

Governance

About Dixons

Dixons Academies is a trust of 17 schools in Leeds, Bradford, Manchester and Liverpool. We focus exclusively on areas of social and educational disadvantage, either by sponsoring turnaround academies to address educational failure, or by opening new free schools to meet growing demand.

Our trust was built around the high-performing Dixons City Academy, which was one of the first City Technology Colleges which were the early blueprint for the academy programme. A third of our schools were brand new start-ups under the free school programme, while the other two-thirds were turnarounds adopted from failing predecessors in special measures.

Over the past five years, our trust has more than doubled in size, growing to serve almost 14,000 students, supported by around 1,800 staff, and with a budget of over £100m. We lead 11 secondary academies, three primaries, two all-through academies, and a sixth form academy. Six of our academies are judged Outstanding; five are judged Good (four of which were sponsored from special measures); one was recently judged Inadequate (despite a compelling formal complaint); and a further five academies are awaiting their first inspection under Dixons' leadership.

Over the next three years, we plan again to grow significantly, building our hubs along the M62 in Leeds, Liverpool and Manchester. Our latest free school, Dixons Newall Green in Wythenshawe, opened in September 2023, and we were successful in our wave 15 bid to open two further free schools in Manchester in 2-4 years' time. We continue to work with the DfE regions group to explore other opportunities on both sides of the Pennines.

Our critical questions

At Dixons, we ask ourselves four critical questions to achieve clarity for everyone in our trust.

Why do we exist?

To challenge educational and social disadvantage in the north.

How do we behave?

In our highly professional environment, we:

- work hard – determined to get things done
- behave with integrity and honesty – be good
- show humility and be a positive team player – be nice

What do we do?

We establish high-performing non-faith academies which maximise attainment, value diversity, develop character and build cultural capital.

How will we succeed?

- Aligned autonomy – finding the optimal balance between consistency and self-determination
- Academic rigour – challenging inequality by instilling shared and powerful knowledge
- Talent first – putting our people before strategy

Governance structure

Our trust has three levels of governance. Our members are the protectors and custodians of our trust and make sure that our values are respected and upheld. They hold our trustees to account for the governance of our trust. Our trustees, led by a chair (who was appointed by a trustee recruitment agency), sets the strategic direction of our trust. They are responsible for compliance with all financial regulations and are accountable to our members and the Department for Education. The third tier is made up of our local academy boards which are each accountable to the community that they serve. They are tasked with meaningful engagement with local stakeholders and provide our trustees with expert intelligence from the local tier to drive strategy. Each local academy board is responsible for a cluster of two or three academies in their local area.

Our board of trustees meets six times a year as a full board. Our board has three sub-committees: finance, audit and risk and remuneration. As part of the drive to strengthen intelligence gathering and dissemination between the tiers, the chair of our trust board meets with the chairs of each local academy board prior to our trust board meetings. Communication following board meetings is then fed back to the local tier.

The clerking for trust board and local academy board meetings is carried out by an external independent professional clerking company. Our trust also has an internal head of governance to ensure:

- members and trustees receive assurances from our executive
- compliance with governance regulations and laws
- local academy boards carry out meaningful support and challenge of their academies
- local intelligence from the local tier is directed to our board

Both the independent clerking company and the head of governance provide statutory training and professional development for members, trustees and the local tier of governance. The head of governance holds a certificate in the principles and practice of international risk management and is a member of the Institute of Risk Management and facilitates risk discussions with our executive and trustees.

Terms of office are for four years for a two-term period. Our trust secures new trustees and local academy board ambassadors through personal contacts, non-executive director recruitment agencies, open advertising, social media campaigns and presentations to local business groups. There are trust procedures for the induction of new members, trustees and local academy board ambassadors and they are supported throughout by the head of governance.

An annual calendar of meetings and deadlines across our trust ensures that leadership and financial activity and information is fully aligned with governance arrangements at all levels. The governance, financial and academic calendars are each aligned to the same annual pattern of three cycles.

As an established trust and with the chief executive as accounting officer, both trustees and our executive are fully familiar with these statutory duties and responsibilities, as laid out in our articles, funding agreement, the Academy Trust Handbook, Charity Commission and company law. The chief financial officer is a chartered accountant who also ensures that our executive includes someone with professional responsibilities for probity and best value beyond the narrower interests of our trust. The training needs of our accounting officer and financial staff are reviewed regularly as part of the professional coaching process.

Full declarations of interest (pecuniary, other governorships and directorships) are made at the start of each academic year, and local academy board ambassadors are obliged to declare any new ones as soon as they arise. The declarations of interest are published on each academy's website. Our trust is fully aware of, and compliant with, procurement rules, and it is our own explicit custom and practice that no-one involved in governance at any level supplies services to our academies or has any pecuniary interest in any aspect of our trust. Moreover, remuneration for all employees is processed through PAYE and no employee's earnings, no matter how senior, are made via third party arrangements.

Local ambassadors serve four-year terms of office, and do not normally serve more than two terms. The appointment of a vice-chair on each board ensures that there is a line of succession as each chair steps down. The appointment of ambassadors is in the power of the local academy board, apart from the chair, who is appointed by our trustees.

Members

There are 5 members in our trust:

Sir James Hill

Sir James has an extensive business background and still has an involvement in a local textile company and a company in the USA. His work in education has covered both higher and further education with appointments to College and University boards as well as the private secondary sector. He has enjoyed a long association with Dixons from its inception and then in 2000 joining the governing body. As chairman, he has taken positions in both the City Technology College and now academy associations and in 2008 earned a national profile as the first chairman in the re-organised Specialist Schools and Academy Trust (SSAT).

Lynn Barrett

Lynn's career as a librarian has followed her from the USA to Greece and Saudi Arabia and finally, in 1982 to England. She worked for 5 years at Rhodesway Upper School (now Dixons Allerton Academy), 14 years at Dixons City Technology College and provided training and consulting throughout the UK. Lynn was awarded an honorary fellowship by the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals and a Lifetime Achievement award by the School Library Association for services to school libraries in England.

Bryan Collins

Bryan is a former state and independent sector headteacher, consultant and independent schools inspector. He has also been governor of a primary school and an independent school, and was a member of the University of Leeds Governing Council for 9 years.

Sir Nick Weller

Formerly the chief executive of Dixons Academies Trust, Sir Nick is currently the CEO of Academy Transformation Trust. Sir Nick was designated a National Leader of Education in 2009. His report to HM Treasury and DfE on schools in the Northern Powerhouse region was published in November 2016. He has an MBA from Cranfield School of Management and received an honorary Doctorate from Bradford University in 2019. He was knighted for services to education in 2015.

David Clayton

David has more than 40 years' experience in the technology industry. He is Chairman of SDL plc, a UK based provider of global content management and language translation services and software solutions. Until July 2012, David was a main board executive director of the Sage Group plc, with responsibility for strategy and corporate development. Prior to joining Sage, David was a managing director at Credit Suisse and Head of the European Technology Equity research team. David was previously a trustee of Dixons Academies Trust.

Trustees

Our trust board meets five times per year and forms the board of directors of the charity, overseeing the day-to-day running of our trust. It approves group-wide policies and procedures, signs off all the academy budgets, and holds the chief executive to account for performance and outcomes across all academies. It is also responsible for the approval of a written scheme of delegation of its financial powers and duties to its local academy boards, its finance committee, its audit and risk committee, the principals, and other staff. This scheme satisfies our trustees' ultimate responsibility for ensuring that there are adequate operational controls in place for all financial processes. It is operated in conjunction with the financial regulations of academy trusts.

Our trust board is made up of nine trustees. There are currently vacancies for those with a finance and / or audit and risk background.

The induction of members, trustees and the local tier of governance is led and overseen by the head of governance who has produced an induction and training plan.

The current trustees are:

Mike Blackburn OBE, Chair of Trustees

Mike spent his executive career in the digital and technology sectors in the UK with leadership roles covering strategy, planning, sales, marketing and innovation. In addition, he has an extensive non-executive experience. This includes serving on the boards of the Lowry Theatre and the Science Museum Foundation. He also chaired the inaugural Greater Manchester LEP for 9 years, leading on the social and economic strategy for the city region. Mike also led the design and development of a new multi academy trust in Manchester from 2008 to 2018.

John Bowers, Vice Chair of Trustees

John is a National Leader of Governance. He is a former headteacher and is an independent consultant working at different schools.

Ruby Bhatti, OBE DL

Ruby is a practicing solicitor with over 20 years' experience in the legal field. She has over 18 years' governance experience and almost two decades of experience in various non-executive directorships. As a National Leader of Governance, she has been a member for several Interim Executive Boards (IEBs), and has completed the Chairs of Governors' Leadership Development Programme.

Brent Fitzpatrick MBE, Chair of Finance Committee

Brent has an extensive background in industry, covering oil and gas production, oil services, insurance, technology and clean energy. His commitment to education in Bradford has seen his involvement in the primary, special and secondary schools. He sits on a number of education committees within Bradford and also sits as a trustee for the National Governors Association. He was awarded an MBE for services to education in 2012.

Kuldip Nijjar, Chair of the Audit and Risk Committee

Kuldip is a chartered accountant and brings over 35 years' experience of working at senior level in a number of FTSE 100 and smaller organisations. She has worked in a variety of sectors including telecoms, financial services, retail and healthcare with both profit and non-profit organisations. Kuldip has extensive experience in audit, financial, operational, strategy and risk management and is currently the chief financial officer of an international non-for-profit company.

Helen Thornton

Helen brings over 20 years' experience of working at a senior level in a number of different sectors including transport, financial services and education in both publicly listed and privately-owned organisations. With the majority of her career spent in HR, Helen has extensive experience in organisation design and development, leadership and colleague development, employee relations, internal communications, recruitment and reward.

Richard Tutt

Richard is the Director of Secondary Education at Astrea Academy Trust. He is an experienced system leader with an excellent track record with achieving transformation at scale, in challenging contexts, and driving rapid and sustained improvements. He has a deep understanding of educational data and using it to drive improvement.

Linda Magrath

Linda is the CEO of Laurus Trust which has academies in Cheshire and Lancashire. Under her leadership Laurus trust has a reputation for outstanding teaching and learning through the relentless pursuit of excellence and determination to ensure that every child succeeds.

Robert Keniwell

Robert is the safeguarding trustee and is an expert safeguarding lead. As a trained social worker, he is able to drive to educate, inspire and support those working with children, young people and adults to create safe, supportive, effective and responsive environments that foster a value base of growth, independence and safety. His skills, knowledge and experience allow him to influence positive outcomes and achieve greatness for both students and staff.

The local tier of governance

Dixons structure at the local tier of governance is for two or three academies to be clustered into one local academy board (LAB). The members of the LAB are called ambassadors.

The local academy board is tasked with community anchoring, whereby, alongside the academy's main purpose, the academy plays a significant contribution to the greater social good. The local tier is also tasked with building productive relationships with families and the local community to create a sense of trust and shared ownership of our strategy. The local tier acts creatively to listen to families, students, staff and the wider community and feed back to trustees who use this intelligence to help drive strategy. Feedback will also include identified risks which can be added to the risk register and monitored by trustees.

Clear roles and responsibilities of members, trustees and local academy boards have been created to ensure there is no duplication of workload and avoid remits becoming muddled. Our structure ties in with section 1 of the Academy Trust Governance Guide and part 1 of the Academy Trust Handbook in that trustees have strategic oversight of its relationships with stakeholders. The board works with the local academy boards to consider the views of parents, pupils, staff and communities so that decision making is supported by meaningful engagement.

The head of governance facilitates the flow of information between the local academy boards and our trust board. As previously mentioned, there is a meeting between local chairs, chief executive and chair of trustees prior to each board meeting. A 'you said, we did' response is then be provided to the local academy boards after the board meeting.

Ambassadors also carry out panel work for stage 3 complaints and permanent exclusions.

Holding principals to account

In the historic structure of school governance, the principal (headteacher) was held to account by a governing body. The accountability lines in academy governance are different. Principals are line managed by executive principals and / or executive directors. The executive meet 3 times a year to review each academy's performance and a DQI (Dixons Quality Index) is produced. The board meetings tie into the cycle reviews and the DQI and other performance indicators are scrutinised by trustees.