives. It can therefore only provide reasonable and not absolute assurance of effectiveness. The system of internal control is based on an ongoing process designed to identify and prioritise the risks to the achievement of academy trust policies, aims and objectives, to evaluate the likelihood of those risks being realised and the impact should they be realised, and to manage them efficiently, effectively and economically. The system of internal control has been in place at the Aspire Free School Academy Trust for the year 1 September 2022 to 31 August 2023 and up to the date of approval of the annual report and financial statements.

Capacity to handle risk

The Board of Governors has reviewed the key risks to which the Academy Trust is exposed together with the operating, financial and compliance controls that have been implemented to mitigate those risks. The Board of Governors is of the view that there is a formal ongoing process for identifying, evaluating and managing the Academy Trust's significant risks, that has been in place for the year 1 September 2022 to 31 August 2023 and up to the date of approval of the annual report and financial statements. This process is regularly reviewed by the Board of Governors.

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GOVERNANCE STATEMENT (CONTINUED)

The risk and control framework

The Academy's system of internal financial control is based on a framework of regular management information and administrative procedures including the segregation of duties and a system of delegation and accountability. In particular, it includes:

- Comprehensive budgeting and monitoring systems with an annual budget and periodic financial reports which are reviewed and agreed by the board of Governors.
- Regular reviews by the Finance and HR Committee of reports which indicate financial performance against the forecasts and of major purchase plans, capital works and expenditure programmes.
- Setting targets to measure financial and other performance.
- Clearly defined purchasing (asset purchase or capital investment) guidelines.
- Identification and management of risks.

The Board of Governors has decided to buy-in an internal audit service from Randall & Payne

In particular, the checks carried out in the current period include:

- Cash handling
- Credit card expenditure
- Budget and budget monitoring: preparation and processes
- Fraud and Irregularity
- Reporting to Governors and ESFA
- Journals
- Insurance Levels
- HR Policies, Systems and Controls

Randall & Payne report to the Board of Governors, through the Finance & HR committee on the operation of the systems of control and on the discharge of the Board of Governors financial responsibilities. They prepare a termly report to the committee outlining the areas reviewed, key findings, recommendations and conclusions to help the committee consider actions and assess progress.

All recommendations for year ending 31st August 2023 have been considered and adopted where necessary.

On a quarterly basis, the reviewer reports to the Board of Governors through the audit and risk committee on the operation of the systems of control and on the discharge of the Board of Governors' financial responsibilities. On an annual basis the reviewer prepares a summary report to the committee outlining the areas reviewed, key findings, recommendations and conclusions to help the committee consider actions and assess year on year progress.

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GOVERNANCE STATEMENT (CONTINUED)

Review of effectiveness

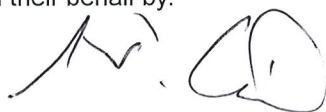
As Accounting Officer, the Head Teacher has responsibility for reviewing the effectiveness of the system of internal control. During the year in question the review has been informed by:

- The work of the external auditors(s).
- The financial management and governance self-assessment process and/or the school resource management self-assessment tool.
- The work of the executive managers within the Academy who have responsibility for the development and maintenance of the internal control framework.
- Correspondence from the ESFA.

The Accounting Officer has been advised of the implications of the result of their review of the system of internal control by the Finance & HR committee and a plan to address weaknesses and ensure continuous improvement of the system is in place.

Approved by order of the members of the Board of Governors on
on their behalf by:

and signed



P Collins
Chair of Governors



S Stevenson
Accounting Officer

ASPIRE FREE SCHOOL ACADEMY TRUST
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STATEMENT OF REGULARITY, PROPRIETY AND COMPLIANCE

As accounting officer of Aspire Free School Academy Trust, I have considered my responsibility to notify the Academy Board of Governors and the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) of material irregularity, impropriety and non-compliance with terms and conditions of all funding, including for estates safety and management, under the funding agreement between the Academy and the Secretary of State for Education. As part of my consideration I have had due regard to the requirements of the Academy Trust Handbook 2022, including responsibilities for estates safety and management.

I confirm that I and the Academy Board of Governors are able to identify any material irregular or improper use of all funds by the Academy, or material non-compliance with the terms and conditions of funding under the Academy's funding agreement and the Academy Trust Handbook 2022.

I confirm that no instances of material irregularity, impropriety or funding non-compliance have been discovered to date. If any instances are identified after the date of this statement, these will be notified to the Board of Governors and ESFA.



S Stevenson

Accounting Officer

Date: 21/12/23

ASPIRE FREE SCHOOL ACADEMY TRUST
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STATEMENT OF GOVERNORS' RESPONSIBILITIES
FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 AUGUST 2023

The Governors (who are also the directors of the charitable company for the purposes of company law) are responsible for preparing the Governors' Report and the financial statements in accordance with the Academies Accounts Direction published by the Education and Skills Funding Agency, United Kingdom Accounting Standards (United Kingdom Generally Accepted Accounting Practice) and applicable law and regulations.

Company law requires the Governors to prepare financial statements for each financial year. Under company law, the Governors must not approve the financial statements unless they are satisfied that they give a true and fair view of the state of affairs of the charitable company and of its incoming resources and application of resources, including its income and expenditure, for that period. In preparing these financial statements, the Governors are required to:

- select suitable accounting policies and then apply them consistently;
- observe the methods and principles of the Charities SORP 2019 and the Academies Accounts Direction 2022 to 2023;
- make judgements and accounting estimates that are reasonable and prudent;
- state whether applicable UK Accounting Standards have been followed, subject to any material departures disclosed and explained in the financial statements;
- prepare the financial statements on the going concern basis unless it is inappropriate to presume that the charitable company will continue in business.

The Governors are responsible for keeping adequate accounting records that are sufficient to show and explain the charitable company's transactions and disclose with reasonable accuracy at any time the financial position of the charitable company and enable them to ensure that the financial statements comply with the Companies Act 2006. They are also responsible for safeguarding the assets of the charitable company and hence for taking reasonable steps for the prevention and detection of fraud and other irregularities.

The Governors are responsible for ensuring that in its conduct and operation the charitable company applies financial and other controls, which conform with the requirements both of propriety and of good financial management. They are also responsible for ensuring grants received from ESFA/DfE have been applied for the purposes intended.

The Governors are responsible for the maintenance and integrity of the corporate and financial information included on the charitable company's website. Legislation in the United Kingdom governing the preparation and dissemination of financial statements may differ from legislation in other jurisdictions.

Approved by order of the members of the Board of Governors on
behalf by:

and signed on its



S Stevenson
Accounting officer

ASPIRE FREE SCHOOL ACADEMY TRUST
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**INDEPENDENT AUDITOR'S REPORT ON THE FINANCIAL STATEMENTS TO THE MEMBERS OF ASPIRE
FREE SCHOOL ACADEMY TRUST**

Opinion

We have audited the financial statements of Aspire Free School Academy Trust (the 'academy') for the year ended 31 August 2023 which comprise the Statement of Financial Activities, the Balance Sheet, the Statement of Cash Flows and the related notes, including a summary of significant accounting policies. The financial reporting framework that has been applied in their preparation is applicable law, United Kingdom Accounting Standards (United Kingdom Generally Accepted Accounting Practice), including Financial Reporting Standard 102 'The Financial Reporting Standard applicable in the UK and Republic of Ireland', the Charities SORP 2019 and the Academies Accounts Direction 2022 to 2023 issued by the Education and Skills Funding Agency.

In our opinion the financial statements:

- give a true and fair view of the state of the Academy's affairs as at 31 August 2023 and of its incoming resources and application of resources, including its income and expenditure for the year then ended;
- have been properly prepared in accordance with United Kingdom Generally Accepted Accounting Practice; and
- have been prepared in accordance with the requirements of the Companies Act 2006, the Charities SORP 2019 and the Academies Accounts Direction 2022 to 2023 issued by the Education and Skills Funding Agency.

Basis for opinion

We conducted our audit in accordance with International Standards on Auditing (UK) (ISAs (UK)) and applicable law. Our responsibilities under those standards are further described in the Auditor's responsibilities for the audit of the financial statements section of our report. We are independent of the Academy in accordance with the ethical requirements that are relevant to our audit of the financial statements in the United Kingdom, including the Financial Reporting Council's Ethical Standard, and we have fulfilled our other ethical responsibilities in accordance with these requirements. We believe that the audit evidence we have obtained is sufficient and appropriate to provide a basis for our opinion.

Conclusions relating to going concern

In auditing the financial statements, we have concluded that the Governors' use of the going concern basis of accounting in the preparation of the financial statements is appropriate.

Based on the work we have performed, we have not identified any material uncertainties relating to events or conditions that, individually or collectively, may cast significant doubt on the Academy's ability to continue as a going concern for a period of at least twelve months from when the financial statements are authorised for issue.

Our responsibilities and the responsibilities of the Governors with respect to going concern are described in the relevant sections of this report.