



Mercian Board Meeting 23rd August 2024, Birmingham City University Notes and Actions

1. Welcome and apologies

Present: Emma Walton (Chair, Loughborough University), Sue Ackermann (Vice-Chair, University of Nottingham), Judith Keene (University of Worcester), Vicky Wreghitt (Birmingham City University), Philip Vaughan (Coventry University), Tim Wales (Cranfield University), Anna O'Neill (University of Warwick), Chris Porter (Birmingham Newman University), Deborah Munro (Aston University), Paul Mahoney (Staffordshire University), Gary Elliott-Cirigottis (Open University), Jo-Anne Watts (University of Wolverhampton), Diane Job (University of Birmingham), Ruth Jenkins (Mercian Collaboration Executive Officer)

Apologies: Pete Maggs (Treasurer, Nottingham Trent University), Steve Williams (University of Leicester), Ian Snowley (University of Lincoln), Benjamin Veasey (University of Derby), Chris Powis (University of Northampton), Dave Parkes (De Montfort University), Laura Pilsel (Harper Adams University), Scott McGowan (University of Keele), Stephen Dudley (University College Birmingham)

The Chair gave a warm welcome to everyone present at the Board meeting. This was an additional meeting to follow up the conversations at both the autumn 2023 and spring 2024 meetings about our offer as a collaboration as well as issues relating to our financial sustainability. It was noted that due to annual leave and other commitments, as well as this being an in-person meeting and travel difficulties on the day itself, this was a slightly smaller group than usual.

2. Minutes of the meeting of 12th April 2024 and matters arising

The [minutes of the last meeting](#) were confirmed as an accurate record of the meeting.

The Chair updated the Board on the following actions:

- She had sent an email on 3rd June 2024 seeking an additional Steering Group member, but there had been no response so it had been decided not to pursue this.
- It was confirmed that Mercian Collaboration Annual Report does need to cover the calendar year to align with SCOUNL.

Other matters arising were already included under other agenda items.

3. Governance – Quoracy requirement

The Chair noted that the Board did not have a formal requirement for quoracy and recommended that should be addressed to ensure that there are enough people present to conduct official business and make decisions.

It was agreed that the quorum would be half the members of the Board plus one, so a minimum of 13 members of the Board. This Board meeting had 14 people present and so met this threshold.

It was also noted that it had previously been agreed at the December 2023 meeting that deputies would have delegated authority from their directors.

ACTION: *Executive Officer to add the quoracy requirement for the Board to the Terms of Reference.*

4. Financial Sustainability

In April 2024 a briefing note to Directors from the Chair and Treasurer of the Mercian Collaboration set out the scale of the challenge to the ongoing financial sustainability of the Collaboration. The current financial position will continue to weaken as expenditure outstrips income and so, following the discussions at the Board Meeting in April, a further briefing note proposed some next steps.

The options for the Mercian Collaboration are to increase income or reduce costs, or both.

Fundamental to this efficiency work is the need for a clear articulation of the future value proposition of the Mercian Collaboration for its members – and work on this must begin immediately, looking at current activity and process as well as what we want or need to offer to ensure we are of value as a Consortium.

4.1 Subscription Income

The main source of income for the Mercian Collaboration remains the subscription fees paid by member institutions (along with limited sponsorship of the annual conference). Running costs mean the current level of income generated is insufficient to maintain the present level of activity.

There are immediate steps that can be taken that the Board need to consider as a matter of urgency before invoices for 2025 subscriptions are sent out by SCONUL in January 2025.

The Treasurer recommended that there should be an increase of 3% p.a. to subscription levels for 2025 and again for 2026.

It was noted that while an increase of 3% will not have a significant impact on income overall it is important to re-establish the principle of annual increases. Freezing subscription rises year by year is unhelpful for budgetary planning in the medium to long term within member institutions and leads to larger increases then being required subsequently in order rebalance Collaboration finances.

The following points were agreed:

- There would be an increase of 3% p.a. applied to subscription levels for 2025.
- A project working group chaired by the Treasurer will carry out some modelling work on the subscription bandings to develop a set of proposals for a new, more transparent and equitable subscriptions model. This would be informed by the existing JISC banding model, because the new JISC banding model was unlikely to be ready in time.
- There was in principle agreement that there would be further subscription increases for 2026 and future years to cover increased activity and/or increased operational costs. However, the amount of each annual increase would continue to need to be discussed and agreed by the Board.
- The Mercian Collaboration Steering Group should develop and maintain a risk register for 2025 onwards, including the impact of potential membership withdrawals.

4.2 Conference Income and Expenditure

It had previously been agreed that the Mercian Conference should continue to be free for member delegates to attend.

It was agreed that from 2025 onwards the Mercian Collaboration Conference should be entirely self-funding/cost-neutral, with any profit raised available to be used as the Steering Group directs.

Some members of the Board felt that consideration should be given to moving the Conference to a mixed delivery model of alternate in-person and online modes on alternate years, although it was noted that it would be harder to attract sponsorship income for online conferences.

4.3 Pay Costs for Executive Officer [RJ left the room for this item]

The Chair tabled a paper at the meeting about pay costs for the Executive Officer, noting that this is the largest element of expenditure for the Mercian Collaboration.

The proposal, based on suggestion received from the Officer herself, was to reduce the FTE of the Officer from the current 0.4 FTE to 0.3 FTE. This would reduce pay costs by a quarter, whilst still allowing sufficient working time for the Officer to continue to support the core work of the Mercian Collaboration.

It was agreed that the contract and pay for the Executive Officer post would be amended to 0.3 FTE in early 2025, with exact start date to be confirmed.

ACTION: Chair to check with SCONUL on the practicalities and timeline for amending the contract and pay for the Executive Officer to 0.3 FTE.

5. Groups Review

The Chair presented a [paper](#) to the Board outlining some proposals related to Mercian groups and asking Board members to comment on the proposals and approve or amend for action. It should be noted that not all proposals have a corresponding action to approve or amend.

5.1 Core Groups

It was agreed that 'Operational Groups' should be renamed as 'Core Groups' to reflect their special focus in delivering on tangible value to the membership.

A range of proposals related to membership, officers and meetings were agreed in principle with further discussion needed from the groups.

It was agreed that Core Groups would include the following existing groups:

- Staff Development Group
- Conference Planning Group

It was also agreed that there would be real value in having a Core Group for EDI and Accessibility. In the first instance, we should explore whether the existing Mercian Disability Forum (MDF) could have a broader remit to include a wider range of EDI and accessibility matters. This would require the MDF to be renamed.

ACTION: *Jo-Anne and Deborah to consult with existing MDF, at their next meeting in November, on the proposal to extend the remit to include equality, diversity and inclusion alongside the group's existing commitment to accessibility.*

5.2 Special Interest Groups and Communities of Practice

Further to made at the Board meeting in December 2023 it was agreed that we look at Communities of Practice as a new mechanism to facilitate collaboration and as an outcome a new CoP was formed.

The idea to introduce Communities of Practice was agreed as a way of providing a mechanism for groups to exist under the Mercian Collaboration umbrella but with reduced interventions from the Steering Group and the Executive officer.

Whilst proposals were put forward and discussed no agreement was reached beyond the following;

- That the nature and naming of groups be revisited by the steering group paying particular attention to both simplifying the proposal and ensuring that the implications of other discussion points related to financial sustainability and the "value" discussion are included.
- That considering the approval of a reduction in the hours of the Executive officer a standard and likely reduced offer to groups be developed.
- That groups are currently able to organise successful events for their members and other interested library staff. If an event is being planned the chair/co-chair should discuss or possible collaborations with the Staff Development Group either directly with the SDG or via their sponsor. Communications and publicity should be discussed with the Executive officer and sponsor. All events would need to incur no costs.

ACTION: To be added to Steering Group Agenda

ACTION: Chair to work with Sponsors and Groups on communicating progress and nature of review.

6. Conference Group update and discussion (SA)

SA reported that the Conference Group was doing an amazing job and was all set to deliver a fantastic Mercian 2024 Conference on 11th September 2024 in The Venue @ DMU in Leicester.

The Conference 2024 homepage is here: <https://www.merciancollaboration.org.uk/conference-2024>

The Conference [programme](#) includes an interesting selection of speakers and there will also be a display conference posters from member institutions.

The Conference Group have been very successful in signing up [conference sponsors](#) for this year, meaning that the costs of delivering the conference have been more than covered by sponsorship income.

ACTION: Directors to encourage team members to book their places at the conference as soon as possible.

ACTION: Directors to encourage team members to join the Conference Group to help plan the next conference.

The following ideas were suggested for future conferences:

- Mixed delivery model of alternate in-person and online modes on alternate years.
- Hybrid delivery model, if a suitable venue could be found.
- Transition to a different time of year – e.g. hold a conference in late spring or early summer – but this would need sufficient planning time.
- Launching award(s) – e.g. Best Library Assistant, Team, Innovation

ACTION: Sue to discuss these ideas with the Conference Group.

7. Discussion: What is Our Value?

In the context of financial challenge both for the Collaboration and as individual members it is essential that our consortium provides good value for money. The following questions were suggested as a starting point for a discussion about what a good value proposition would be for our members.

- Is what we offer sufficient?
- If no then what could we offer?
- If yes how could this be protected and/or enhanced?
- What opportunities does a regional consortium offer that other bodies/individual institutions can't?

This was a rich, helpful and interesting discussion that was positive about the value of our consortia, but there was limited time available. It was clear that there was more work to be done before we could set out our value proposition to members. Therefore, it was agreed that this would be the main discussion topic for the next Board meeting on 30th November. Points made and noted as part of this discussion will be incorporated into planning for further discussion.

ACTION: *Chair and Executive Officer to ensure that this topic is on the agenda for the next Board meeting*

8. AOB

We have recently received a proposal to rebuild the Mercian Collaboration website in Wordpress. It is no longer possible to continue using Drupal 7 due to ongoing issues and lack of technical support for this outdated platform.

There was strong agreement to using Wordpress, subject to the cost being affordable.

ACTION: *Chair to ask SCONUL to request a quote from Pendulum.dev for rebuilding the Mercian website in Wordpress. We will also need to discuss practicalities and the timeline.*

8. Next meeting – 29th November 2024

It was agreed that we should try to hold the next meeting at the Open University so that this could be a hybrid meeting with some people attending in person and others having the option to join the meeting online.

The main focus of the meeting will be to discuss and agree the value proposition and future priorities of the Mercian Collaboration. However, there will be a timely call for agenda items.

ACTION: *Officer to liaise with colleagues at the Open University to finalise arrangements.*

Please see previous Directors Board agendas and meeting minutes:

<https://merciancollaboration.org.uk/about-collaboration/agendas-minutes-directors-board>

Please see previous Steering Group agendas and meeting minutes:

<https://merciancollaboration.org.uk/about-collaboration/agendas-minutes-steering-group>

Ruth Jenkins, Executive Officer

October 2024