

External Board Review

London South East Colleges (LSEC)

Reviewer:

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National Leader of Governance

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Executive Summary

This AoC External Board Review (EBR) is based on the AoC 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. The framework comprises three core areas for evaluation known as Board Dimensions – namely: Composition, Structure and Interaction.

The intention of the report is to support the further development of governance arrangements at LSEC.

Governors have an excellent spread of skills and expertise which they use to support and challenge LSEC’s executive team. Self-evaluation and succession planning are strengths and while interactions between Governors and the executive team are good-natured, respectful and courteous, challenge is strong and can be persistent.

The following table summarises some of the headline strengths and areas for development:

	STRENGTHS	AREAS FOR DEVELOPMENT
BOARD COMPOSITION	Excellent chairs, a great mix of skills and backgrounds with strong representation in terms of education and finance.	In order to reflect LSEC’s diverse student body (and staff) the Board needs to recruit at least one governor from local ethnically diverse communities.
	Good diversity in terms of gender, age, disability and sexual orientation. This has an impact on the Board as Governors can bring lived experience and specific perspectives into Board debates and discussions.	The addition of a governor with HR experience would benefit the Board, adding a new perspective. Because of the size of LSEC it is also recommended that a further student governor and staff governor are recruited.
BOARD STRUCTURE	Effective and well-developed committee structure – new capital committee provides extra scrutiny of estates strategy.	Chair’s 1-2-1s should be held annually.

		Governors would like more opportunities to meet students – the Board needs a louder student voice.
BOARD INTERACTION	Good examples of scrutiny and challenge and an exemplary link governor programme.	Increased awareness of the Nolan Principles.
	Interactions between Governors are good-natured, respectful and courteous. Good working relationship between Board and exec team.	

Fig 1

The overall conclusion 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.

Thanks are recorded to those who have engaged in this Review, particularly Jenny Pharo, Group Director of Governance, who has worked diligently to ensure arrangements have been smooth.

Approach taken

In an initial scoping meeting with London South East Colleges (LSEC) on December 12, 2023, it was agreed to use the AoC’s template for the Review with no specific areas identified for particular focus. An initial findings meeting was held on April 15 and the report completed on April 24 prior to moderation.

This full report sets out the findings made against the three Board dimensions in the Framework with key evidence that informs those findings.

This review was undertaken by Rob Lawson between December 2023 and April 2024, after an initial meeting in December. Rob previously carried out several reviews of College Board effectiveness as part of the DfE pilot programme. He then carried out an audit of 23 such reviews on behalf of the FE Commissioner Shelagh Legrave. Rob is the Chair of Hull College and a National Leader of Governance appointed by the office of the FE Commissioner.

Evidence for the report has been drawn from a variety of sources, some published, and others provided by LSEC, and triangulated to draw findings around an overarching question for each Board Dimension:

1 Composition

What attributes (skills, knowledge, mindset/attitude) do members of the Board possess currently and what additional attributes would allow the Board to better meet its objectives?

2 Structure

Does the current Board processes and structures equip members to optimally engage with each other to deliver the objectives effectively, with transparency and in compliance with regulations?

3 Interaction

Does the Board's culture and interactions between Board members allow for the most effective deployment of individuals and collective skills to meet the College's goals?

Overall Board effectiveness focuses on the core functions of the Board as a governing body and the extent to which the board culture delivers nine key outcomes which characterize highly effective boards –

Integrity: Commitment to Nolan Principles and the AoC Code (or relevant code)

Strategic: Setting a clear direction and objectives for the organisation

Quality: Progress and achievement of students effectively monitored and scrutinised

Financially Sound: Robust financial system and processes

Responsive: The Board engages and has positive partnerships within the local community

Collectively Accountable: Responsibility for strategy and decisions and compliant with regulations

Inclusive & Diverse: Diversity and inclusion are central to decision-making and impact is measured

Reflective: Board performance and impact are thoroughly reviewed

Student Experience: Student voice is valued, and student experience and safeguarding are central to decision-making

Rob met Chair David Eastgate, then Group CEO Dr Sam Parrett CBE and Group Director of Governance Jenny Pharo on December 12, 2023 for an initial scoping meeting at which the process of the review was discussed. A general review of governance at the College was agreed.

Review Process

The Review processed involved:

- An online survey/questionnaire sent out to Governors in mid December;
- A desk-top analysis of key College documents, policies and minutes of meetings;
- Attendance and observation at two Board meeting and three committee meetings;
- Fourteen 1-2-1 interviews, including the Chair of the Group, Chair of LSEC, Director of Governance and student governor.

Survey:

The survey was sent to 16 Governors – 13 responses were received.

Desktop analysis:

Time was spent analysing a wide range of documents including: College and governance policies; the strategic plan; governor CVs and profiles; meeting schedules; the latest skills audit; the schedule of business; corporation committee membership; committee and Board minutes and internal assessment reports.

Attendance and observation:

Meetings attended:

- Wednesday, January 24: 5.30pm – Board (in-person)
- Wednesday, February 7: 5.30pm - curriculum and standards (online)
- Wednesday, March 6: 5.30pm - audit and risk (online)
- Wednesday, March 13: 5.30pm - finance (online)
- Wednesday, March 20: 5.30pm - Full Board (in-person)

Interviews:

- Kate Shiner, January 24
- Angela Hands, January 24
- Sarah Lewis, January 24
- Jenny Pharo, Director of Governance, January 24
- Dr Sam Parrett CBE, CEO, January 24 and 26
- George Ryan, January 24

- Louise Nadal, Vice Chair, January 24
- Darren Kirwan, January 25
- Mark Trinick, January 25
- Mark Burnett, Vice Chair, January 25
- Teresa Longford, staff governor, January 25
- David Eastgate, Chair, January 25
- Ruby Davis, student governor, January 25
- Stephen Howlett CBE, Chair London and South East Education Group, January 25

An initial findings meeting was held on Monday, April 15 between Rob, Chair, Group CEO and Group Director of Governance.

A draft report was shared with a moderator on April 22. ***Following moderation, a final report was sent to the College on April 29 in advance of being presented to the Board on Wednesday, May 8.***

A list of recommendations can be found at the end of this report, as can an analysis of the responses to the survey sent to the Board.



Fig. 2

The above graphic summarises the review process.

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.

Background

LSEC is a large further and higher education College operating in south east London. LSEC was established in 2016 after the amalgamation of Bromley College, Greenwich Community College and Bexley College. Its largest campus is in Bromley and others are situated in Orpington, Erith and Plumstead.

LSEC is part of the London and South East Education Group (LSEEG), a social enterprise which also includes London South East Academies Trust and London South East Apprenticeship Company.

LSEEG has its own Board and committees, but shares a CEO. LSEC's Chief Governance Officer is also Company Secretary and Clerk to the Boards of LSEC and London South East Academies Trust – and is also Group Data Protection Officer for LSEEG.

The LSEC Board has ultimate overall responsibility for the performance of the further education colleges within LSEEG. It is a unique governance structure, designed on charitable principles, that applies the 'coincidence of interest' concept and practice.

In terms of numbers, students are spread across four main campuses:

- Bromley – about 4,000 students on a large site incorporating a £4m sports centre, hair salon and construction workshops
- Bexley – about 1,600 students on a campus which includes a new creative media centre, gym and café
- Greenwich – about 1600 students on a site that has a performing arts centre, along and café
- Orpington – about 1000 students.

In 2022-23 LSEC's student population was 11,794 of which 2,364 required additional learning and 718 required specialist high needs – 58 per cent of learners needed to study English and/or maths alongside their vocational subject.

At its last full Ofsted inspection (March 2019) LSEC was graded as Good. A monitoring visit in December 2023 focused on the Nido Volans Lambeth provision of LSEC (only 40 learners). Significant progress was reported across the report's four themes.

LSEC's finances are graded Good by the ESFA.

The College delivers a wide range of vocational courses across its campuses and also offers higher education opportunities through Bromley College's partnerships with the University of Greenwich and Canterbury Christ Church University.

The Board adheres to the AoC Code of Governance, and this is reaffirmed annually. The minutes of a full Board meeting in October 2023 noted a new AoC Code had been published and changes had been reviewed by the Board in previous meetings.

The Board subsequently approved adoption of the new Code and at the March 20, 2024 meeting agreed to a revised Board Improvement Framework in light of the changes in the updated AoC Code.

The new Board and self-evaluation document was reviewed by the audit committee and approved by the Board in March 2024, and will be completed against the new AoC code at the next meeting in May to include the outcomes of the EBR. An action plan will flow out of this and be approved in July 2024.

The LSEC Board Improvement Framework for 2023/24 paper to the Board of March 20 also included an LSEC Board Improvement Action Plan for 2022/23 (more later).

An annual skills audit is completed. The Board's standing orders (2023-24) state: 'All Governors are required to complete a skills audit which determines the level of understanding and proficiency in certain core skills, experience and attributes. These are categorised within the following headlines and reviewed annually:

- Leadership & Management
- Legal, Finance & Audit
- Public Sector & Voluntary
- Education
- Quality
- IT & Estates
- People Management & Strategy'

These individual skills audits, completed at onboarding or induction inform a broader annual Board skills audit. It is not known if the skills audit is updated if/when a governor leaves and is replaced, which would be good practice. The search and governance committee review the annual skills audit twice a year to identify skills and experience gaps.

A summary governors' skills dashboard was completed in December 2023.

A register of interests, updated annually, is also kept.

Board Composition

BOARD COMPOSITION
The attributes possessed by
the Board that enable
effective strategic leadership.

LSEC's governance section of its website shows 16 governors, including one student governor, a staff governor and the CEO. The college's I&As state the composition of the Board to be a maximum of 20 governors, including the CEO, a staff governor and a student governor.

The Board has an excellent mix of skills and backgrounds, and includes: a former chief executive and finance director at a large housing association; the school secretary at the London School of Economics and Political Science; the chief executive of a multi-academy trust; the CEO of a tech company working in the FE sector; the director of estates for the Metropolitan Police; the head of sales and client management at a global information conglomerate; a former director at the National Audit Office and former NHS chief executive; an experienced senior director who has worked with several major companies; a senior leader from the financial services sector – and chartered accountant; the chief executive of a multi-academy trust and former director at the Department for Education; the chief operating officer for Justice Digital in the Ministry of Justice; the head of quality at The Education and Training Foundation, and a consultant specializing in strategic communications and education policy.

The Board has an impressive array of Governors with a range of experiences from the private and public sectors. It feels like a Board with significant influence locally and nationally. It is particularly strong in the areas of education and finance, and there is a good mix of new and experienced governors. No governor on the Board has served more than the AoC recommended two terms of four years.

The Board includes one staff governor and one student governor. To ensure both the student and staff voices are heard, some FE colleges have moved toward have two student Governors and two staff governors. Because of its size, and to ensure these important voices are heard on the Board, it is recommended that LSEC looks to increase its numbers from one to two for each.

The Board is well led by an experienced Chair whose informality and relaxed approach to meetings provides a welcoming and accessible environment in which Governors feel encouraged to make contributions. The Chairs of meetings observed were also very effective and allowed Governors to have their say, while ensuring meetings were conducted at pace and with energy.

Through observation, the survey and the 1-2-1 interviews it was clear that strategic thinking was a strength. Through the survey 85% of respondents agreed that Governors operate strategically and in the latest governors' skills dashboard (November 2023), the statement 'I have experience and expertise in developing strategy' scored a high average. However, the average score for the statement 'I know what the college's strategic priorities are' scored a much lower average. It is recommended that a session is held for Governors to remind them of the college's strategic priorities – especially in light of a likely inspection from Ofsted in the near future. It is also a recommendation that closer links to strategic priorities during Board meetings, referencing the strategic plan and KPIs.

The governance area of the college's website includes pictures and short biographies of the governors. The area also includes information on the group's structure and committees, LSEC's instrument and articles (dated 2016); financial statements from 2014 to 2023 and links to the scheme of delegation, charitable status, standing orders, Board EDI statistics and an energy and carbon reporting statement. The area also includes minutes from Board and committee meetings from 2017 to January 2024.

This thorough and helpful approach is evidence of an open and transparent attitude to governance.

Further evidence of the good range of skills and experience was clear from reading governor CVs and through the interviews completed.

Responses to the survey/questionnaire recorded Governors who had very recently joined the Board to Governors being on the Board for eight years. A governor EDI profile completed in December 2023 showed a gender split of 63 per cent female and 37 per cent male. The survey also showed two Governors identified as disabled; a diversity of sexual orientation on the Board

and a wide range of age brackets – the largest proportion of Governors were in the 55 to 64 years age bracket, but there is a healthy range of ages on the Board, bringing different perspectives and life experiences.

The survey also showed that the majority of Governors (88 per cent) were white British, with one governor from a Black British Caribbean or African heritage, and another from a mixed heritage ethnic group.

Clearly, the Board needs to be more diverse – the current Board does not reflect the ethnic diversity of its student body, or its staff. During the 1-2-1 interviews with governors, several reflected that the Board needed to be more ethnically diverse.

Last year two Governors from ethnically diverse backgrounds stepped down from the Board, which adversely affected the Board's diversity. The Board's succession planning discussion (at search and governance) includes recruiting more ethnically diverse governors.

EDI is a strength of LSEC as an organisation and the College recently hosted an EDI conference on behalf of the Further Education Commissioner (FEC). Governors are aware of the importance of the issue as evidenced through the survey where, when asked if equality, diversity and inclusion are a clear consideration, all Governors agreed, barring one who was unsure. Similarly, through the November 2023 skills dashboard, Governors scored very high averages for the following statements:

- I understand the legal responsibilities of the College in relation to equalities
- I have influenced an organisation's culture of equality and diversity (through communication, appropriate challenge, awareness raising or developing policy and practice)
- I have knowledge, experience or training that will help me to promote diversity and inclusion
- I can confidently challenge behaviour, attitudes and practices which are detrimental to creating an inclusive culture
- I can interpret relevant data and insight to identify issues and ask questions relating to equality and inclusion

The Board would also benefit from the recruitment of someone with an HR background. LSEC is a large and complex organisation and HR skills on the Board would help Governors – and the executive team - understand challenges and opportunities in this area. This was identified by several Governors during interview and was also identified by the latest annual skills audit. The search and governance committee also discussed an HR professional would be 'nice to have' on

the Board, but that CEOs and senior leaders on the Board would have experience and knowledge of HR matters.

Other areas of strength identified through the November 2023 skills dashboard include: identifying risk and their potential impact; interpreting budget monitoring reports and understanding the strategic nature of the Board's role. Areas that score less well included understanding how the College engages with stakeholders and knowing and understanding the communities served by the college.

Succession planning is taken seriously at LSEC. The Group search and governance committee meets three times a year, with other meetings added if needed. A sample agenda within LSEC's standing orders (2023-24) lists succession planning, Board self-assessment and performance, and training as standard items for discussion. In the Business Cycle Items for remuneration and search committee 2023/24, it is reported that a succession planning review will take place in the spring term.

A detailed discussion of governance succession planning took place at the December Group search and governance meeting. The meeting also discussed Board registers for each of the Group's organisations including LSEC. The registers incorporate succession planning and skills gaps in terms of Board composition.

The Board registers also identified vacancies or future vacancies as Governors came to the end of their first or second terms of office.

It was reported that the LSEC Corporation was almost up to capacity with a number of new Governors recruited in 2023. There were no vacancies per se but there was a need for the committee to consider succession planning across a number of roles :

- Chair Corporation
- Chair C&S Committee
- Chair Finance Committee
- SEND Lead Governor

The skills dashboard was reviewed at the December Group search and governance meeting when it was reported that LSEC Board had a range of expert and proficient specialists with a number scoring 4s (the highest score) across many of the competency questions. However it was reported that those areas reporting 3s should be considered for wider board training and development as these are perceived gaps in the board's knowledge, skills and understanding.

It was reported that these gaps were around

- FE/HE funding and finances,
- Curriculum,
- EDI and
- Community/Stakeholder Engagement.

Under an item on Board profiles, skills analysis and training, Governors were also asked to consider and comment on skills dashboards completed by current members of LSEC's Board.

(See also training in Board structure section).

The committee was also asked to comment on an EDI profile of the Board which was to be published on the College and Trust's websites.

Conclusions

Through observation of meetings, through the governor survey and through the 1-2-1 interviews it is evident that Governors are curious, committed and ambitious for the students of LSEC. Meetings observed were well chaired.

Succession planning is taken seriously.

The high-calibre, high-profile Board has an excellent range of skills and experience, and good diversity in terms of gender, age, disability and sexual orientation. The Board needs to recruit from ethnically diverse communities in order to reflect the make-up of the student body and staff.

The Board would also benefit from the addition of a governor with HR experience and would also benefit from adding an additional student governor and a staff governor to its number.

The following table summarises Board Composition headlines:

BOARD COMPOSITION	
STRENGTHS	AREAS FOR DEVELOPMENT
Excellent chairs, a great mix of skills and backgrounds with strong representation in terms of education and finance.	In order to reflect LSEC's diverse student body (and staff) the Board needs to recruit at least one governor from local ethnically diverse

	communities.
Good diversity in terms of gender, age, disability and sexual orientation. This has an impact on the Board as Governors can bring lived experience and specific perspectives into Board debates and discussions.	The addition of a governor with HR experience would benefit the Board, adding a new perspective. It is also recommended that additional student and staff Governors are added to the Board.
Governors are curious, committed and ambitious for the College and its students.	It appears there is work to do to ensure Governors are more aware of LSEC's strategic priorities.

Fig. 3

Board Structures

BOARD STRUCTURE

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

Background

The Board operates a traditional committee structure, with most Group committee meetings covering LSEC as well as the Group's other organisations.

For instance, the Group's audit and risk committee meets three times a year; the Group's finance committee meets three times a year; the Group's remuneration committee normally meets three times a year and the Group's search and governance committee meets three times a year.

LSEC's specific curriculum and standards (C&S) committee meets three times a year.

The corporation usually meets four times a year, with two development/strategy days and a further strategic development day for the LASER, LSEC and LSEAT Boards.

Given the large capital programmes (£60m) currently being undertaken at LSEC, a new capital programmes committee of the Group finance committee has recently been introduced.

This spread of meetings and development/strategy days, and a willingness to arrange more meetings on an ad hoc basis if and when needed, ensures the Board has sufficient opportunities to scrutinise College business and challenge the executive team.

During the 1-2-1 interviews conducted, all Governors expressed satisfaction with the current committee structure, with several noting the flexibility in approach which led to the creation of the capital programmes committee.

Through the survey, 77 per cent of Governors agreed that the Board has opportunities to scrutinise proposals and to ask questions. After discussions during the interviews, I was surprised his figure was not substantially higher.

Meetings

The first meeting observed was LSEC's Corporation Board Development meeting on January 24, 2024.

The meeting was well attended. Governors were well prepared for the meeting and appeared to have read the papers in advance. Good examples of challenge came in a detailed discussion around LSEC's Greenwich campus project. Governors clearly understood the issues and challenges involved in the project and wider estates issues.

There was also discussion around whether the planned capital programmes committee was needed. The CEO and some Governors said because of the importance of the Greenwich project – and other capital projects – the extra scrutiny applied by the committee was needed. This is evidence of a sensible, self-assessing and flexible approach to the committee structure that is responsive to LSEC's governance needs.

In a discussion around teaching and learning, the CEO asked for feedback from four recent learner walks completed by governors. The four Governors who had completed the learner walks have education backgrounds and spoke with knowledge and confidence about their experiences. They reported back about teaching and learning, attendance and classroom behaviours, and all had been impressed by their visits.

Two presentations followed, one from an AoC policy manager who spoke about curriculum reform and another from LSEC's Principal and Chief Learning Officer about LSEC's approach to post-16 reforms.

Both presentations prompted a good range of questions from a variety of Governors – evidence of curious and knowledgeable Board members who understand LSEC and the wider FE sector.

The passionate response from the Chair around so many LSEC students being ineligible for T-Levels (because of their failures in English and maths) and the danger of DfE discontinuing with BTECs was evidence of a committed Chair driven by an ambition for learners to succeed and progress.

The student governor was also an active participant in the wide-ranging discussions. One outcome of the discussion was a decision for the student governor, CEO and LSEC's Principal and Chief Learning Officer to write to the DfE expressing frustration around the broad decision to withdraw some BTECs in favour of T-Levels.

The LSEC curriculum and standards meeting of February 7 was online, but poorly attended, with only three Governors attending out of a possible nine. Despite this, there was a good level of challenge, and the meeting was well chaired.

The meeting started with reports from external assurance reviewers on five areas: English and maths, STEM, Tutorials, ALS and apprenticeships.

The reports were thorough and succinct and prompted both questions and praise from Governors (particularly around recent English and maths resits). However, on occasion Governors strayed too far into operational questions.

Governors put the online chat function to good use, making points and asking questions.

There was an excellent balance between support and challenge, and the interaction between Governors and the executive team was good-humoured, respectful and polite.

The Director of Governance played an active part in the meeting, giving advice around ONS reportable events and at one point stepping in to remind Governors that they were behind the scheduled timings of the meeting.

The next meeting observed was LSEC's new capital programmes committee held on February 21. This meeting was well attended and began with an explanation of why the Board felt such a committee was necessary. The terms of reference, agreed at the January 2024 Board meeting, stated that the purpose of the committee was:

To provide expert financial advice, review, scrutiny and risk analysis and impact assessment on major capital programmes and projects ongoing, in consideration of their priority order, objectives and implementation plans, in relation to the overarching College estates plan and strategy.

The Group Strategy Officer presented a paper about LSEC's Future Greenwich project.

Governors followed the paper with questions around risk, progress and ambition. Particular questions were around financial risks and what would be the repercussions be if not all of the funding materialised after a possible shortfall was identified. There are some challenges around the project and Governors scrutinised the plans and risks to the College and stakeholders involved, displaying good background knowledge and seeking assurances about the viability of the project. Several Governors obviously knew the site well.

A paper on the FE Capital Transformation Fund Project was then presented by the Group Strategy Officer. This again prompted a good range of questions from governors, who appeared to understand the complexities of the funding arrangements and asked appropriate questions around the awarding of a significant works package.

The Group finance meeting observed virtually on March 13 considered the finances of both LSEC and LSEAT. The meeting was well attended, and Governors displayed an excellent working knowledge of LSEC's finances and the complex funding arrangements of the wider FE sector.

Governors were keen to understand LSEC's recruitment performance against the performance of other London colleges, and colleges nationally. Enrolment numbers were below those forecast, and Governors asked good questions about how the executive team planned to improve recruitment and to make up the financial shortfall if targeted figures were not met.

In delivering LSEC's financial performance report, the executive team was open and honest about a deteriorating financial picture, showing a transparency needed for good Board/exec relationships. Governors asked a range of relevant and pertinent questions in a respectful way but were determined to understand the full picture and asked for a range of options to ease the financial pressures to be presented at their next meeting.

Governors were persistent, firm, but polite and also came up with their own solutions, showing their understanding of the college's finances and the challenges faced.

During a discussion following a property and capital report, Governors asked good questions around rising costs, mitigation of those costs and risks associated with the Future Greenwich, and the impact of HAAC being discovered.

A RAG-rated paper – Capitals Project Funding Recovery Approach – looked at a high-level options appraisal exploring risk and opportunities across all capital projects currently. This included critical risks, and mitigating and managing those risks. This paper was a clear, concise and visual way of presenting information Governors needed to analyse the situation and come to decisions.

Although showing support for the executive team, Governors were also challenging, especially around financial timeframes. Some of the discussion was similar to the debate at the capital committee held on February 21, but with a different set of governors. In my view this was not an example of duplication, but a further opportunity for Governors to explore and challenge a vitally important project.

The final meeting observed (virtually) was the LSEC Board meeting of March 20. The meeting was well attended and judging by questions, comments and engagement, the vast majority of Governors had read the papers in advance. The meeting was divided into two sections, the first to consider 'above the line' more operational oversight items, and the second section looked at 'below the line' more strategic issues.

Meeting agendas are timed which ensures focus from both the Chair and governors. Although not rigidly adhered to in meetings, allowing Chairs the flexibility to let debates run their course, they did act as reminders to Chairs and the Director of Governance to keep to a given timeframe.

There were challenges during the CEO's update around English and maths, a KPIs dashboard and apprenticeships – the latter had caused concern on the Board after falling below expected targets and national averages. Governors were keen to understand the results of a deep dive into apprenticeship provision and asked a persistent series of questions about how performance was to be improved and by when.

There were also some excellent questions around safeguarding, with a particular focus on the mental wellbeing of students. The questions were evidence of Governors making the well-being of students a top priority. This is echoed through the survey - when asked if the quality of the student experience was central to their decision-making, all members agreed.

A property strategy paper had only a few updates from the paper originally presented to the finance committee. The paper included details of the potential project funding recovery options requested by the capital committee.

Despite being considered at two previous committees, there were further good questions for the executive team around estates and property, especially around the financial position and possible DfE/ESFA intervention. A governor rehearsed some of the discussions that had been had at the finance committee for the benefit of other governors.

Evaluation and assurance

A paper on self-evaluation at the Board meeting of March 20 explored LSEC's corporation improvement framework. The framework considered the LSEC Board's performance against the AoC's new Code of Good Governance. The new code has informed the Board's improvement plan. The paper also stated that as a provider of higher education and regulated by the OfS, the code is also consistent with the OfS conditions of registration concerning management and governance.

The paper had previously been discussed and recommended for approval by the Group audit and risk committee.

The paper stated:

By adopting the code the Corporation is publicly taking responsibility for the approach to governance and in using this improvement framework to measure its effectiveness annually, seeking to enhance shape and continuously improve governance at LSEC. Providing both assurance to all stakeholders and improved reputation and performance.

At the end of the review process the Corporation are asked to evaluate themselves against each of the Principles using the guiding questions under behaviours, outcomes and practice and assess the Corporation's effectiveness and capacity against a four-point scale of Red, Red Amber, Amber Green and Green. All actions captured through the evaluation process will be included in the action plan with dates for completion and status updates provided at future meetings of the Corporation.

LSEC's evaluation and action plan uses guiding questions under behaviours, outcomes and practice to assess the Board's effectiveness and capacity for each of the six principles of Improvement a four-point scale of:

- Red (ineffective/weak capacity)
- Amber Red (AR)
- Amber Green (AG)
- Green (fully effective/strong capacity)

The six principles are:

- Determination of aims and strategic oversight
- Responsibility and Accountability
- Leadership and integrity
- Collaboration and stakeholder engagement
- Regulatory compliance
- Board and organisational effectiveness

Furthermore, the Board had mapped the principles of the code to the DfE Competency Framework for Governance to provide additional reference and guidance as Governors assess and evaluate the Corporation's effectiveness and capacity.

There were no Red ratings in the combined self-assessment. The LSEC 2022/23 Board Improvement Action Plan had five areas graded AG, each which had a completion date of July 2023. All five areas had been completed.

This approach to governance assessment is thorough and thoughtful.

In the second part of the meeting, Governors were asked to consider an LSEC Board Assurance Framework (BAF). A paper stated:

The BAF has been designed to demonstrate the overall assurance of each defined Assurance Area and the components that comprise these areas, as an indicator of the strength and health of the organisation and risks associated with these.

The Board had previously agreed that the BAF would focus on five key areas:

- Governance
- Strategic Operation
- Risk Management
- Audit
- Performance (Financial, Academic, Estates, IT and People)

All of these areas were graded good or strong. These assurances were given by a department, a senior manager, the Corporation or Trust Board or external auditors, awarding bodies or external accreditations.

The Board also received a report on the successful and well-received Just One More Thing conference hosted by LSEC on behalf of the FEC. A part of the discussion, Governors noted the diversity of the student body was reflected in the staff body – but not by the Board in terms of ethnic diversity (as mentioned above).

Lastly, Governors briefly discussed five governor link visits – evidence of triangulation, a commitment to the college, Governors increasing their understanding of the College and meeting staff and students. The forms Governors are asked to fill in after their visits are exemplary, and Governors had clearly spent some time in writing up their reports.

The Director of Governance followed up the meeting with a meeting evaluation survey, designed to improve the running of meetings. This process also happens at the end of committee meetings. Feedback is received into the Director of Governance's Survey Monkey account, and salient points are extracted to discuss with the Chair before the next Board meeting. This is a new process for this year and the number of responses are being monitored to see if it should be continued.

When asked about meetings through the survey, Governors mentioned 'open and honest discussions' and Governors brought 'highly relevant skills and knowledge and applied these effectively in meetings.'

Governors also felt that the Board should spend less time on paperwork, and less time scrutinising operational data which robs them of the chance to think strategically.

When asked if they could change or improve one thing about how the Board operates, members suggested shorter, more focused meetings and Board papers which focused on the big picture rather than attempting to cover all topics in minute detail.

The issue of long Board and committee meetings and too many papers to read in preparation for meetings was also mentioned during governor interviews, as was the fact that meetings are often scheduled for two hours, but that wasn't sufficient time to get through the volume of papers.

Long papers and the amount of time Governors need to devote to reading the papers and attendance at meetings are sector-wide issues, and LSEC has tried to tackle the time commitment with the introduction of two-part meetings, which also focus governors' attention on more strategic issues. More focused executive summaries would help to reduce the length of papers. (More on cover sheets on Page 27).

All of the meetings attended were well chaired, and the leadership of the Board and the committees appear to be a strength at LSEC.

Community links

Although some live and work outside LSEC's footprint, Governors seemed to know the locality reasonably well (though this was mentioned by two Governors as an issue in interviews) and showed a genuine commitment to the college.

Governors in interview and through the survey felt they had good connections into local businesses and knew enough about the local economy and jobs market. Through the survey, all Governors who responded said they understood the local economy and local economic needs. When asked if the board valued the input of key local employers and other stakeholders in the area, all Governors who responded agreed.

A draft Accountability Agreement was presented to the Board in March and is being reviewed to include more specific reference to the statutory responsibilities of local skills needs. It will be presented in May (2024) as a final document for approval.

Strategy setting

Governors also appear closely involved in strategy and setting the college's strategic direction – during interview the majority of Governors said the Board had ample opportunity to contribute to the college's strategic direction – particularly through specific Board debates and away day discussions. However, one governor said through the survey they felt that it is not yet apparent that the board is thinking strategically, and that the renewal of the strategy this year will be a key indicator of change; another felt the board should spend more time on strategic thinking and tactical positioning.

Attendance

With one exception as mentioned above, attendance at meetings observed was good. LSEC Corporation average attendance during 2022-23 was 83 per cent, above the 80 per cent target.

However, most Governors recorded 100 per cent attendance and the overall figure was reduced by one governor who only attended a third of meetings, and another who only attended 40 per cent of meetings.

Attendance at Group committee meetings during 2022-23 was exceptional – remuneration, search and governance, audit and risk and finance all recorded 100 per cent attendance. The average attendance at LSEC’s curriculum and standards meeting was 87 per cent.

These figures show a real commitment to the college.

The Director of Governance flags any poor attendance to the Chair who will then discuss any issues preventing attendance with individual Governors during their 1-2-1 meetings.

Learner voice

The need to understand the experience of students through increased direct interaction was mentioned by most Governors during interview and through comments made through the survey.

When asked if the Board listened to students, of those who responded, Governors largely agreed, with two Governors said they ‘somewhat agreed’ (There was a similar split when asked if they listened to staff). However, in the comments section, one governor felt more effort should be spent ‘getting student voice and experiences at the heart of what we do.’

This sentiment was echoed during the 1-2-1 interviews, with most Governors saying they wanted to spend more time with students so they could understand their experiences better and triangulate information provided by the executive team. Governors cited learning walks and link governor visits as opportunities to meet students, alongside attendance at open days and College performances.

One governor said access to students was not restricted and the only barrier to them spending more time with students was work commitments.

Several Governors mentioned Governors Angela Hands and Darren Kirwin were particularly conscientious in meeting students.

In interview, several Governors praised the contributions made by LSEC’s current student governor, who was observed asking good questions and making sound comments during meetings. The student governor is supported by the Director of Governance in terms of pre-meeting briefings, and the student – and staff governor – have Board mentors to work with them.

The Director of Governance is aware that the student voice needs to be louder on the Board and is exploring options to take to the Board.

Other colleges have introduced student voice committees, a student voice link governor or have worked with the Unloc organisation which helps educational organisations empower young people to be ‘changemakers.’ This organisation has helped schools, FE colleges and universities take the learner voice to the next level.

Governing Documents and Arrangements

A calendar of meetings is scheduled well in advance and the Director of Governance holds an in-depth and detailed schedule of Board business (the business and meetings schedules are aligned).

The Board uses the Board Intelligence platform to distribute and store Board papers and governance documentation. Board Intelligence is an impressive and sophisticated Board platform that is easy to use and popular with governors. Areas within the platform include information and documentation about the latest meetings; governance documentation; constitution; governors; governance self-evaluation and minutes.

All key documentation relating to governance practice is in place and well written, and there is plenty of evidence of the monitoring of compliance.

Minutes of the LSEEG audit committee (June 2023) confirm a report on key financial controls tested the College’s and Trust’s compliance of financial controls and an audit provided significant assurance. The same committee received a funding assurance audit undertaken as part of the approved internal audit plan for 2022/23 which confirmed compliance with the 2022/23 ESFA, AEB, GLA and Apprenticeship Funding Guidance in line with the ESFA’s Funding Audit Programme. It was reported that the internal auditors had concluded that the College is demonstrating a high level of compliance with the required funding guidance for each funder and funding stream audited.

At March 2024’s full Board meeting, a paper about the college’s performance against KPIs noted full compliance with bank covenants.

At the same meeting a paper was presented by the Director of Governance about the Board’s Assurance Framework (BAF). A number of governance processes were reported on the BAF, as components within the governance assurance area. There were good governance principles that demonstrated transparency and compliance across legal and regulatory matters and monitored the effectiveness of the Board. The processes ranged from Board and individual self-evaluations through to regular review of schemes of delegation and terms of reference and the review and assessment of skills gaps and succession planning.

The same paper noted an internal audit of OFS regulatory compliance was completed in December 2023, reporting significant assurance. It also noted compliance with AI matters.

Similarly, a paper on risk reported that a statutory compliance audit had been completed; that H&S policies and procedures were in place to ensure compliance with current legislation; accident and incident reporting mechanisms ensured compliance with RIDDOR, and that asset and compliance registers and dashboards were in place.

Finally, the BAF reported at full Board confirmed that regulatory requirements and compliance against the DfE competency framework and the new AoC Code had been achieved (green RAG rating).

Regulatory policies including summary of arrangements; financial regulations; privacy statement; whistleblowing policy; complaints procedure; health and safety policy and safeguarding policy had all been updated last year (2023).

LSEC's standing orders were also updated in July last year, as were a scheme of delegation for the College and terms of reference for each committee. Other governance policies on board recruitment and succession planning, website compliance, a code of conduct, training and development are all updated annually and were done so between July and December last year.

Other documents seen include role descriptions for the Chair, co-opted members, governors, student governor, link Governors and the Vice Chair of the Corporation.

Cover sheets for Board and committee meetings are good, and sensibly laid out. They would be improved by adding a section to say whether an item has already been discussed at a committee previously. Executive summaries are patchy – with some excellent examples read, while others were far too long. Many colleges also use cover sheets to link agenda items to strategic aims – which is recommended here.

All Governors interviewed praised the professionalism of the widely respected and experienced Director of Governance, Jennifer Pharo. Through the survey, Governors praised Jennifer and her team, who were said to be 'friendly, supportive, professional and organised.'

Jennifer plays an active role in meetings and made regular contributions at committees and Board meetings observed. Her background gives her a unique set of skills to fulfil the role: her career began in legal and company secretarial, transferring to the investment banking and financial services sectors where she worked for about 20 years. She then retrained as a business and IT Teacher in 2001 and started her career in the FE Sector, progressing into a senior management role in Further Education. This background and her positive approach mean she is a valuable asset to the Board.

Minutes were well written, relatively concise and were distributed in good time after meetings. Governors reported that it was very rare that papers were late. A questions and comments section in every minutes taken capture challenge and scrutiny. At the end of each agenda item minuted, a clear action (NOTED, APPROVED, RECOMMENDED) is recorded.

Agendas were easy to follow and incorporated a timeframe for each item to focus the minds of Chairs and governors.

However, several Governors interviewed – and through the survey - said Board papers were too long and contained too much detail, making it too time consuming to read and understand papers before meetings. For instance, when asked what does not work well through the survey, several Governors described being bogged down by lengthy board packs. Members felt that although two hours was scheduled for meetings, this was not enough time to get through the sheer volume of papers.

Governors also felt that the board should spend less time on paperwork, and less time scrutinising operational data which robs them of the chance to think strategically.

When asked if they could change or improve one thing about how the board operates, members suggested shorter, more focused meetings and Board papers which focused on the big picture rather than attempting to cover all topics in minute detail.

However, the reviewer didn't think the papers for meetings he attended were excessively long – and the point about Governors overburdened with papers is a sector-wide issue.

The Director of Governance and executive team are aware of this issue, and introduced the 'above the line, below the line' Board meetings in order to create more time for strategic discussions.

Governors may want to consider the wider use of RAG-rated pie charts as an easier way to present key information in a more accessible way. These charts are particularly helpful in immediately identifying areas of concern, particularly in financial reports. There were a few seen during the review, but not many.

Self-assessment

Evaluation and self-assessment is a particular strength of LSEC. Every committee and Board meeting is self-assessed through a series of questions sent out after meetings, which focuses the minds of governors. The Director of Governance reported that there is normally a good response to these forms, and she flags any issues raised to committee Chairs.

Every committee goes through a thorough annual self-assessment process, with reports going to the main Board for consideration.

The Board itself is self-assessed annually (as required by the college's accountability agreement and the AoC Code). LSEC's standing orders also list self-evaluation should be undertaken annually in the Spring term, with a regularity self-assessment questionnaire sent out to Governors in the Autumn term.

The standing orders state:

Self-Assessment and Board Evaluation including the assessment of Board and committee impact and effectiveness, is conducted annually, reflecting performance of the Board against the conduct of business and improvement action plan.

Post-evaluation of Board and Committee meetings is also conducted to inform improved presentation of papers and decision making and conduct of meetings.

As already stated in this report, the Board assesses its performance against criteria in the new AoC Code of Good Governance and the core competencies of the DfE competency framework. The Board evaluations between 2019 and 2022 have been analysed and show a thorough and comprehensive approach to self-assessment.

The latest self-evaluation document seen was a 2023/2024 Board evaluation mapped to the AoC governance code. There are no Red graded areas in the document, with all 16 areas of governance graded green or amber green.

The Board's self-assessment report helps inform and shape a Board improvement action plan which is monitored by the governance committee and Board.

Self-evaluation heat maps are also produced for Governors and are an easy way to identify where potential areas of improvement are needed.

The Chair carries out 1-2-1 reviews with each governor every other year. While it is good practice for the Chair to complete individual meetings with governors, it is recommended that these meetings are held once a year and not once every two years. These meetings can be invaluable for the Chair in terms of governor ambitions and training and development needs. Governors also appreciate an opportunity to speak to their Chair on an individual basis. An excellent personal review and assessment form (updated July 2023) are used for these meetings, and then a report is produced for the governance committee based on the 1-2-1 meetings. The forms have areas such as training and development needs, their review of the Board and committees they sit on, personal ambitions and an overall summary.

Again, this is good practice.

The Chair's own performance is also reviewed by forms sent out to governors. It is understood that the Director of Governance writes a summary report based on these forms that then goes to the governance committee.

Training and induction

The Director of Governance updates Governors regularly about training opportunities offered by AoC, ETF and the executive team. All mandatory training around safeguarding and Prevent is

completed and several Governors reported attending Ofsted training and other internal and external training sessions.

Some Governors said they felt governor training could be improved. Commenting through the survey, one governor suggested ‘doubling up of skills sets to ensure even more robust analysis of each area of operation.’

However, the Director of Governance keeps a detailed note of training needs identified, offered and completed on the Board Register (regularly updated). This shows a range of courses requested or arranged including risk management, AI training, FE funding, unconscious bias. The Board register also lists governors’ specific skillsets.

As reported in the Board Composition section above, December’s Group search and governance committee discussed governors’ training needs and identified areas – through the annual skills dashboard – of training needs. The same committee asked for approval – which was given – for training on funding and finance, and EDI to be delivered to governors. The former was to be delivered internally, while the latter was to be delivered by a third party. This was in addition to Board training already agreed around risk management and AI awareness.

Other bespoke training on curriculum for both the College and Trust would be factored into the individual Board Development Days (January and May) and/or through Deep Dive activities within Board meetings.

In addition it was reported that individual training modules would be shared and directed to individual Trustees and Governors who had requested more support and understanding.

Newer Governors were quick to praise their induction at LSEC, reporting they had been sent documentation and had completed tours of the LSEC’s campuses and met the Chair and senior executives. They also reported they had completed the ETF induction programme. The Director of Governance said she worked through an induction document (not included in the documentation seen).

The induction process could be improved by an induction booklet (which could be online) containing documentation, LSEC’s policies and strategic plan, committee structure, history and some context on the FE sector. Pulling such key documents together in one place would help new Governors assimilate volumes of information quicker.

Risk

The risk register is analysed and updated at every Group audit committee and is also scrutinised by the Board three times a year. Regular deep dives are completed in areas identified as high risk.

Committees can identify risks in their own areas and add them to the overall risk register (through the executive team), or the audit committee can ask committees to look at risk in specific areas of their responsibility.

Governors interviewed felt they understood the management of risk and could identify the most pressing areas on the risk register. However, two people interviewed felt the risk register was too financially focused and needed to include more on areas such as teaching and learning, and curriculum.

An interesting and informative presentation on risk management was delivered to the Group audit committee in March by an external consultancy. It is suggested this presentation is made available to all Governors as it is sector focused and covers some important areas.

Conclusions

LSEC'S current board structure works well and provides the requisite platforms and opportunities for oversight, challenge and scrutiny. There is ample evidence of the impact Governors make through their work on the Board, and through the diligence of an experienced Director of Governance the Board is compliant with the relevant codes and requirements.

Training is taken seriously, with needs identified through an annual skills audit and then monitored by the Director of Governance.

BOARD STRUCTURE	
STRENGTHS	AREAS FOR DEVELOPMENT
Effective and well-developed committee structure – new capital committee provides extra scrutiny of estates strategy. Attendance Agendas, minute reporting and good cover sheets Evaluation and processes of governance Board Intelligence is an excellent governance platform. Excellent Director of Governance Training is taken seriously	Governors would like more opportunities to meet students – the Board needs a louder student voice. Chair's 1-2-1s should be held annually. Governors would like more time to consider strategic issues for longer. Risk register to incorporate more around curriculum and teaching and learning.

Fig. 4

Board Interaction

BOARD INTERACTION

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

Background

Interactions observed between Governors and the executive team were respectful, courteous, good-natured and mature. Meetings observed were relaxed and informal and Chairs worked hard to create an inclusive and welcoming environment in which Governors felt able to challenge.

The executive team accepted challenge in a positive, constructive way and no signs of defensiveness were observed in any meetings. At times – a debate around finances for the Greenwich campus project for instance – there was good collaboration between the Board and the executive team, working together to find solutions.

Governors appeared to get on well with each other, and contributions to meetings were widespread and not just from the same Governors all the time.

Governors have the skills and confidence to challenge and Chairs of the Board and committees created the right environment for challenges to be made in the right way.

Through the survey, 92% of Governors who responded agreed opinions and contributions of all Governors are welcomed and valued, that the relevant experience and skills of Governors is used well in decision-making, and that the board works well with the Principal/CEO and other senior staff.

Challenge

As outlined above in the Board Structure section of this review, there were some good examples of Governors challenging the executive team in Board and committee meetings observed.

Challenge was particularly strong around the financing of new campus developments, at audit and resources committee as well as full Board meeting. Challenge around teaching and learning and the curriculum was also observed to be strong, as you would expect from a Board with such solid education experience. At the curriculum and standards meeting observed on February 7, there was persistent challenges around English and maths and around a paper on STEM.

It was also reported through interviews that there was good scrutiny and challenge around SAR validation at a curriculum meeting in November.

At the finance meeting observed on March 13 Governors asked intelligent and insightful questions about a deteriorating financial picture. They sought assurance about the affordability of the Future Greenwich campus redevelopment, questions which were asked again at the full Board meeting later that month. Realising the urgency of the issue, Governors at the finance meeting asked for a range of options to be presented to them within a four to six week timetable. As stated above, Governors also sought to come up with their own solutions.

Analysis of minutes from finance meetings from last year show consistent challenge around apprenticeship recruitment, pay awards, College provision contribution rates and capital work increased costs.

Minutes of the curriculum meetings from last year showed challenge around Ofsted readiness, English and maths, validation checks around on teaching observation, retention rates and forecast achievement rates.

Consistent audit and risk challenges from last year's meetings included cost forecasts, MIS systems, staff and student feedback and audit data.

In interviews, Governors said they felt most challenge happened at committee level, but that Governors also felt able to scrutinise at Board too. This was backed up by meeting observations.

There was no evidence of groupthink, with evidence of diversity of thought in committee and the Board meetings attended. This reflects a high functioning Board with different backgrounds and experiences – Governors bring different perspectives when considering and debating agenda items.

Nolan Principles and AoC Code of Governance

The vast majority of Governors were aware of the Nolan Principles (all respondees to the survey agreed the Board observed the Nolan Principles), but most said they had not been considered or discussed at Board meetings. Governors were aware of the new AoC Code and that it had been adopted by the Board last year.

Triangulation

Governors appeared to have plenty of opportunities to triangulate information given to them. As well as the opportunity to scrutinise at committee/Board meetings, Governors complete classroom walkthroughs/learning walks, are involved in the college-wide SAR process, attend curriculum area self-assessments, and attend College performances and exhibitions.

The College also has a well-developed Link Governor programme, with link areas, managers and roles linked to Governors as below:

Governor	Link Area	Link Manager	Role
David Eastgate	Service Areas	Dawn Buttle	Assistant Principal Study Programmes
Angela Hands	English and Maths	Fadia Clark/Pamela Dheer	Deputy Principal/Director English and Maths
Mark Trinick	IT & Digital	Ed Avenell	Group Director IT
George Ryan	Creative Media	Dawn Buttle	Assistant Principal Study Programmes
Lucie Allen	Business	Suzy Bolwell	Director Creative Digital & Business Curriculum
Louise Nadal	HE	Carmel Jewell-Newby	Director HE
Kate Shiner	Apprenticeships	Neil Coates	Deputy Principal
Sarah Lewis	SEND	Rhona Sapsford	Assistant Principal High Needs and Foundation Learning
Darren Kirwin	Quality	Fadia Clark	Deputy Principal
Joanne Bell	Student Experience	Beth Moore /Stuart Blackmore	Deputy Principal/Director Student Experience
Mark Burnett	Leadership & Management	Asfa Sohail	Executive Principal
Vince Fihosy	Estates/Capital	Andy Simpson	Group Director Estates
David Bailey	Strategic Projects	Liz Lake	Group Development Director
Tony Gilbey	STEM	Fadia Clark/ Nick Cocks/ Bharat Hirani/Trevor Noble	Deputy Principal & Directors STEM

A well written and comprehensive document – The Role of the Link Governors – fully explains how the programme works and what impact it is expected to make. The document also outlines what is expected of Governors and what types of activities a link visit might comprise.

The benefits are outlined as:

- They allow Governors to see first-hand the resources used in the College and observe and engage in the student experience.
- They constitute part of a strategy to monitor and regularly evaluate progress against the Group and College Strategic Plan.
- They are a means to build up relationships, based on mutual trust and respect.
- They provide Ofsted with concrete evidence about the involvement of Governors in the College.
- They inform the self-assessment and evaluation processes.

Innovatively, Governors change their link governor areas after a year and are then given a new area to focus on. This is to spread knowledge and understanding across the Board.

Governors interviewed who were part of the link governor scheme praised how it worked and said they and the Board had benefitted from the visits.

A link governor activity form is included in the document, and as observed, Governors give feedback on their visits to the full Board.

Triumvirate

It is clear that the Chair, CEO and Director of Governance get on well and operate well as an effective team. All three are respected on the Board – and the CEO and Director of Governance are well respected figures in the wider FE sector.

The three get together before Board meetings for individual updates, and ad hoc meetings are also arranged. Diarised monthly meetings arrange for the Chair to have half an hour with the CEO before the Director of Governance joins the meetings. The three also keep in touch through WhatsApp messages.

Conclusions

LSEC's triumvirate works well, Governors get on well with each other and there is mutual respect between Governors and the executive team.

There is plenty of challenge and scrutiny, with questions being asked respectfully, and sometimes firmly. The executive team reacts well to challenge – positively and constructively,

The exemplary link governor scheme is an asset to the Board and helps with triangulation and with Governors gaining greater understanding of the college.

All Board members interviewed felt valued and their contributions appreciated.

BOARD INTERACTION	
STRENGTHS	AREAS FOR DEVELOPMENT
Good examples of scrutiny and challenge and an exemplary link governor programme	Increased awareness of the Nolan Principles
Interactions between Governors are good-natured, respectful and courteous	
The triumvirate relationship and that between the Board and the executive team work well	

Overall Board Effectiveness

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



LSEC has a well-led, high-performing Board that is ambitious for the College and its students. The Board has an excellent mix of skills, backgrounds and committee chairs are particularly strong.

At meetings observed, through interviews and through minutes and documents read, there is clear evidence of a high level of scrutiny and challenge. Governors are curious and committed, and the Director of Governance is an asset to the Board.

My conclusion is: The overall conclusion 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.

Recommendations and Action Plan

This Review has drawn a number of conclusions about the strengths of the College and areas for development. I suggest the following recommendations:

1. Diversify the Board. The Board needs to recruit from the local ethnically diverse communities to ensure Governors reflect the diversity of the student body.
2. Continue to create and further develop opportunities for Governors to meet students. This would improve governors' knowledge of the student experience, hear the student voice louder and allow for greater triangulation.
3. Look to add another student governor and another staff governor. This would ensure both voices are heard at Board meetings, and ensure their perspectives are not missed if a staff or student governor cannot attend.
4. Improve governors' awareness of LSEC's strategic goals. This could include a Board session as a reminder and/or more focus on linking items on the agenda to the strategic aims and objectives.
5. Add a governor with HR experience to the Board, broadening its skillset into an important area.
6. Improve awareness of the Nolan Principles among governors
7. Hold Chair's 1-2-1 governor reviews annually.
8. Incorporate more curriculum/ teaching and learning risks into the risk register.
9. Consider how to create more time in meetings to discuss strategic issues.

Appendix 1

LSEC Analysis of governor responses – 13 Governors responded, 16 surveys were sent out.

Demographics

The number of years spent as governor varies, from a low of seven months to a high of 8 years.

Governors represent a range of age bands, from 16-18 years to 65-74 years.

The board currently has 7 male members and 6 female members.

One member of the board reported that they identify as disabled.

The board is nearly exclusively White/White British, with one member identifying as an ethnic minority.

Perceptions

The board agreed unanimously that they observe the Nolan principles.

When asked if they listen to students, the board largely agreed, with two members saying that they 'Somewhat agreed'. There was the same similar split when asked if they listen to staff. When asked if the quality of the student experience was central to their decision-making, all members agreed. When asked about the local economy and local economic needs, all members agreed that they understood. When asked if the board values the input of key local employers and other stakeholders in the area, all members agreed.

When asked if they have robust financial management and consider value for money, all members agreed, barring two members who were unsure.¹ When asked if equality, diversity and inclusion are a clear consideration, all members agreed, barring one who was unsure. All members agreed that they understood their responsibilities as a board for Safeguarding and Prevent.

92% of members agreed the board has the skills to lead organisational change, that they could understand and question financial reports, and that they could consider key risks and decide on associated actions. 77% of members agreed that they had the skills to make financial plans and set budgets. 85% felt that they could consider learners' needs.

¹ One member clarified in the comments that they were unsure 'because of the current position in relation to capital funding'

When asked if they had had a good induction process on joining the board, all members agreed apart from one who somewhat agreed.

92% of members agreed opinions and contributions of all Governors are welcomed and valued, that the relevant experience and skills of Governors is used well in decision-making, and that the board works well with the Principal/CEO and other senior staff. 77% of members agreed that the board has good opportunities to scrutinise proposals and to ask questions. 85% agreed that Governors operate strategically, and the operation of the College is clearly delegated to executives, and that the board works well with the Governance Professional/Clerk.

On the topic of organisational change, one member stated they had worked hard over the past few years to improve the quality of the Governors appointed to the board, this had now been achieved and the current board has the breadth and depth of knowledge and experience to govern the College more effectively.

One member felt that senior staff at the College are sensitive to challenge around non-educational matters (particularly those related to property) and there is hesitancy to challenge from the board, partly because the senior team are very strong and very good at dealing with challenges. The member felt that it is not yet apparent that the board is thinking strategically, and that the renewal of the strategy this year will be a key indicator of change. Another member expressed the opinion that 'whilst we all provide advice and guidance to the executive they continue on their chosen path unless a suggestion is a show stopper'.

When asked what works well, members mentioned 'Open and honest discussion at meetings' and that 'Challenge is generally seen in positive terms'. It was felt that most Governors bring highly relevant skills and knowledge and apply these effectively at meetings.

When asked what does not work well, several members described being bogged down by lengthy board packs. Members felt that although two hours was scheduled for meetings, this was not enough time to get through the sheer volume of papers. Several members stated that they are willing to extend the length of meetings in order to cover everything in full detail. One member expressed concern that 'assessing and understanding non-educational risks Governor input into the strategy'.

Members felt the board would benefit from more contact with College staff. It was felt that papers or analyses that are routinely produced could be offered one-off or periodically to help individual Governors seeking to develop more depth of knowledge in specific areas of the college. Members asked for more time in meetings to focus on the big risks and challenges facing the college, particularly around those surrounding finances and accountability.

One member felt that the board should spend more time on strategic thinking and tactical positioning, as they currently feel that too much time is spent reviewing things that have already gone through College committees. Another member felt that more effort should be

spent 'getting student voice and experiences at the heart of what we do'. One member recommended 'doubling up of skills sets more to ensure even more robust analysis of each area of operation'.

Members felt that the board should spend less time on paperwork, and less time scrutinising operational data which robs them of the chance to think strategically.

When asked if they could change or improve one thing about how the board operates, members suggested shorter, more focused meetings and board papers which focused on the big picture rather than attempting to cover all topics in minute detail.

When asked for any other comments, one member summed things up with 'Passion, vision and excellence combined', while another praised the 'Strong board, good coverage, good skills' they had the opportunity to engage with.