



# External Board Review

**East Surrey College  
Corporation**

**Reviewer: Sandra Prail  
26 September 2023**

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## Executive Summary

This AoC External Board Review is based on the ETF/AoC pilot review framework. The Framework considers, but is not limited to, principles from Codes of Governance, the Education Inspection Framework and the DfE's current guidance on external board reviews. In discussion you asked that the Review specifically consider the following questions:

- Do we have the right balance between access to relevant skills and knowledge and the ability to make timely decisions that are owned by all governors?
- Does the current structure through which committees provide assurance and make recommendations to the Board deliver sufficient oversight of all key areas?
- Is the level of scrutiny and challenge sufficient and proportionate to the risks?
- The role of Chair in leading the governing body is crucial and has considerable authority in determining how a governing body influences the College. How can the Board be best placed in holding the Chair (and senior team) to account for their actions taken?
- Do the Board and its committees achieve the right balance between strategic decision making and monitoring of operational performance?
- Is there scope to rationalise the committee structure, for example where there may be overlap?
- How should the Board ensure that all its decisions are informed by student voice?
- How could meeting arrangements be improved to maximum both efficiency and the quality of decision making?
- How could the college enhance the quality of the information provided to governors (in terms of accuracy, relevance and timeliness) while reducing the volume of board and committee papers?
- Is there other good practice we should consider adopting? Is what we do good enough? Could it be improved?

Emerging findings have been discussed throughout the Review in a developmental and inclusive approach that supports College improvement and seeks to share best practice. The full report sets out the findings made against the 3 Board dimensions in the Framework with the key evidence that informs those findings.

The following table summarizes the headline strengths and areas for development:

	<b>STRENGTH</b>	<b>AREA FOR DEVELOPMENT</b>
BOARD COMPOSITION	Robust skills audit process for identifying skills gaps and informing recruitment and training & development initiatives	R1 Diversity monitoring Increase Governor data collection by gathering information on all protected characteristics and diversity of approach
	Rich blend of skills on Board	R2 Succession planning S&G to review approach to succession planning for key roles including Chair of Corporation and Committee Chairs to design skills led documented succession plan that informs training & development.
	Tenure of office no more than 8 years normally	
BOARD STRUCTURE	Governance arrangements are strong including agenda setting and quality of papers	R3 Link Governor scheme Review the purpose of the scheme, set clear expectations and ensure reporting to Corporation. Consider including student contact within the Link Governor role profile.
	Transparency and clarity of information presented to Governors	
	Governor attendance at Corporation and Committee meetings	
	Board engagement in strategy setting	
BOARD INTERACTION	GP support to Governors recognised as highly effective	R4 Chair appraisal Design and implement a chair appraisal scheme that ensures the Chair's performance is evaluated constructively
	Induction, training & development	
	Positive engaging culture	

**Fig 1**

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The overall conclusion on Board effectiveness is that **the Board consistently impacts positively on college outcomes and there is strong evidence that it is highly proficient in most or all of the Board outcomes.**

A key element of the Review is the identification of effective practice. There are many examples of effective governance practice. In particular, others might learn from the clear setting of expectations for holding no more than two terms of office unless exceptional circumstances dictate otherwise and the regular meetings of Chairs as a mechanism for communication and focus.

Thanks and appreciation is recorded to all those who have engaged in this Review. Particular thanks to the College's Governance Professional, who has worked to ensure that arrangements have been smooth and efficient.

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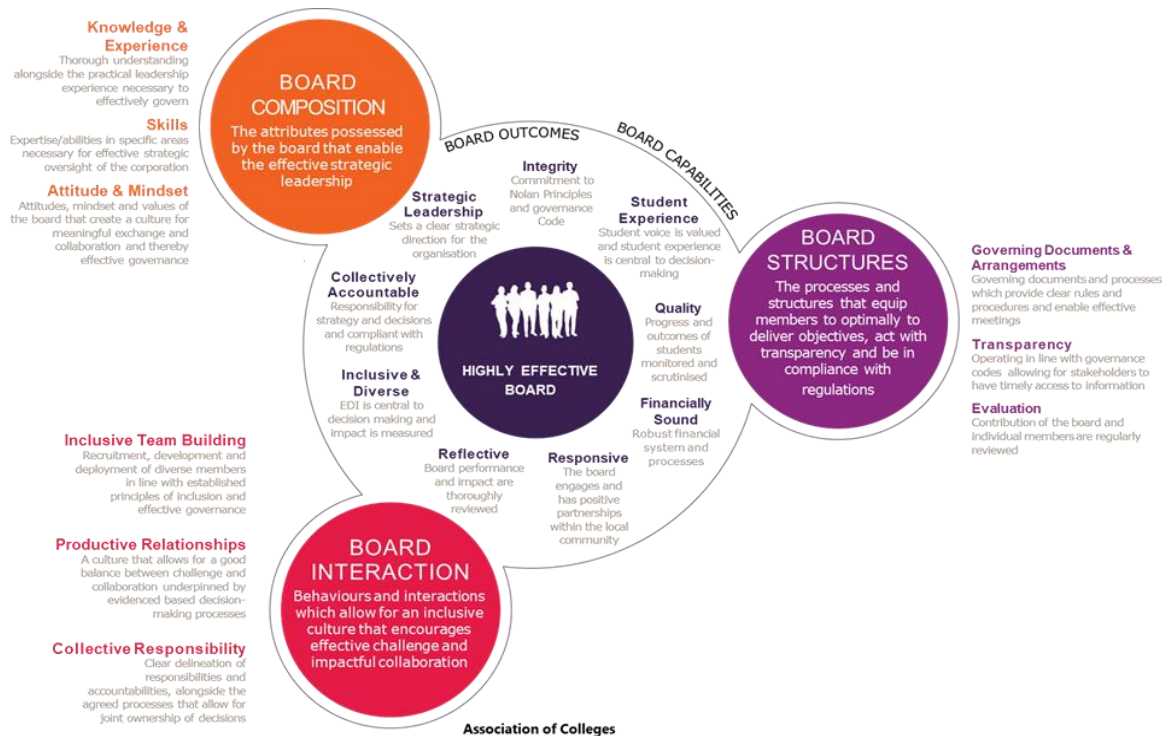
## Our Approach

This External Board Review was undertaken over the period February – July 2023. The methodology followed a seven-stage approach:



**Fig. 2**

The Review has been conducted against the published AoC Framework for FE College External Board Reviews as shown in Figure 3 below. The Framework comprises 3 core areas for evaluation known as Board Dimensions – namely, Composition, Structure and Interaction.



**Fig 3.**

Overall Board effectiveness focusses on the core function of the Board as a Governing Body and the extent to which the Board culture delivers nine key outcomes (Figure 4 below) which characterize highly effective Boards.

Outcome	Description
<b>Collectively Accountable</b>	Responsibility for strategy and decisions and compliant with regulations
<b>Strategic Leadership</b>	Setting a clear direction and objectives for the organisation
<b>Integrity</b>	Commitment to Nolan Principles and the AoC Code (or relevant code)
<b>Student Experience</b>	Student voice is valued and student experience and safeguarding are central to decision-making
<b>Quality</b>	Progress and achievement of students effectively monitored and scrutinised
<b>Financially Sound</b>	Robust financial system and processes
<b>Responsive</b>	The board engages and has positive partnerships within the local community
<b>Reflective</b>	Board performance and impact are thoroughly reviewed
<b>Inclusive &amp; Diverse</b>	Diversity and inclusion are central to decision-making and impact is measured

**Fig. 4**

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## Review Process

The Reviewer met the Chief Executive, Chair and Governance Professional (GP) for an initial planning and scoping meeting on 22 February 2023. At that meeting it was agreed that the Review would in particular cover the following questions:

- Do we have the right balance between access to relevant skills and knowledge and the ability to make timely decisions that are owned by all governors?
- Does the current structure through which committees provide assurance and make recommendations to the Board deliver sufficient oversight of all key areas?
- Is the level of scrutiny and challenge sufficient and proportionate to the risks?
- The role of Chair in leading the governing body is crucial and has considerable authority in determining how a governing body influences the College. How can the Board be best placed in holding the Chair (and senior team) to account for their actions taken?
- Do the Board and its committees achieve the right balance between strategic decision making and monitoring of operational performance?
- Is there scope to rationalise the committee structure, for example where there may be overlap?
- How should the Board ensure that all its decisions are informed by student voice?
- How could meeting arrangements be improved to maximum both efficiency and the quality of decision making?
- How could the college enhance the quality of the information provided to governors (in terms of accuracy, relevance and timeliness) while reducing the volume of board and committee papers?
- Is there other good practice we should consider adopting? Is what we do good enough? Could it be improved?

These issues are weaved into the report and then conclusions summarized in Appendix A.

An online survey was issued to all Board members (excluding the CEO) week commencing 15 May. The survey produced a good return rate of 93%. A desk top review of key college documentation informed one to one interviews. Remote interviews took place with the GP, Chairs of SPH Employment Committee and Finance & Resources Committee and Chair of Corporation on 23, 29 June and 11 July respectively and face to face interviews with the CEO, Vice Chair of Corporation and Audit Chair on 6 July.

The Reviewer attended the College Group's Board meeting on 6 July and observed an online meeting of the Audit Committee on 15 June.

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Following moderation a draft report was shared with the GP, Chair and CEO on 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2023 and this report takes into account feedback.

## Background Context

East Surrey College Corporation (trading as Orbital South Colleges) incorporates the Reigate School of Art and the John Ruskin College (JRC) following a merger in 2019. The Group also includes Orbital South Colleges University Centre as the umbrella organisation for HE provision. There is a subsidiary company Surrey Skills Ltd which was dormant in 21/22. The College provides a range of vocational, further and higher education courses as well as apprenticeships. The East Surrey campus is based in Redhill and the John Ruskin campus in Selsdon. Most learners come from the boroughs of Tandridge, Reigate & Banstead, Guildford and Croydon. It offers a broad curriculum in most subjects for full and part time learners including apprenticeships and circa. 6732 learners are enrolled.

The 2023/24 budget assumes income of approximately. £27.8 m with £400k savings to be identified and a projected operating surplus of £44k. The financial health of the college is confirmed by ESFA as Good. 97% of students rate highly the quality of teaching.

Ofsted inspected the College in December 2022 and made an overall effectiveness grade of Requires Improvement (RI). Behaviour and attitudes and apprenticeships were graded RI and all other categories graded good, including leadership and management.

The College Group has adopted the AoC Code of Good Governance for English Colleges and therefore that Code is taken as the basis for this review.

The remainder of this report is structured to set out key messages across the Review Dimensions of Board Composition, Structures and Interaction before concluding with a Judgement of overall effectiveness.



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## Board Composition

### BOARD COMPOSITION

**The attributes possessed by the Board that enable effective strategic leadership**

#### Board Composition

Board composition requires a mix of people with different attributes to ensure that the Board provides strategic leadership as well as meeting its statutory and other requirements. This analysis of the Board's composition focusses on people and attributes and the central question: What attributes (skills, knowledge, mindset/attitude) does the Board possess currently and what additional attributes would it need to meet its objectives?

#### Background

Following merger in 2019 four additional Governors joined the Board from JRC. In March 2020 the Board agreed to reduce membership numbers to pre-merger levels by not appointing replacement Governors as individuals retired or resigned. Currently, the Board comprises 11 external Governors, the CEO, 2 staff governors and 2 student governors. There is also a coopted member on Audit Committee. There are 6 committees – Finance & Resources (F&R), Learning & Quality (L&Q), Senior Post Holder Employment, Search & Governance (S&G), Audit and Strategy.

The Chair of the Corporation is new to role having been appointed in November 2022 for a 2-year term and he also chairs Search & Governance Committee and Strategy Committee. The Vice Chair was re-elected in January 2023 for an additional 1-year term and she is also the Chair of L&Q and is the Safeguarding & Prevent Link Governor. Following recent vacancies Peridot were commissioned to support recruitment and new appointments were made at the July Board.

The College Group has adopted the AoC Code of Good Governance for English Colleges and the Board considers compliance and adopts actions to address areas where compliance is not full.

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## Findings

### **Governors' Skills and experience**

S&G analyses Board composition and takes a robust approach to seeking a rich blend of skills on the Board. The current skills audit suggests a well-rounded membership including education and business expertise and experience. Information from skills analysis has informed Governor recruitment.

S&G receives a Skills Audit and Training Needs Analysis/Diversity Audit and this is regularly reviewed, including when resignations occur. The audit reviews the skills of Governors against the key functions of the Board as set out in the Instrument and Articles of Government. It is clear from the minutes of S&G and speaking with Governors that the results of the audit inform recruitment and that when the Committee interviews prospective members it is mindful of the audit conclusions.

Recent recruitment has been skills led. Three new Governors were appointed at the July Board. Two had been identified through a Peridot external recruitment campaign and one through College connections. The recruitment campaign was skills based with a focus on filling an identified finance skills gap. Corporation received full information in ratifying appointments on recommendation from S&G and new Governors were welcomed to their first meeting and encouraged to contribute fully.

All those to whom I spoke recognised the need for a rich blend of skills and a significant majority of respondents to the survey undertaken as part of this Review identified that the Board has key skills, including leading organisational change and risk management. The focus of Governors on staff wellbeing was also recognised and appreciated by the CEO and GP.

From the meetings that I observed Governors demonstrated relevant skills and knowledge and struck an effective balance ensuring that their input did not impede timely decisions and collective ownership of decision making. The current skills mix of the Board and its approach to skills analysis is a strength.

### **Board Diversity**

The Board recognises the benefits to decision making of a Board that is diverse and it is committed to improving the diversity of the Board. S&G should and does monitor Board make up annually to ensure a broad cultural and social base. The report to S&G in February 2023 reported an almost equal number of males/females, a relatively wide spread of age, one recorded disability and a majority of White British Governors (and this is consistent with the responses to the survey undertaken as part of this review). But all those to whom I spoke including the Chair, GP and Chief Executive recognise that, as is the case in most colleges, more could be done.

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The College's Annual Equality, Diversity and Inclusivity Report contains detailed profiles and analysis of learners and staff. KPI data reported to the Board includes reducing the attainment gap between different cohorts of learners. The data collection on Governors' profiles is less comprehensive. The College currently collects basic data on sex, age, disability, ethnic background, employment status, professional qualifications and locality. Extending the collection of data to include protected characteristics and diversity of thought/style might enhance opportunities to improve the rich blend of Governor diversity. Improving its data on the make-up of the Board might also help to further target future recruitment campaigns and including Governor profiles in the college annual report might also raise the profile and demonstrate the Board's commitment to equality, diversity and inclusivity. I have included the suggested improvement as a recommendation but in doing so recognise that the current baseline position is a positive one and any enhancement would create practice from which others might learn rather than remedy a weakness (R1).

### **Succession planning**

Succession planning is an area for improvement. Succession planning for key roles sits within the remit of S&G as part of its review of Corporation membership. The Governor Recruitment and Succession Planning Policy & Procedure says that S&G will consider succession planning at every meeting and refers to identifying opportunities for shadowing when vacancies are identified. It does not expressly cover the development of a pipeline for key roles to address a risk of unexpected vacancies and to assist with individual Governor self progression. The former Chair of Corporation had been a Governor since 2008 and was intending to step down at the end of 2023. The College had planned for a handover period to an identified Chair Designate. But plans had to be accelerated following the Chairs' early unexpected resignation and the Chair Designate was elected as Chair without the planned handover period. It is positive that the College had plans in place and that these were implemented smoothly. S&G does consider succession and informal discussions take place but formalising succession planning and mapping the potential pipeline for key roles such as the Chair of Corporation and Vice Chair and also Committee chairs would reduce the risk of unexpected vacancies and help to inform Governor training and development (including tailored shadowing and mentoring) and recruitment. (R2)

### **Governor tenure**

The Instruments & Articles provide for Governors to be appointed for 2 terms of 4 years with extension in exceptional circumstances. This is consistent with the current AoC Code. Good reasons should dictate any extensions beyond 2 terms. The former Chair had however been in role since 2008 and although it is positive that handover arrangements were in place his term had been much longer

than best practice suggests. The new Chair has set clear expectations for adherence to the two terms norm and I note that in a recent 1 year extension beyond two terms for the Vice Chair very clear reasons were recorded by S&G to justify an extension. In the discussions I have had with Governors expectations around tenure are clear and it is monitored closely by the GP. It is also positive that membership dates are staggered to better manage the appointment process. The current spread is between 1 and 7 years in role. Adherence to two terms tenure of office is a strength and ensures a healthy turnover of Governors.

## Conclusions

The Review has identified that Board Composition is overall an area of strength. It has some strong basic foundations in place. The key area for development is succession planning.

The following table summarises headlines:

BOARD COMPOSITION	
STRENGTH	AREA FOR DEVELOPMENT
Robust skills audit process for identifying skills gaps and informing recruitment and training & development initiatives	R1 Diversity monitoring Increase Governor data collection by gathering information on all protected characteristics and diversity of approach
Rich blend of skills on Board	R2 Succession planning S&G to review approach to succession planning for key roles including Chair of Corporation and Committee Chairs to design skills led documented succession plan that informs training & development.
Tenure of office no more than 8 years normally	

Fig. 5

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## Board Structures

### BOARD STRUCTURE

The processes and structures that equip members to optimally deliver College objectives.

#### Board Structure

Board structures are the processes and arrangements that provide the space and tools for a Board to deliver College objectives. Analysis of Board structure focusses on structural arrangements and process and the central question: Do current Board structures equip Governors at East Surrey College to optimally engage with each other to deliver the College objectives effectively, with transparency and in compliance with Regulations?

#### Background

The Board has approved a Strategic plan 2022-25 for the College Group which sets out its mission and strategic aims. Board receives a regular narrative update report from the CEO and quality and finance KPI data in tabular and graphic form.

The College Group operates a committee model of governance. There are 6 committees – Finance & Resources (F&R), Learning & Quality (L&Q), Senior Post Holder Employment, Search & Governance (S&G), Audit and Strategy. In addition to its 6 Committees the Board holds an annual strategic awayday. The Instrument & Articles state that the Corporation shall meet at least once in every term. There is a comprehensive annual cycle of Board business and committees produce annual reports.

Governors are invited to undertake Learner Walks once a term and to attend internal performance reviews. A Link Governor scheme is in place. There are Link Governors for Safeguard & Prevent, HE, Careers and Sustainability.

There is a Governance Portal where all meeting agendas, minutes and supporting documents are located together with training material and useful background documents.

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## Analysis & Findings

### Governance arrangements

Governance arrangements are strong. The college has relatively recently introduced a new portal, Team Engine. I was provided with full access to it for the purposes of the Review and was therefore able to form my own judgement on its functionality. The Portal is effective and enables Governors to navigate meeting papers as well as being an archive for key background documents and having useful chat functionality. Governors through S&G report satisfactory progress on implementation and that it has 'proved easy to use' and this was a consistent view of the Governors to whom I spoke. Some Governors compared how much time has been saved in seeing Board papers in one place compared to the previous process where multiple emails made navigation more challenging. I found the portal easy to use and I saw its positive use at Board and Committee meetings. It does mean that wifi access is essential for meetings and that Governors need a certain IT skill level but this does not appear to be problematic and IT resource was available for Governors before and during the Board meeting that I observed. Governors report timeliness in receipt of committee and Board papers.

There is a standardised agenda format for Board and committee meetings dividing the agenda into themes (eg routine, strategic) and with key standing items including the Chief Executive & Principal's Report and Learner Voice presentation by student Governors which encourages a focus on strategy and students. This approach also seeks to make best use of time and that meetings focus on key issues.

Governors recognise the importance of the Student Voice and 100% of those who responded to the survey undertaken as part of this Review agreed that they listen to students and the interests of students inform decision making and that the quality of the student experience is central to decision making. The Student Governor at the Board I observed was confident and Governors listened and responded with interest to the points made. A review of the Link Governor scheme covered later in this report provides an opportunity to reflect on the extent to which Governors hear directly from students.

Reports are well written with an executive summary that makes links to strategic aims and risks and seeks to ensure that time is focused on key issues. The committee structure is effective and Chairs provide concise feedback to the Board on main issues rehearsed at Committee. Minutes are thorough, well presented and concise, clearly identifying actions agreed. Actions are tracked with owners and deadlines monitored.

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The committee structure works well. The Strategy committee provides a useful forum for less formal debate and the opportunity to explore topical issues in more depth. But there may be further opportunities going forward to enable that committee to be more creative in its methods and potentially widen debate – for example the use of participative workshop techniques rather than formal written reporting.

Governors are clear that Corporation and Strategy meetings (and awaydays) are face to face and that Committees are online. The Chair sets expectations about attendance articulating clearly his preference for meetings in person. This appears to be working well and recognises that hybrid meetings are not generally effective. The Chair should continue to set clear expectations about attendance and ensure that remote attendance at face-to-face meetings is only by exception. In the Board meeting that I observed one Governor attended on screen (due to unforeseen travel difficulties). There were unfortunate technical difficulties and IT resource on hand but hybrid attendance should not become the norm and expectations particularly of new Governors should be clear.

There have been many recent improvements to the efficiency of meetings. Of particular note is the introduction of the portal, a change in style to the Chief Executive & Principal's report and Chairs introducing the minutes for their individual committees. These changes are positive and help ensure the quality of decision making. They should continue to be monitored. The only additional suggestion concerns Link Governor reports which is dealt with later in this report.

## **Attendance**

Attendance is monitored on a termly basis by S&G with an annual review of attendance at Corporation Board and Committees. Term 1 data in February 2023 reported an average attendance of 82% with 100% attendance at Audit, S&G and SPH Employment Committees. The overall rate for 21/22 was also 82% which is good.

## **Meetings**

Observation of meetings demonstrated a positive governance culture. Teaching and learning was a key focus. At Corporation I witnessed a friendly and inclusive culture that was respectful and inclusive. The Vice Chair (acting as Chair for the meeting) ensured that everyone had the opportunity to contribute and clearly summarised decisions at the end of debates. Staff and the student governors were thanked for their contributions and made to feel welcome. Questions were curious and responses from the executive were clear and without any sense of defensiveness.

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I observed the Audit Committee which took place on Teams. It was actively chaired and Governors brought into the debate appropriately. There was constructive challenge around areas of risk and a healthy dialogue reviewing the effectiveness of the meeting.

Meetings of the Corporation and its committees that I have observed were well chaired. The Vice Chair chaired the July Board meeting in the absence of the Chair and most Governors showed confidence in making their voice heard. In Governor 1-1s it might be useful to discuss with those Governors who do not make regular contributions any barriers to their input.

Senior staff attend Board meetings and provide Governors with the opportunity to know the broader college management team. Dialogue between managers and Governors at Board was constructive and professional and behaviours collaborative with clear understanding of roles and the separation between management and governance. The responsibilities of the committees are well explained in terms of reference, and I observed no unnecessary overlap. Governors to whom I spoke understood and respected collective responsibility. This mirrors the college's own governors' self-assessment 21/22 survey results where all agreed that Governors take collective responsibility for Corporation decisions with one respondent commenting that 'a high level of ownership is shown by governors.'

### **Strategy setting**

The Board holds an annual awayday to focus on strategic direction. In June 2023 the session was held off campus and face to face in a workshop format with a dinner to encourage Governors to get to know each other. It focused on Board self-assessment including a review of college culture, the Link Governor scheme as well as updates on college finances and use of college email addresses by governors. The Governor survey used to inform the Governor self-assessment 2021/22 reported consensus agreement that Governors are fully involved in the setting of the college vision and its annual review with one Governor commenting that 'a great deal of effort is put into this activity'. Board engagement in strategy setting is a strength.

### **Link Governor Scheme**

The Board has established a Link Governor scheme. There are four Link Governor roles – Safeguarding & Prevent, HE, Careers and Sustainability. The latter was created as part of the response to the compliance audit of the AoC Code. Plans to introduce a SEND Link governor will be tabled at the October Board following the recent recommendation to all colleges from DfE. Governors are also invited to attend internal performance reviews for curriculum and support staff which review action plans and progress and this provides useful Governor insight.



The Link Scheme is an area for improvement. From my discussions with Governors and observing the feedback item at Corporation there are opportunities to improve the consistency and impact of the scheme. This is recognised by the Chair, CEO and GP and it is positive that the Board started to discuss the scheme at its recent awayday. I found the approaches of the Link Governors to be inconsistent. I recommend that the College undertakes a root and branch review of the scheme (R3). The subject areas may no longer be the most appropriate to reflect current priorities. The scheme sits alongside other positive opportunities for Governor assurance, including internal performance reviews, but it is not entirely clear to me that this is managed to best effect. By redefining the purpose of the role and how it differs from other mechanisms (such as task and finish deep dives, attendance at internal performance reviews and learning walks) greater clarity will be gained. Role profiles can then set clear expectations, including how learning from Link Governor activity provides assurance to Corporation and captures Learner Voice.

## Conclusions

The Review has identified that Board Structure is a strength with one key area for development, namely review of the Link Governor scheme.

The following table summarises headlines:

BOARD STRUCTURE	
STRENGTH	AREA FOR DEVELOPMENT
Governance arrangements are strong including agenda setting and quality of papers	R3 Link Governor scheme Review the purpose of the scheme, set clear expectations and ensure reporting to Corporation. Consider including student contact within the Link Governor role profile.
Transparency and clarity of information presented to Governors	
Governor attendance at Corporation and Committee meetings	
Board engagement in strategy setting	

Fig. 5

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## Board Interaction

### BOARD INTERACTION

Behaviours and interactions which allow for an inclusive culture that encourages effective challenge and impactful collaboration

#### Board Interaction

Behaviours and interactions contribute to Board culture. An effective Board culture encourages an effective blend of challenge and support to create impactful collaboration. Analysis of Board interaction focusses on the following key underpinning questions: Does the Board's culture and interaction between East Surrey College Board members allow for the most effective deployment of individual and collective skills to meet College goals?

#### Background

All new Governors have an induction programme and Safeguarding & Prevent training is mandatory. All new Governors have the opportunity to be assigned to another Governor as part of a mentoring support scheme. The implementation of the Governor training and development policy is regularly reviewed. A detailed survey of Governors' perceptions of governance informs the College Self-Assessment Report. An annual Governors' self-assessment inform the Governors' Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) and this is reviewed on a termly basis and the self-assessment of governance arrangements was a rating of outstanding in 21/22. The QIP is structured to identify key areas for development with outcomes, owners, milestones and monitoring arrangements.

#### Findings

##### The triumvirate

The working relationship between the Chair, CEO and GP (often known as the triumvirate) is key to effective governance. Observations and interviews demonstrated a clear understanding of role and mutual respect. This is consistent with self-evaluation. Almost all of the respondents to the survey issued as part of this review found that the Board works well with the CEO (and other senior staff) and the GP. All to whom I spoke recognised that relationships were all relatively new but were

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embedding positively. The Chair and CEO joined the College at a similar time and whilst the relationship remains relatively new I found a culture of openness and transparency underpinning their ways of working and evident in dialogue.

The GP is highly experienced and recognized universally for her effective organisation skills. The GP should focus on governance support and make effective use of administrative resource where possible. There is a recognition of the need to regularly review the capacity available for governance support and the appropriate blend of governance professional and administrative skills. I support this and I encourage an early review of the role and the capacity and skills needed to deliver it.

### **Culture, relationships and behaviour**

The culture of the Board as observed at meetings and in interviews is engaged and curious and respectful. 100% of respondents to the survey recorded that the opinions and contributions of all governors are welcomed and valued. 93% recorded good opportunities to scrutinize proposals and ask questions and that the relevant experience and skills of governors is well used in decision making.

The Corporation RAG rated risk register is reviewed regularly and risks are allocated to committees for monitoring. The Board considers its collective appetite for risk via Audit Committee and options for a future Board assurance framework are being considered to strengthen the approach to risk further. Post Ofsted quality improvement plans have been drawn up and these set out detailed actions to address areas for improvement with clear allocation of responsible persons, success criteria, completion dates and monitoring arrangements. These plans with progress updates are considered by L&Q and Corporation. Governors to whom I spoke recognised the importance of their role in monitoring post Ofsted action plans and described their disappointment in the Ofsted report coupled with a new CEO and Chair as being opportunities to strengthen relationships between the Board and the Executive through a shared common aim.

### **Training & development**

Induction and training lay the foundations of Board culture. The personal development of the GP is well supported and training opportunities encouraged.

The Board has a training and induction policy that is reviewed annually by S&G. A statement of annual training is approved by the Board. The training programme is wide ranging including AoC/ETF Governance Development programme for college boards and is informed by the Governance self-assessment and QIP. Total training hours are reported to S&G and show good participation. This is supported by the responses of Governors to the survey undertaken for this review as 93% of those

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who responded agreed that they are provided with training and development which assists them to be effective (and 7% somewhat agreeing).

All newly appointed Governors are expected to take part in a thorough induction programme. The Board Member Induction and Training Policy refers to new Governors having a 'tailormade' induction checklist to meet individual needs and generally comprising meetings with senior staff, Chair/Vice Chair and access to key documents including the Governance Toolkit (available on the portal). 85% of those who responded to the survey undertaken as part of this survey agreed that they had a good induction process when they joined the Board with 14% somewhat agreeing.

### **Self assessment**

The Board takes self-evaluation and seeking continuous improvement seriously. Since 2011 an annual cycle of review meetings between the Chair of Corporation and individual Governors has taken place to review college governance and identify personal development opportunities for individual governors. These sessions have explored in an informal manner what's going well, opportunities for improvement including asking for feedback on the performance of the Chair. It is positive that the new Chair intends to continue this good practice. His approach to increasing 1-1 communication with Governors and ensuring that his own performance is scrutinised constructively is positive. To maximise impact these meetings could be semi-structured and ensure that feedback is reported to S&G and links made with the monthly 1-1 meetings between the Chair and Chief Executive & Principal and meetings with student governors.

The College monitors compliance with the AoC Code through a RAG rated schedule and action plan. The latest audit shows good levels of compliance and actions in place to address a few partially or non-complete activities.

Appraisal of the Chair is a key part of the Board's overall reflection on Board and individual effectiveness. Although I understand that in 1-1s with Governors the former Chair sought feedback the board lacks a formal mechanism for Chair appraisal. A more structured approach to Chair appraisal is recommended (R4) and the new Chair is committed to developing such an approach. This will strengthen how the Board holds the Chair to account for his actions and behaviours.

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## Conclusions

The Review has identified that Board Interaction is a strength. The only area for improvement is strengthening the process for Chair appraisal.

The following table summarises headlines:

BOARD INTERACTION	
STRENGTH	AREA FOR DEVELOPMENT
GP support to Governors recognised as highly effective	R4 Chair appraisal Design and implement a chair appraisal scheme that ensures the Chair's performance is evaluated constructively
Induction, training & development	
Positive engaging culture	

**Fig. 7**

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# Overall Board Effectiveness

In assessing overall Board effectiveness we have focused on the core function of a Governing Body:

- setting and communicating the College educational character, strategy and goals;
- holding executive leaders to account for educational performance and quality of the College and performance of staff;
- exercising effective control to ensure that funds and assets are protected and legal obligations are met.

We have looked at the way in which you observe the Nolan Principles and your adopted Code of Governance and the extent to which the culture of the Board focusses on outcomes. Key Board outcomes are shown below:



Fig. 8

The following table summarises outcomes against the 9 Board outcomes.

Board Outcome	Conclusion
<b>Collectively Accountable</b>	The Board takes collective responsibility for strategy, decisions and compliance with regulations. This is evidenced in survey data and Governor meetings.
<b>Strategic Leadership</b>	The Board holds strategic awaydays to inform its strategy setting. A relatively new CEO and new chair are building effective relationships founded on transparency and openness.
<b>Integrity</b>	There is clear evidence of a good culture that allows straightforward scrutiny and challenge of performance in an open and positive manner. All except one of the survey respondents recorded that they observe the Nolan principles and have committed to a code of governance (the other respondent was not sure). This is consistent with observed behaviours, internal Governor survey data and self-assessment against the AoC code.
<b>Student Experience</b>	Student Governors attend Board meetings. All Governors are invited to learner walks where they observe students in a particular curriculum setting. The L&Q KPIs reported to the July Board include a target that 90%+ of students would recommend the college to others. Performance is currently red rated as not achieving targets with May 2023 On Programme survey records 82% (at ESC) and 78% (at JRC) (although induction survey results are 92% and 89% respectively). 100% of the respondents to the survey recorded that the quality of the student experience is central to decision making and that they listen to students to ensure their interests inform decision making. A review of the Link Governor scheme should consider opportunities for further Governor engagement with students.

<b>Quality</b>	The Board has a strong focus on quality and driving improvement. A post Ofsted action plan is a key focus and the Governance QIP is a good example of self-evaluation feeding improvement planning.
<b>Financially Sound</b>	Robust systems of monitoring need to be maintained to meet the challenges of future funding. There is collective Board responsibility for financial performance. Financial data is reported to Board in a clear way including dashboard graphics and key metrics appear to be understood by Governors without a financial background including the challenges ahead. The College has an ESFA rating of good financial health.
<b>Responsive</b>	The board engages and has positive partnerships within the local community. 100% of participants who responded to the survey sent as part of this review said they understood the local economy and support meeting its needs and all except one respondent agreeing that the Board values the input of local employers and other stakeholders.
<b>Reflective</b>	Self-evaluation has many strengths including capturing feedback through 1-1s between the Chair and each Governor. Strengthening the mechanisms for feedback on the chair would further strengthen the Board's approach.
<b>Inclusive &amp; Diverse</b>	Diversity and inclusion are central to decision-making but more could be done to improve data collection and recruitment focus. The Board has used its recent Governor recruitment campaign to improve its breadth based on skills analysis. 100% of respondents to the survey agreed that equality, diversity and inclusion are clear considerations in board decision making. 100% of respondents to the survey agreed that they understand Board responsibilities for Safeguarding and Prevent and are kept up to date regularly. S&G monitors this mandatory training and the Link Governor (Safeguarding and Prevent) is active and experienced in seeking assurance that is reported to Board.

**Fig 9**

Perception of the Board's external impact is outside the remit of this Review and I did not speak with any partners. But the recent Ofsted report found that the College makes a reasonable contribution to



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meeting skills needs and identifies many strengths including that leaders work highly effectively with the local enterprise partnerships to understand and contribute to meeting regional skills needs. In the survey undertaken as part of this review 100% of respondents recorded that they understand the local economy and support meeting these needs. In the Board meeting that I observed relevant connections were made to various stakeholders.

The overall conclusion on Board effectiveness is that **the Board consistently impacts positively on college outcomes and there is strong evidence that it is highly proficient in most or all of the Board outcomes.**

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## Recommendations and Action Plan

This Review has drawn a number of conclusion about the strengths of the College and areas for development.

We make the following recommendations:

R1	Diversity monitoring Increase Governor data collection by gathering information on all protected characteristics and diversity of approach
R2	Succession planning S&G to review approach to succession planning for key roles including Chair of Corporation and Committee Chairs to design skills led documented succession plan that informs training & development.
R3	Link Governor scheme Review the purpose of the scheme, set clear expectations and ensure reporting to Corporation Consider including student contact within the Link Governor role profile.
R4	Chair appraisal Design and implement a chair appraisal scheme that ensures the Chair's performance is evaluated constructively

The College intends to discuss the recommendations at its meeting on 19 October and to add SMART actions to its Governance QIP.

1.	<b>Do we have the right balance between access to relevant skills and knowledge and the ability to make timely decisions that are owned by all governors?</b>
	The Review has found the mix of Governor skills to be broad and the Governors are engaged and committed to College objectives. It has also found governance arrangements to be good and to enable timely decisions with effective collective responsibility.
2.	<b>Does the current structure through which committees provide assurance and make recommendations to the Board deliver sufficient oversight of all key areas?</b>
	The Review has found that the Committee structure works well without duplication. The Strategy Committee provides a useful forum for less formal debate and the opportunity to explore topical issues in depth. There may be future opportunities to enable the Committee to be creative in its methods but timing needs to be carefully considered to ensure energy is not taken from delivery of the post Ofsted action plan.
3.	<b>Is the level of scrutiny and challenge sufficient and proportionate to the risks?</b>
	The Board has a detailed risk register reviewed by Audit Committee. Key risks are reviewed by committees and communication seems focused on key identified risks. Maintaining focus on risks should continue to be a focus. Observations and interviews suggested that scrutiny and challenge is generally proportionate to risk. Focus should continue on delivery of the post Ofsted action plans.
4.	<b>The role of Chair in leading the governing body is crucial and has considerable authority in determining how a governing body influences the College. How can the Board be best placed in holding the Chair (and senior team) to account for their actions taken?</b>
	The Review recommends a more structured approach be taken to Chair appraisal. This will strengthen how the Board holds the Chair to account. As part of this review the Chair should seek to review his approach to SPH appraisal.
5.	<b>Do the Board and its committees achieve the right balance between strategic decision making and monitoring of operational performance?</b>

	This is an issue that all Board should keep under review and a topic for regular review between the Chair and CEO. During this Review the relationships between the Board and the Executive was observed as respectful and the balance between strategy and oversight was not observed to be an issue of concern. There was no evidence in the Review of interference by Governors in operational matters and the Review found Governor engagement in strategy setting to be strong.
<b>6.</b>	<b>Is there scope to rationalise the committee structure, for example where there may be overlap?</b>
	This is an issue for ongoing Review but no significant overlap was identified.
<b>7.</b>	<b>How should the Board ensure that all its decisions are informed by student voice?</b>
	Evidence did not identify a concern that Student Voice was not informing decisions. But in reviewing the Link Governor scheme there might be opportunities for Governors to expose themselves more to the world of the student (eg college classrooms, celebration events, focus groups, learner walks).
<b>8.</b>	<b>How could meeting arrangements be improved to maximum both efficiency and the quality of decision making?</b>
	In terms of meeting arrangements setting clear expectations about face-to-face attendance needs to be balanced against any specific attendance difficulties that might be overcome through remote attendance. Maintaining focus on key issues through prioritised agendas and clear focused reporting and time for Governor challenge in meetings will help to maintain quality decision making.
<b>9.</b>	<b>How could the college enhance the quality of the information provided to governors (in terms of accuracy, relevance and timeliness) while reducing the volume of board and committee papers?</b>
	The Portal has had a positive impact on Governor time management. The use of front sheets and executive summaries for all papers with detail referenced in appendices will continue to balance quality and paper volume.
<b>10.</b>	<b>Is there other good practice we should consider adopting? Is what we do good enough? Could it be improved?</b>



	<p>This Review has highlighted some practice others might learn from as well as areas for development where practice could be improved. The College should continue to engage with peers and identify effective practice from elsewhere. Some links to good practice might be found in:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Just One Thing – FEC active support initiative</li><li>AoC Chair &amp; Committee Chair Networks</li><li>Continued engagement with ETF Governor Development modules</li><li>Peer to peer buddying</li><li>Networking with Colleges on specific issues</li></ul>
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