

External Board Review



DN COLLEGES GROUP

Reviewer: David Wright

25 07 2024

Executive Summary

In March 2024, The Association of Colleges (AoC) was asked to undertake an independent review of the DN Colleges Group. This AoC External Board Review is based on the ETF/AoC pilot review framework. The framework considers, but is not limited to, principles from the Code of Governance, the Education Inspection Framework and the DfE's current guidance on external board reviews. In discussion with College leaders, it was agreed to tailor the focus of the standard framework whilst also considering some reflections on best practice in governance.

The objective of the review was to gain an understanding of the strengths of the Board and any areas that would benefit from development. It also aimed at facilitating collaborative effort between the reviewer and members to explore areas of improvement and overall effectiveness of the Board. The framework and methodology used to undertake the review was developed in collaboration with governance experts and stakeholders in the further education and training sector. The College Board has recently undertaken an annual self-assessment review and graded governance as outstanding but is not complacent and seeks continuous improvement.

Emerging findings have been discussed during the review in a developmental and inclusive approach that supports College improvement and seeks to share best practice.

The overall conclusion on Board effectiveness is that: there is strong evidence the Board is highly proficient and consistently impacts positively on College strategy, effectiveness, and outcomes.

The Board demonstrates strong behaviors and characteristics associated with a high performing board (committed, confident, curious, challenging, collaborative, critical, creative), is innovative and transparent with a strong mix of skills, experience and understands collective responsibility in decision making. The Board has developed strong and effective governance with back-office systems in place to support overall College improvement and continues to adapt to change over time and in response to feedback.

The Governing Body is well informed and actively oversees its strategic objectives. Governors understand its context well and monitor its progress closely, offering senior managers both support and searching challenge in equal measure. They monitor performance and students' achievements closely and are open with views on College strengths and weaknesses. They receive regular updates on local and national issues. Their expertise in curriculum, finance, audit, strategy, human resources, marketing, and

estates management is used to support the development of the College in a productive way.

There is much that is strong and positive about governance arrangements at DN Colleges Group, with robust and professional Board interaction. Whilst there would be benefit in the Board continuing to keep its structures under review for the future, there is transparency of information and a healthy approach to evaluating how governance is operating in seeking further improvement, with the Board consistently measuring impact on college strategy, effectiveness and outcomes.

The process involved interviews with the Chair, Chief Executive, Clerk to Corporation and other members of the governing body; a group meeting of senior leaders; a Board members' survey; examination of a sample of governance documents and papers; an observation of a full Board meeting and observation of three Committee meetings.

The following summarises the headline key strengths and suggested key areas for further enhancement:

Key Strengths

- Experienced and committed governors with wide-ranging skills and experience
- Good and effective use of governors' particular skills in different committees and working groups to provide supportive challenge to the executive
- Commitment to the principles of good and effective Governance
- Good alignment of key strategic decisions with core values, vision and strategy.
- A robust, transparent and professional format for reporting key information to the Board
- Challenging, conscientious and objective in seeking assurance on all areas of risk.
- Effective governance practice via Committee structure and strategy meetings
- Good visible team ethic, spirit of inclusion, support and engagement
- Strong engagement to consider how the college offer meets student and community needs
- Collective responsibility demonstrated at Board and committee level allowing for joint ownership of decisions

Suggested Key Areas for Further Enhancement

- Maintain a review of Board membership and search with HE, Health and Safety and Estates management future appointments as a focus.
- Consider further use of co-opted members to widen the knowledge and skills base of the current board
- Keep under review the Board operating structure by extending the delegation of responsibility and scrutiny at Committee level
- Consider whether further refinement of Board papers is possible with greater use of cover sheets to focus Governor attention on key issues arising from any paper
- Board to consider the introduction of informal “How did we do” checks/evaluation on Governance papers and presentation reflection
- Consider if appropriate the inclusion of team/peer development/knowledge-based update sessions to improve Governor understanding and confidence in role.

My thanks, and appreciation are recorded to all those who have engaged in this review including all governors who gave up their time to meet with the Reviewer. Thanks, are also expressed to Angela Briggs Chair of Corporation, Sharon Harmon Clerk to the Corporation and Claire Houlden Executive Support/Governance who have worked hard in providing documents and ensuring that all arrangements have been both smooth and efficient.