



Supporting effective college governing in England



This review of further education college governance in England is timely, relevant, and necessary if we are to learn lessons and improve practice.



Foreword

To supporting effective college governing in England: a review of external governance reviews.

The governance of educational institutions is, once again, back in the spotlight. Well-publicised failures in university, college and school governance raises questions about whether the current arrangements are fit for purpose.

This review of further education college governance in England written by Professor Gary Husband and Professor Ron Hill, both from the University of Sunderland, and Tom Morrison from the law firm Stone King, is timely, relevant, and necessary if we are to learn lessons and improve practice.

Drawing upon external governance reviews conducted in further education colleges, the report covers both the outcomes of such reviews and the extent to which they drive improvement in governance. Pleasingly, it demonstrates that such reviews are taken very seriously and confirms that, in the main, they have brought about observable and tangible changes for the better in board governance.

At the same time, the report highlights the need to keep governance under constant review. In too many cases, failure follows a period when governance has been strong, and people have, as a result, either become complacent or too accepting of inappropriate conduct and poor practice in board management.

Unsurprisingly, this report highlights the importance of getting the basics right as the foundation of good governance. That includes ensuring that governors are well inducted to their roles, agendas are well structured, and that appropriate boundaries are set between the responsibilities of executives and non-executives.

The report also handles the sensitive issue of balancing operational with strategic requirements. It makes the helpful point that this is often 'work in progress' and that it takes time to achieve, particularly if the focus is on creating a mature enough board to undertake proper medium and long-term strategic thinking.

Of course, as is the case in most organisations and businesses, culture and relationships are central. Governors have to be able to trust the information that they receive from 'management' and, in turn, senior staff must be open, transparent, and ready to take appropriate challenge.

There are powerful insights in the report about the role of the Governance Professional. Again, there are some basics that need to be in place, but the added value comes when the Governance Professional is able to work in partnership with the Chair and the Chief Executive to make the board work even more effectively. To that end, governance reviews can be a helpful stimulus to action, both for newly appointed chairs as well as those who are much more experienced.

Diversity and engagement are important themes in the report. Ensuring that boards represent the student and staff communities they serve remains, in too many places, an unfulfilled promise. In addition, it is too easy to either restrict or, worse, ignore the invaluable perspectives of student and staff members of the board. Again, this comes down to proper induction and training to ensure that everyone who sits around the board table is able to make a valuable contribution.

The report concludes with a set of helpful recommendations which can be used by boards to consider their practice and keep it under regular review. After all, good governance is far too important to be left to a periodic review, however important they are as a 'milestone moment' along the way.



Sir David Bell KCB DL

Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive
University of Sunderland



Research work such as this is devised to enable positive and impactful change, and we hope that those who participated will find this research and report both useful and thought provoking.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to take this opportunity to both highlight the participation of partner organisations, and thank the teams and individuals from those institutions for their support of this research.

Within ten days of contacting possible partner general further education and sixth form colleges, we had secured the promise of participation from more than 20 institutions. Those of you familiar with the vagaries of research project management will understand when we say that we cannot overstate the significance of that response and the willingness to participate. We would further like to thank the individuals that gave freely of their time and participated in the one-to-one interviews. The thoughtfulness and clarity of the candid responses has undoubtedly allowed us to gain insights that we could not possibly have seen without that engagement and dedication.

Research work such as this is devised to enable positive and impactful change, and we hope that those who participated will find this research and report both useful and thought provoking. Your participation has afforded us the opportunity to complete this work and now share the subsequent insights with an international and multi sector audience, the importance of your participation cannot be overstated.

Thank you.

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The project could therefore be established
on the basis of a combination of deep insight,
trustworthiness and independence.



1.0

Introduction

In the Summer of 2024, the University of Sunderland and Stone King agreed on a collaboration to undertake a piece of research that aimed to try and understand the impact of governance reviews in further education colleges in England.

This research was undertaken in both general further education colleges and sixth form colleges. Whilst both operate within the further education space, it is important to acknowledge that they are distinct in practice and offer. From a governance perspective there are a great deal of crossovers between institution types and they sit comfortably together in this piece of work.

The partnership between Stone King and the University of Sunderland offered a unique opportunity to bring together independent research expertise from senior academics with internationally recognised research and practice in college governance and, a leading provider of governance reviews from a company with a long-established practice in the college sector.

The partnership offered several distinct advantages to the research process. Firstly, as a reviewer, Stone King recognised that they could not conduct the research without an independent partner. To avoid the risk of ‘marking their own homework’ the decision was made to collaborate with experienced researchers who could draw on past governance research work and significant research expertise. Two of the authors of this report were involved in the original delivery or assurance of reviews; the lead researcher and author was not involved in the reviews in any way. The project could therefore be established on the basis of a combination of deep insight, trustworthiness and independence.

Secondly, Stone King has conducted in the region of 50 reviews between 2021 and 2024, through which it established collaborative working partnerships with the colleges and key actors within each institution. As independent researchers, the academics could not hope to be able to access such an established sampling opportunity without significant work over an extended period of time. These relationships led to 20 colleges agreeing to take part in the research within ten days of being invited. The established partnerships ensured that named and accessible key members of staff at the participating colleges were involved from the outset.

Thirdly, the data sets available through these extended collaborations offered an opportunity to carry out research that was able to draw on multiple perspectives over an extended period of time. The research incorporated the full review documentation from each participating college, data from interviews with eight Governance Professionals undertaken shortly after review completion and follow on interviews undertaken six months later to assess impact and change. Further to this, semi structured interviews were undertaken with three independent reviewers who had undertaken the 20 reviews and finally, ongoing discussion with senior staff at Stone King who authored company policy on reviews and were architects of the process.

1.1 Significance

While the research has clear national relevance, its international significance lies in its potential to inform global conversations about educational governance, institutional accountability, and the role of external review in driving improvement.

At the core of the project was a commitment to independence and credibility. Stone King, having conducted in the region of 50 governance reviews between 2021 and 2024, recognised the importance of partnering with an academic institution to ensure objectivity and avoid the perception of self-assessment bias. This ethical approach – grounded in transparency and collaboration – sets a powerful precedent for similar research globally, where the integrity of governance evaluation is often under scrutiny. The model of combining practitioner insight with academic rigour offers a replicable framework for other countries and sectors seeking to assess and enhance governance in their own education and wider public systems and institutions.

The research design was methodologically robust and internationally relevant. The longitudinal, multi-perspective approach provides a rich evidence base that

can inform governance reform efforts not only in the UK but also in systems where external review is emerging as a tool for institutional development.

Internationally, the study contributes to a growing body of work that recognises governance as a dynamic, strategic function rather than a static compliance exercise. It reinforces the idea that Governance Professionals must be empowered with the time, authority, and capacity to engage with external reviews and lead change. This insight is particularly valuable in countries where the professionalisation of governance is still developing, offering a model for how governance roles can evolve to support institutional resilience and innovation.

This research initiative not only advances understanding of governance in England's further education sector but also offers a globally relevant model of ethical, collaborative inquiry. Its findings and methodology have the potential to influence governance reform and capacity-building efforts in education systems around the world.







2.0

Research questions

The research undertook to incorporate these data sets to answer the following questions:

- Do governance reviews bring about measurable and impactful change in practice?
- Who are the key actors within the review process and how do their roles impact outcomes and potential changes in practice?
- What insights were gained by reviewers and how were these subsequently enacted within the governance framework of the reviewed institution?

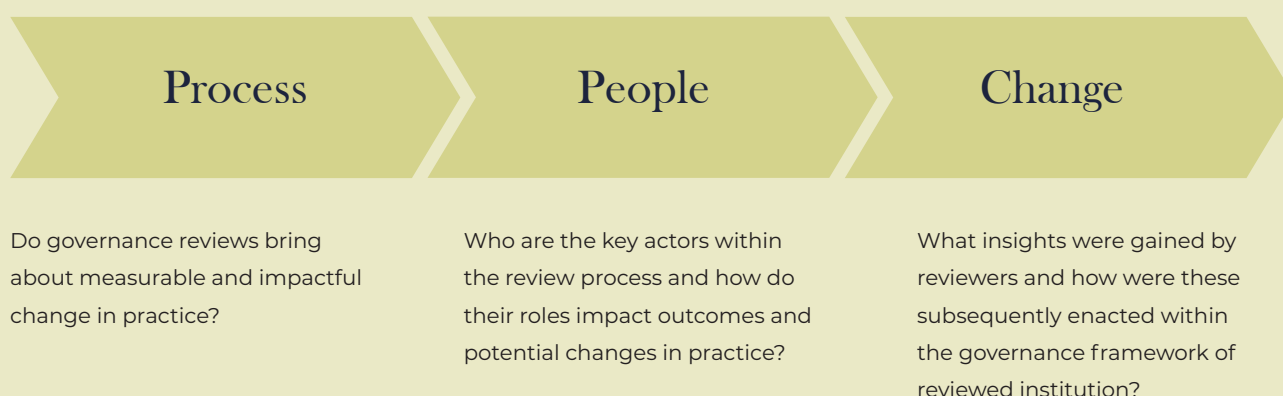
The questions cover three main areas of focus:

- 1 The process of review
- 2 The people involved
- 3 The communicated observations and outcomes of reviews (what common factors did the reviews find?)

We took this approach to allow a triangulation of data and importantly, to elevate the discourse above simply looking at common observations of reviews. Whilst it is important to understand common issues and strengths across governing highlighted through observation, it was not enough to ask this question of the data alone.

We felt that key questions needed to take account of the impact and efficacy of reviews, that is, what subsequently happened as a result of the process? Recognising the original intentions of reviews brought in to highlight and subsequently realise potential for improvement; we needed to observe and see if any evidence of resultant action existed. This is a key and underlying driving feature of this study, the question, so what, what difference does review make?

Link between methods and questions





3.0

Methods

In this section we set our rationale, justification and explanation of the methods used in the research.

A significant feature of this review of a sample of reviews is that this research is comparing the application of a considered and defined framework for external governance reviews. The Stone King governance review team had developed an approach based on a common understanding of governing processes and practices and implemented through a standardised reporting format. Within this approach there was ample space for the individual characteristics of each reviewed college, but the overall approach was a consistent one.

This strength was built upon by the use of an assurance stage for the consideration of draft external governance reports from the governance review team members by a senior partner at Stone King – in almost all cases the same one, and even where another senior partner was involved it was with appropriate internal triangulation to ensure consistency of approach and quality. Thus, questions of the application of the framework were considered together with points of justification, validity and clarity.



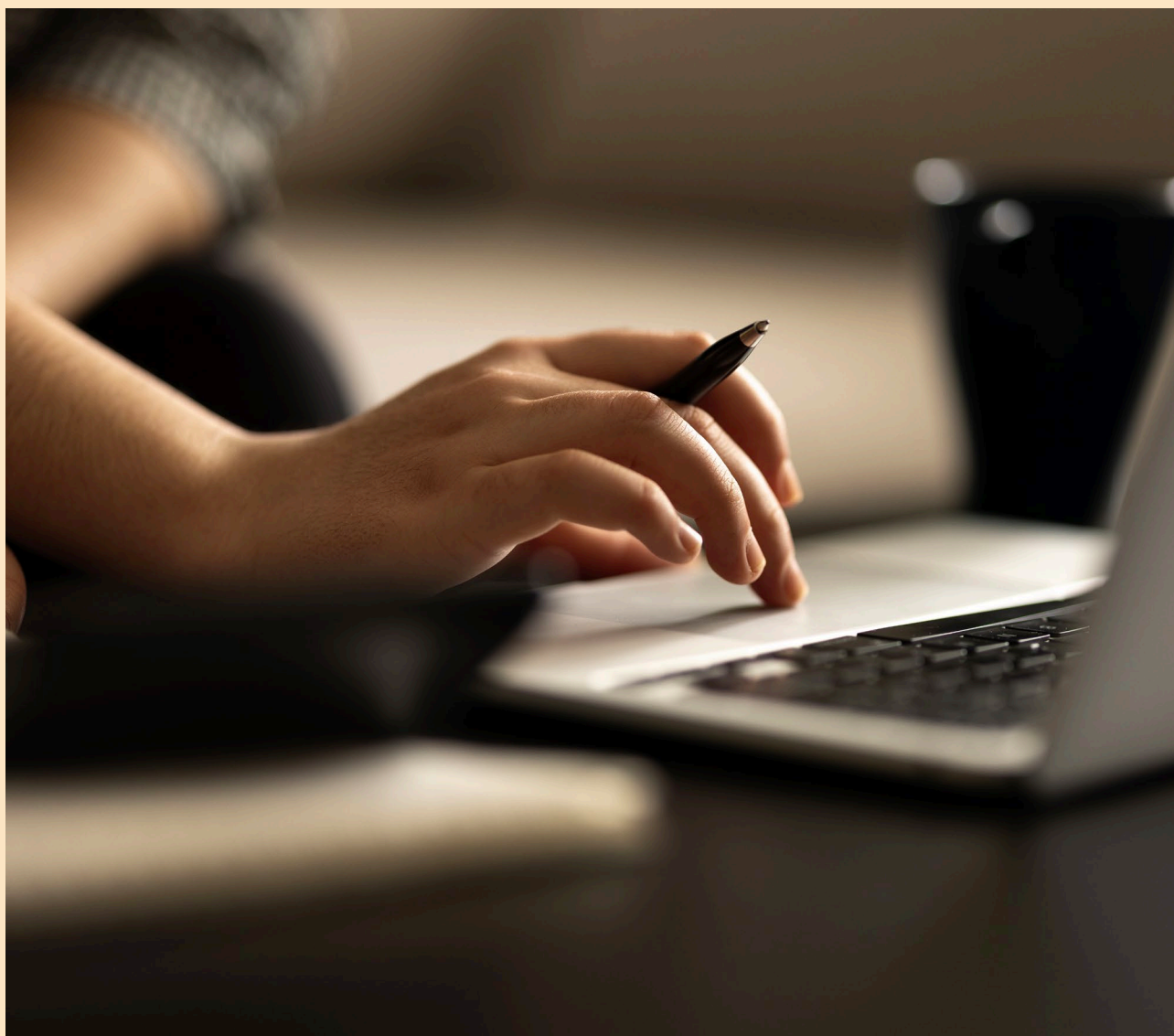
3.1

Document analysis

From the documentation, we were able to extract data that gave us themes in relation to commonly observed strengths and areas of improvement.

We were also able to review pathways to impact and change within the review documents. How the reviewers communicated their observations was key to subsequent post review enactment of change which was out of scope for the documents themselves. The return of the review documents to colleges marked the end of the review process and subsequent actions were of course not recorded. In order to ascertain the impact of reviews and look at possible areas of action (and inaction), a post review process needed to be included in the data collection process. The colleges themselves

have no nationally agreed policy driven process post review, and whilst it is reasonable to assume that any reports would be drawn up by boards and subsequent action plans drawn up, there is no requirement or imperative placed on the colleges to do so beyond those set out in the College Accounts Direction and in governance codes. As such, we could not rely on a standardised documentary format to draw on and had to seek alternative methods to gain insight into what happens within colleges post review and to observe any actions resulting from the process.



3.2

Semi-structured interviews

Built into the research design and process from the outset was the need to interview key actors within the colleges themselves.

The individuals interviewed would need to be integral to the review process, have had sight of reports, be responsible for governance processes and be able to provide an overview of the journey undertaken by written reports through the internal governance procedures of the colleges. The Governance Professionals within each college were able to offer this insight and as a result, we undertook to interview a sample of colleagues from the colleges included in the research project.

The opportunity to work directly with research participants from partnering colleges was a key feature of this research and the basis for the triangulation of data between multiple sources. The two stage interview process offered a longitudinal element to the study allowing for in depth analysis of action over an extended period of time. This allowed the researcher to engage with the Governance Professionals in early discussion that was focused on process and outcomes, i.e. actual change as a result of the review as opposed to commonly occurring observations. It was apparent very early on in the research that there was a limited opportunity to discuss change as many of the colleges had only just agreed action plans in post review meetings. Whilst the production of action plans and their routes through various board structures were early indicators of impact, it was too early to ascertain demonstrable outcomes from change, that is beyond agreeing to make changes, no actual changes had been made as a result of recommendations from reviews.

It was agreed that follow up interviews would be scheduled for six months later with the distinct focus on one question, what has changed as a result of the review process. Despite this one area which required time to develop, the interviews were designed to allow Governance Professionals to discuss key areas of interest such as board engagement with reviews, key actions during review, establishing of working relationships with reviewers and management of process within the institution.



3.3

Interviews with reviewers

The research presented an opportunity to expand the data set and subsequent data perspective by interviewing the reviewers that had undertaken the sampled reviews.

This gave us the opportunity to triangulate data from the review documents and interviews with college Governance Professionals. The reviewers were able to give insights into process, collaboration, relationships and their own experiences of conducting the reviews across the diverse sample of colleges.

In order to be able to triangulate findings from the review documents and Governance Professional interviews, it was critical to understand the review process from the perspective of those undertaking the reviews. Key questions focused on review process and establishing focus, understanding relationships with college staff, managing the review progress and feedback and finally, efficacy of the reviews themselves.

These combined mixed methods allowed us to not only review what was observed by reviewers but critically, how they established their findings and what happened as a result. This has allowed for a multi-perspective report of findings co-constructed from both documents and in partnership with participants. As a result, this research offers a unique set of perspectives whilst being able to share findings not only on what college reviews reveal about colleges but critically, what the review process tells us about itself and those involved.

Research methods



3.4 Positionality

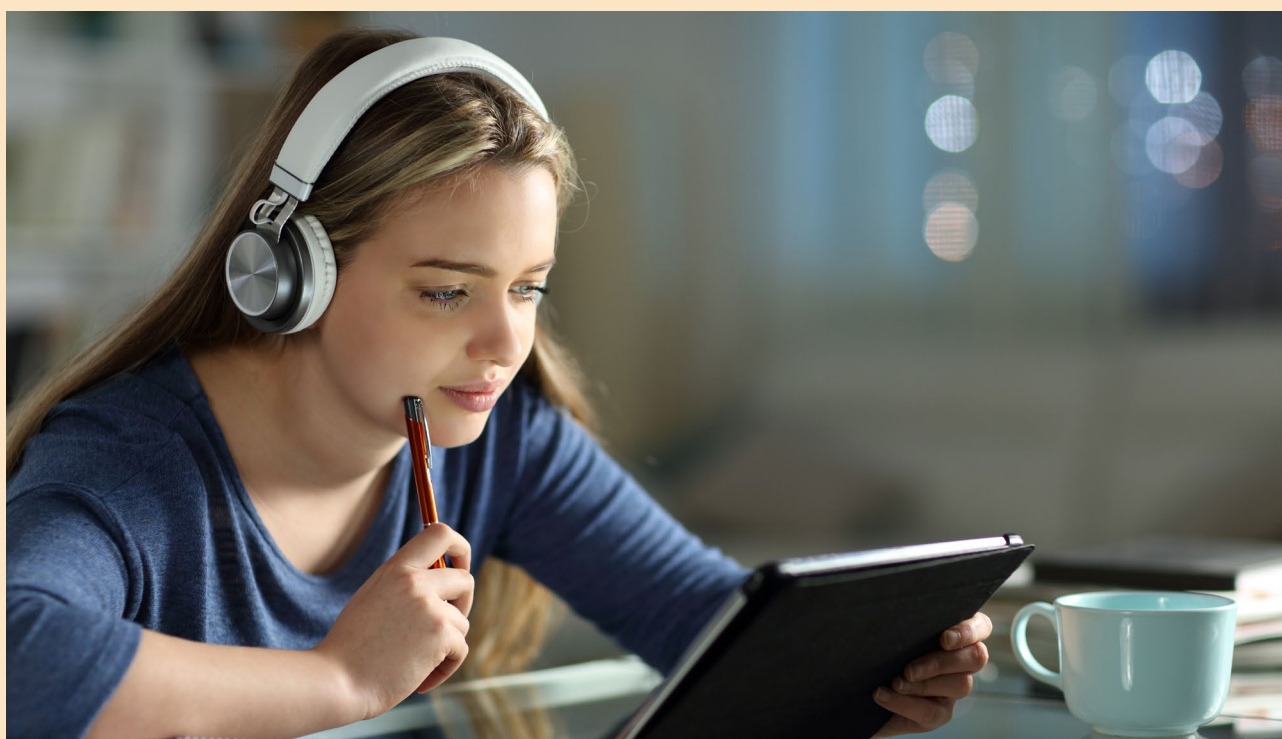
Before proceeding to the discussion related to the findings of the research, it is important to note the positionality of the researchers within this work.

The research was led by Professor Gary Husband of the University of Sunderland who has significant experience in both research leadership and college governance. Professor Husband is currently Chair of a college in Scotland and Chair of the independent research organisation, Association for Research in Post Compulsory Education (ARPCE). Gary was joined in the work by Professor Ron Hill and Tom Morrison. Professor Hill is an experienced researcher and internationally recognised for his work on governance and Tom Morrison is a Partner and Head of Further Education at Stone King and leading expert on governance reviews. It is worth acknowledging here that Professor Hill had conducted some of the reviews that were included in the study, however, these were in partnership with another independent reviewer and Professor Hill did not engage in the analysis process.

Being situated within the work was a critical aspect of being able to analyse and understand the phenomenon observed. The documentary analysis and discussions revealed a lot of nuance and detail that required the researchers to draw on their significant background

knowledge. We note this here as the analysis is both informed and influenced by experience which has both a positive impact on the work but also presents some challenges.

The researchers were critically aware that with a lack of diligence they could potentially 'fill in the gaps' in the data and make deductions that were not possible without drawing on an assumptive base drawn from practice. Significant care was taken by the researchers to sense check the findings through several methods. Firstly, all findings were critically analysed in purposeful and framed discussions that used a process of sense checking where critical stress testing was applied to findings by asking critical questions of the data and the researcher (e.g. describe how you have arrived at this analysis, and how are you able to justify the finding/theme?). Secondly, findings and themes were sense checked with the communities from which they were derived, e.g. putative findings were discussed in interviews with reviewers who were able to comment on accuracy and meaning. All efforts were taken to remain impartial whilst drawing on a background of knowledge and experience to inform the understanding of phenomena.



The longevity of the approach in the research design allowed for a longer observation of actions and enabled us to tell not only a story of what was changed but also, how, when, by who and critically, to what end and resultant impact.



4.0

Findings

The findings are presented below as answers to the research questions and structured around the key aims of the research work. The findings are subsequently discussed in detail in section 5, summary and conclusion with recommendations for practice.

4.1

Do governance reviews bring about measurable and impactful change in practice?

In this section we examine the results of the research after analysis of all interviews and the documents associated with the enactments of governing.

These findings are framed as impact of reviews and changes made as a result of the whole process – being the process which runs from initial contact between college and reviewers, through quality assurance processes and sign off, through to final presentation of the report as presented to the college. It was not possible to fully understand or derive these findings without the secondary interviews with the Governance Professionals. This was simply due to some actions only

being undertaken post board ratification and action planning cycles being completed. Whilst it was clear colleges had taken actions in relation to planning, it was not possible to get sight of the impact of those actions as they had not yet been enacted. The longevity of the approach in the research design allowed for a longer observation of actions and enabled us to tell not only a story of what was changed but also, how, when, by who and critically, to what end and resultant impact. As a result of this approach, we are able to make justifiable and robust claims about the depth of impact of the reviews within the participating colleges.



4.1.1

Action plans and planning processes

This research presents substantial evidence that suggests that reviews have brought about observable and tangible changes in practice of boards.

All of the interviewed participants were able to discuss at length the process post review that revealed the journey of action plans from the keyboard of the Governance Professionals, through drafting with senior leadership and chairs, through committee structures and finally into a state of being signed off at full board level. This is evidence that the reviews were taken seriously, were discussed, recommendations reviewed and subsequently agreements made to enact changes in practice. These changes were wide ranging and included, short term easy to implement changes in meeting agenda layout, changes to board documentation, a shift in practice to align meetings to allow for recognition of and checking for progress against strategic KPIs, through to significant structural changes to board committees and methods of operation and interaction between Chair, Governance Professional and Chief Executive.

This finding shows that reviews bring about significant responses from boards and bring about early and purposeful actions with intention to enact changes.

All of the Governance Professionals interviewed were able to share their experiences of the development of actions plans. Not all colleges chose to enact all recommendations with some opting to prioritise those with the greatest level of importance attached and things easily implemented over less impactful recommendations that could be tackled over an extended period of time. All colleges prioritised recommendations intended to bring about improvements in board efficacy and their ability to act as an accountable and effective body.

4.1.2

Changes to meeting structures, agenda and committee operations

Governance Professionals referred to ‘quick wins’ where changing aspects of governing practice within their assumed responsibility was possible.

Examples of a quick win were described as a revision to governor induction arrangements, agenda structure and the order of items discussed in meetings and drafting a revised scheme of delegation.

The possibility of ‘quick wins’ varied with the degree of Governance Professional confidence and professional space to operate in the best interests of governing.

Respondents recognised that, in some cases e.g. reaching a more strategic board, a sustained evolution was possible, but there were procedural and cultural sensitivities to address. In some cases, committee review and response plus board approval would be required e.g. revising committee structures and revising committee terms of reference.

Furthermore, respondents believed that certain changes might only be possible taking a longer term view. This might include changes to board and/or senior staff membership or at the very least a very gradual rather than radical change to governing practices to maintain confidence and stability.



4.1.3

Changes to reporting and monitoring of strategic plans and related performance indicators

Governance Professionals were very committed to encouraging better connectivity between board agendas and the monitoring of strategic progress.

This raised some questions about the usefulness of some current strategic plans to be converted into monitoring reports with milestones, targets, and impact statements. It was accepted that in order to enact purposeful and meaningful improvements in embedding strategic monitoring within board practices, changes to practice and procedure may need to be delayed until the production of the next strategic plan. This was considered to be an opportunity for further integration of discussion and involvement of governors in setting strategic priorities and in bringing about a sense of ownership and 'buy in'.

The external governance reviews confirmed Governance Professionals as curators of knowledge pathways, making information accessible and useful to governors. They are centrally placed to help drive governing relationships towards stated strategy and college aims through agenda formation, reporting style, and use of the wider governance space for strategic thinking and creativity.



4.1.4

Changes to board culture

Governance Professionals reported that boards can exhibit a natural reticence to change and a willingness to accept delay and reflection.

This characteristic can be deeply embedded and believed to be a strength of governance i.e. a steady hand in the face of a complex and changeable operating environment for the college.

Thus, the role of the Governance Professional becomes one of persuasion and influence with, initially, the Chair and the Chief Executive. The task was, in recognition of external review recommendations for development, to help the board move forward to address, in some cases, quite fundamental aspects of governing the college. Finding the balance between stability and change varied according to local key personality chemistry, the nature of the review recommendations, the circumstances of the college, the nature of the board and senior staff membership and, significantly, the confidence of the Governance Professional to move from a slow and cautious board to quicker and nimble, more creative and innovative board could not be underestimated. Responses from Governance Professionals confirmed versions of work-in-progress.

This revealed an interesting juxtaposition within the governing space where boards are expected to be able to respond purposefully and swiftly to external demands and institutional priorities whilst also maintaining a firm grasp of the deeper and longer-term responsibilities of ensuring the longevity and success of the institution itself.

Boards are not just responding to the agenda item as is presented but, need to have a meaningful and deeply considered position on the long-term implications for all items. This is a balance that became apparent within the research as we were able to observe how the Governance Professional influenced the approaches to recommended changes.

Using experience and institutional knowledge a process of prioritisation was undertaken that stratified the responses to a reviewer's recommendations. Interestingly, in relation to the enactment of change through planning cycles, the reviewers themselves held the colleges to a high standard and expectations for the enactment of change processes were clear and exacting. Whilst it was acknowledged the enactment of significant change itself was a longer term project, there was some frustration at the length of time taken for boards to discuss the reviews and agree action plans (this was revealed to be in excess of 12 months in some instances). This is discussed in further detail in section 4.2.



4.2

Who are the key actors within the review process and how do their roles impact outcomes and potential changes in practice?

4.2.1

Relationships and routes to action

All colleges reported that after the review documents had been received and final meetings had with reviewers, discussions at various levels were had within the colleges' recognised structures. Dependent on the various structures, committees were engaged with early discussion, whether this was in Audit or Search committees depended on the colleges but, importantly, discussions were reported. Similarly, prior to plans being written there was significant evidence of discussion between Chief Executives, Chairs and Governance Professionals.

This may seem obvious but, the detailed responses highlighted the importance placed on the reviews and the significance placed on communicating results and

prioritising action. Whilst action plans were universally adopted (in various forms) the importance placed on the relationships was critical in revealing board practices and the flow of data and messages to the wider board, college and then the public.

Governance Professionals in all cases were critical to the management of the review process within the college and subsequent discussion about required actions and communication was managed similarly. The Governance Professionals were frequently the change makers whilst being instigators both in pre action plan discussion and post action planning enactment.



4.2.2

Enactment of change, history and the archive

There is significant evidence of changes in practice as a direct result of the findings of the reviews.

It was not possible to ascertain this from review documents alone and the interviews with both Governance Professionals and reviewers were instrumental in allowing us to see this perspective. The recommendations from reviewers (as detailed in section 4.3) were presented in the documentation and reviewers reported that they had early discussions with key actors in colleges about what those changes might look like. Interestingly, there was an unanticipated finding in relation to expectations for change management. Whilst the Governance Professionals reported in initial discussions with the researcher that it was too soon to report on actions and change as the governance cycles meant that the board had only just approved action plans. This raises an interesting point about the speed of change and the pace of boards in making decisions and enacting change. Relatively minor changes were subjected to the same level of scrutiny and as such, were not enacted (by and large) without wholesale approval from the board.

There were examples where minor changes such as agenda layouts, content of executive summaries and the order of meetings were enacted, as these were seen as within the purview of the Governance Professional to manage and required no extended discussion. However, in other instances, this was not the case and extended periods of discussion in

multiple fora and committees placed a significant burden or bureaucracy on items that possibly required a lighter touch. However, the incongruity between expectations of reviewers and the actions of boards in enacting change revealed a point for consideration around procedure and practices in conducting future reviews. There were very few instances within reviews of recommendations from reviewers that were time bound (i.e. had recommendations for completion dates or indicative timescales). Where items were seen to be of significance, reviewers reported that discussions were had with key actors within institutions. This indicates a balance to be found between the reviewer offering their opinion and a board determining its priorities around the implementation of any recommendations it chooses to adopt.

This reveals the unseen aspects of reviews and casts light on the importance of engagement with process and the individuals both reviewing and managing reviews within institutions. The published reports themselves do not reveal the full picture of the review and should themselves be treated as an artefact of the review rather than the review in its entirety. This may seem obvious but, as a process that is founded on archive and historical contextual data (e.g. the minute), governing relies heavily on its documentary history. It is easy to overlook the importance of relationships, discussions and conversations that go unrecorded but have an evidencable impact on the enactment of change.



4.2.3

Impact on individuals

There is an impact from an external governance review on all the governance 'actors' i.e. the governors, the senior staff, the Governance Professional, but the centrality of Governance Professionals is emphasised by governance reviews.

As explained above, the Governance Professional is the agent of change (hopefully supported by the Chair and Chief Executive). However, our observations from the documentary record and from interviews reinforce the roles of individuals and the evidence suggests that recognition should be made of three critical factors:

- i the confidence (derived from expertise and experience) of the Governance Professional to influence and often lead change;
- ii the capacity of the Governance Professional to devote time and energy to a development action plan;
- iii the capacity of (a) the board and (b) the senior staff to engage with a change agenda.

This review of reviews confirms that there is a significant impact from governance reviews on individuals through engagement with the review process. The Governance Professionals that we interviewed came from a variety of backgrounds and consequently, experience. Some had several years' experience in multiple institutions and

came from backgrounds such as law. Others were much newer to their role and had significantly less experience than some of their peers in other institutions. However, the burden of managing the review process fell the same irrespective of experience and as such, had a different effect on different people.

Whilst Chairs and senior teams were universally engaged in the processes of review, they were afforded a layer of 'protection' from the procedural and bureaucratic aspects of the process. The burden of planning, enacting and subsequent action plan management of the review processes fell, by and large to the Governance Professionals. This created an increase in the pressure and stresses reported by these individuals that needs to be recognised and considered. More experienced individuals were able to draw on previous work to support their engagement with the process whilst others communicated more challenging impacts. This needs to be seriously considered in future enactments of reviews from the perspectives of all involved. This needs to be managed closely from the inception of the review to its conclusion and should feature as an aspect of reporting i.e. what was the impact of the review on the individuals engaged in its undertaking?

4.3

What insights were gained by reviewers and how were these subsequently enacted within the governance framework of the reviewed institution?

This section is the final part of the reporting of individual findings and focuses on the observations and recommendations made by reviewers for the colleges within the reports.

The analysis focused on common feedback and development points as reported within the review documents. These texts were analysed for message, focus and purpose and as such enabled us to map

across all 20 institutions the most commonly reported areas reviewers thought that colleges could improve on.

The findings are broken down into four key areas and grouped to reflect their overlapping influence. The four areas of focus of these findings are strategy and planning; capacity and culture; structure and process; and, learning and training needs. The key themes are summarised next.

4.3.1

Strategy and planning

This was a significant theme across the colleges in this review of reviews. In summary, the external governance reviews were suggesting that college boards should become more strategic.

It is recognised that governance reviews are, to a degree, a snapshot of governing at a point in time. However, there were no instances in the governance reviews of advising that boards should know more about the operations of their colleges. It seemed to reviewers that, broadly albeit with exceptions, there was too much operational detail presented to boards and insufficient consideration of progress towards the achievement of the board's strategic plans and intentions for the college.

Strategic planning (4.3.1.1)

Some strategic plans were not formed in a useful format to permit continued monitoring; Feedback for the use of SMART strategic objectives was consistently recommended across reviewers to assist both the board and senior staff to focus attention on critical planning details. There was a variability in the opportunity provided to board members to engage with strategic influence, in advance of approving a strategic plan; there was significant evidence of encouragement in the governance reviews for governors to play a bigger part in strategic thinking (stimulated by the college senior staff) to permit a louder, clearer governor voice on matters of strategic importance.

Risk management (4.3.1.1)

There were many instances of reviewers reporting that strategic risk registers were not linked to strategic plan priorities; thus, whilst audit committees and boards were systematically reviewing risk registers, key risks linked to the achievement of the strategic plan were not necessarily being tested. Given this gap in linkage, reviewers identified significant potential that some boards were unable to assess the achievability of their plans through risk oversight.

In some cases, reviewers identified that too many risks were being monitored through the risk register. Frequently the advice to boards was to fine-tune the number of strategic risks to permit ease of reporting and monitoring. In order to reduce the number of

risks being reported into the governance arena, there were occasions where it was recommended that an assurance mapping exercise was undertaken to connect the prime sources of audit committee/board assurance to the strategic risk register.

Strategic plan and reporting (4.3.1.3)

A consistent piece of feedback that featured in most of the reviews analysed was an encouragement to improve the standard of reporting on strategic progress to permit a clear picture to be presented to the board. The recommendation was that this was built into governance practice on a regular cycle more frequent than once a year.

The revised reporting format frequently recommended that the board should hold the Chief Executive and senior staff to account for management actions in relation to the achievement of the strategic plan and that these should be mapped and recorded in both minutes and actions in decision logs.

Decision making and ratification (4.3.1.4)

The observation of meetings as part of the external governance reviews produced multiple recommendations to encourage all formal governing meetings to reach decisions on each agenda item, responding to the question – what does the meeting want to decide in relation to this item? Agendas were largely separated into sections marked as 'for decision', 'for discussion' and 'for information'. Whilst these categories usefully delineate the purpose of the presented papers, frequently boards were observed to either 'take papers as read' or hold discussion and field questions which sometimes resulted in no formalised recognition that the item had been discussed.

It was consistently recommended by reviewers that regardless of the purpose of the paper, some decision or action of the board should be recorded.

It was consistently recommended that each decision should be guided by a meaningful recommendation in the written report, and the meeting would also want to take account of any deliberation during the item.

4.3.2

Capacity and culture

Equality, diversity and inclusion (4.3.2.1)

During the process of the research data collection, it was possible for us to identify from the review reports that significant feedback was given to colleges regarding the activities of Search and Governance Committees (or their equivalent). Whilst boards frequently expressed support and, in some cases considerable ambition, to achieve a more diverse membership, it was also common in the governance reviews to find recommendations to establish an equality, diversity and inclusion plan, with actions, timescales and monitoring i.e. converting these positive intentions to more concrete actions.

Some boards were advised to expect to review an annual equality duty report with action plan. There is some evidence from the reviews that some boards are viewing equality, diversity and inclusion as items for consideration as opposed to something that boards 'are'.

Some boards were trialling the use of co-opted members for committees to extend expertise and become more inclusive; some boards were permitting meeting observation by potential board members to improve relationship building. However, there were cases of some members of boards in place beyond a defined period for a maximum term of office without clear justification - causing potential issues around succession and progression by limiting opportunities for new members.

Critically, it was fed back on several occasions that some boards were unnecessarily restricting roles for student and staff governors. This restriction was possibly derived from a misunderstanding of the value and purpose of such board members. Further focused work on the role of staff and student members is recommended and should be pursued in the near future.

Documentation and processes (4.3.2.2)

Common areas recommended for development included more action-focused induction for new governors (rather than relying on a document-driven induction); a creative, responsive governor development programme (beyond on-line courses) and evaluated annually for impact; clarification of the role of link governors and how such a role supports board

assurance; formation of a governor handbook to assist the role of governor.

Reviews often commented on the usefulness of making use of the code of governance in more visible ways e.g. as the basis for governor and senior staff induction, and for agenda formation. Further to this, it was identified that the focus of board reports could be strengthened by clear links to the governance code.

Succession planning (4.3.2.3)

It was commonly identified in the review documents and discussed at interview, that informal approaches to succession planning excluded wider board engagement. Also, the timing of addressing succession (based on informal assumptions) seemed to delay (rather than anticipate) decisions about key governing roles such as Chair of Audit Committee, Vice Chair of the board, Chair of the board. Based on the evidence, reviewers frequently recommended that boards review the practices and terms of reference for Search and Governance committees to improve the efficacy and transparency of their succession planning.



4.3.3

Structure and process

Agenda formation and reporting (4.3.3.1)

The key message on agenda formation was to achieve greater prominence of core responsibilities of the board such as strategic plan monitoring, KPI reporting, strategic risk oversight.

Greater use of brief baseline reports with a properly formed executive summary was advised in many governance reviews.

In some cases, an action tracker was recommended to enable board and/or committee members to be assured that their previous decisions had been actioned.

This was also discussed at interview with both Governance Professionals and reviewers who agreed that these recommendations were relatively minor in scope, fairly easily achievable and had significant potential for immediate impact.

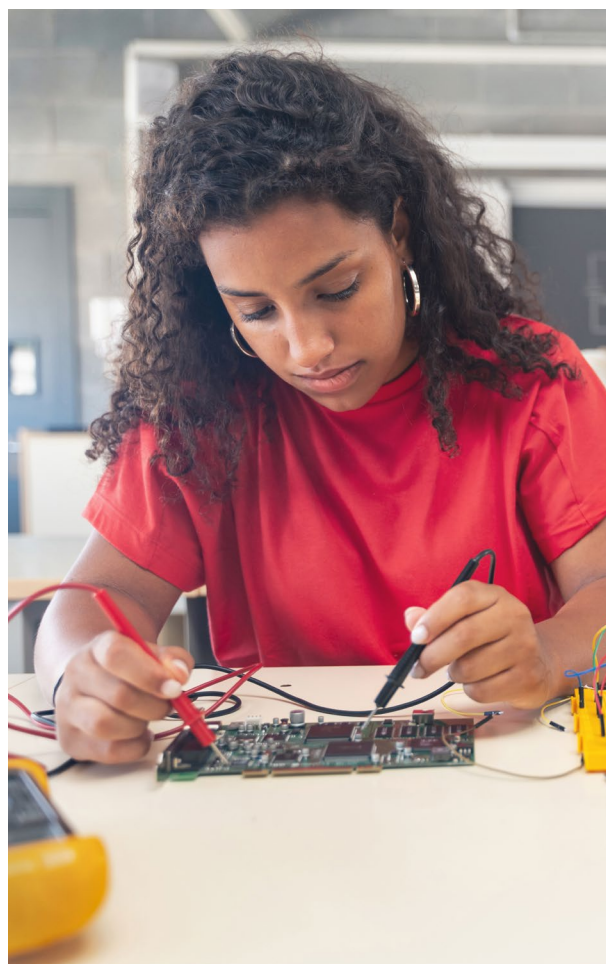
Committee structures (4.3.3.2)

It was revealed during analysis that feedback was given to several colleges to regularly review (i.e. annually) the committee structure and usefulness of each committee to the board. Whilst during interview it was revealed that this was often happening informally, the evidence hadn't translated into the artefacts of governance. It was suggested that an annual item be tabled reviewing terms of reference of each committee.

Some refinement to schemes of delegation was advised to take account of layers of decision making through the board, committees, Chief Executive, senior staff, Chair of the corporation, and clerk to the corporation (Governance Professional).

Role of the Chair (4.3.3.3)

The research was able to ascertain that on several occasions feedback was given relating to the role and actions of the Chair of the board. It was advised that Chairs should ensure meetings are well-structured and strategically focused, with clear agendas that guide purposeful discussion. This was to be undertaken in partnership with the Governance Professional and often the Chief Executive. Chairs play a critical role in fostering inclusive participation, encouraging all board members to contribute and ensuring diverse viewpoints are considered. In some cases it was identified that a more proactive approach would support consensus-building by mediating differing opinions and promoting collaborative decision-making with a clearer focus. As with other actors in the governance space, the Chair was advised to ensure that they were proactively aligning board decisions with the college's mission, values, and long-term goals.



4.3.4

Learning and training needs

Committee-specific learning and skills (4.3.4.1)

As a general point, there were several recommendations across the 20 reviewed reports encouraging all committees to be appropriately and regularly trained or engaged in ongoing targeted development to meet the requirements of the terms of reference.

As the Audit Committee was reviewed in all the colleges participating in this study, there were a range of recommendations for this specific committee development. In summary, these recommendations were (i) improved and regular training for Audit Committee members regarding risk and audit processes (ii) improved membership of Audit Committees to be more resilient with a wider range of expertise (iii) to exert a clearer influence on assurance for the board.

Observation of Quality and Curriculum Committees suggested that skills in the interpretation of learner data and understanding of curriculum delivery were frequently lacking. Feedback was provided to several institutions that some committee members needed to develop further their understanding of the content and implications of the reports on teaching, learning and assessment they are reading. Governors are frequently required to engage with technical language specific to learning and teaching and having access to support to learn specialist terms and nuances came through strongly as a theme in the data.

It was further advised through multiple reviews that coordinated management of board committees is essential for effective governance. Committees allow boards to delegate detailed work, enabling deeper focus on key areas like finance, or academic affairs. This was not always managed in a way which allowed for maximum impact; improvements in efficiency would improve informed decision-making, and support accountability. There was some evidence of duplication, confusion, or oversight gaps that reviewers advised should be appropriately managed by the Chair within meetings guiding members to appropriate interactions with reports and briefings and regular review of committee terms of reference.

Wider development needs (4.3.4.2)

There were several points of feedback in the reviews about the broader training needs of the board and members. These are not presented as themes as in some instances, they were observed or shared only once; they are however relevant and of interest.

Training and support for the Governance Professional in all aspects of external governance review, from selection of reviewer to working with the reviewer, and all aspects of post-review activities e.g. formation of action plans, impact statements and evaluation of governing performance was noted in a couple of cases. Whilst it was frequently commented on in interviews that the relationship with reviewers and Governance Professionals was important to the success of the review, it was noted that Governance Professionals in some cases had lacked wider support from their institution.

Training for the Chair, Chief Executive and Governance Professional on how to design and implement a more strategic board was raised and is linked to the finding that boards could usefully bring strategic plans more to the fore of governance practices.

Training for the Chief Executive and senior staff of the colleges reviewed in the production of higher quality/ lower density reports, especially the design and use of an accessible report for the monitoring of strategic progress was fed back on several occasions. The quality of papers was discussed at interview and in some instances was found to be a focus of development opportunities.

Linked to the earlier finding that assurance mapping to link KPIs and strategic plans (and possibly risk management processes), recommendations were also made that highlighted that associated training should also be secured for the Governance Professional and Chair (and possibly senior staff) to this end.



5.0

Summary and recommendations

5.1

Summary of findings and answers to research questions

When we embarked on this work we set out to answer the following questions:

- | | |
|--|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Do governance reviews bring about measurable and impactful change in practice? 2 Who are the key actors within the review process and how do their roles impact outcomes and potential changes in practice? | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3 What insights were gained by reviewers and how were these subsequently enacted within the governance framework of reviewed institution? |
|--|--|

As a summary of the findings, we can now answer each of these questions and present these here in order.

5.1.1

Do governance reviews bring about measurable and impactful change in practice?

The headline answer is that yes, we were able to see distinct, measurable and real changes within multiple institutions as a direct result of engagement with reviewers and the review process.

We would not have been able to get sight of this had we not conducted follow up interviews with Governance Professionals six months after initial engagement. The period of the research beginning overlapped with the tail end of many colleges devising and agreeing their action plans. The opportunity to see the review recommendations being enacted almost in real time was seized and we are grateful to the respondents from the colleges who gave freely of their time to support our enquiries.

We were able to see recommendations being made in review documents that were then translated into the board action plan and then implemented. We were able to discuss at interview the impacts of those changes being implemented into practice.

There were distinct and measurable changes to how meetings are planned, ordered and enacted. There was evidence of agendas being restructured to provide a greater focus for board members and clear guidance given on decision making. Further to this, the way in which strategic plans were drawn on and used as KPIs and given greater presence in meetings was distinct and explicitly described as an essential and useful adjustment.

Culture of boards was a little more nebulous, and ascribing measurable indicators of success here is perhaps neither desirable nor useful. However, it was observed and discussed that some boards, whilst navigating complex issues, were able to find a greater balance between the need to be cautious but also, to react more nimbly to immediate issues.

5.1.2

Who are the key actors within the review process and how do their roles impact outcomes and potential changes in practice?

Whilst we were able to see in the data the impact on the whole board within institutions, the review process itself clearly relies on and impacts differently on various roles.

Without exception, the review process from start to finish relied heavily in all institutions on the Governance Professional. Preparation, planning, engagement, undertaking, and post review documentation all relied on the Governance Professional. There was of course input from all parties but the key actor in all processes and the gatekeeper to the institution was the Governance Professional. Importantly, we were able to see significant evidence of the impact of establishing positive working relationships between the review team and the key actors within the institution who were the Chair, the Chief Executive and the Governance Professional. Whilst there were clear inputs from other board members and committee chairs, the burden of labour rested with those key actors.

The impact of these roles on the outcomes of the process are clearly demonstrated within this research. A strength of the observed process was the early engagement and planning done in partnership with key actors from the institution and the reviewers. This had a significant impact on the process and clearly established a proactive route through the review and increased the potential for useful outcomes in terms of change and development. In all instances, the Governance Professional was the key actor within the process and enabled engagement and impact whilst the review process navigated its route through the board governance structures.

5.1.3

What insights were gained by reviewers and how were these subsequently enacted within the governance framework of reviewed institution?

Repeatedly the reviewers were able to feed back to those colleges who were reviewed on potential improvements to their processes and structures of governance and governing.

This was common across all types of institutions and yielded opportunities for impactful change. As experienced Governance Professionals themselves who were able to draw upon both their own experiences in role as well as what they had learned from conducting reviews across a range of colleges, reviewers were able to offer recommendations for change across multiple dimensions of practice which subsequently brought about positive and demonstrable impact. Where 'quick wins' were possible, boards that enacted some simple changes were able to benefit from easily achievable results (e.g. change in agenda order) that aided communication, decision making and strategic aim monitoring. Where slightly larger or structural changes were recommended, the processes of governance within institutions on occasion seemed to get in their own way. There were observed to be several significant delays between the end of the review process and the enactment of action plans post board approval (12 months in some instances). Operating with a three yearly cycle of review may present some challenges within institutions as recommendations and changes have little time to bed in before the next cycle of review begins. The agility of boards to respond to environmental factors outside of institutional influence is highlighted as an area for focussed development within existing structures and norms.

5.2

Recommendations

This chapter goes on to give some specific recommendations that are derived from the findings and observations resulting from this research.

Whilst the site of the research has been necessarily focused on colleges of further education, as highlighted in the foreword to this report, the work offers far greater reach.

5.2.1

Recognition of the role of Governance Professionals as change agents

This report recognises the influence of college Governance Professionals as change agents.

Highlighting their vital role in supporting institutional transformation and resilience beyond ensuring compliance with regulatory frameworks, Governance Professionals are increasingly strategic partners who help embed good governance across all levels of the organisation. Their work supports effective decision-making, risk management, and stakeholder engagement – key elements in navigating sector-wide challenges such as funding pressures, curriculum reform, and evolving learner needs. By fostering a culture of transparency, accountability, and continuous improvement, Governance Professionals enable colleges to remain responsive, inclusive, and forward-thinking in delivering high-quality education and training.

Greater recognition of the influence and impact of this role manifested as support for development and training needs has been highlighted by this report and promises significant impact on the governance practices in all areas of education and beyond.

5.2.2

Addressing the pace of change for governing

The accelerating pace of change in the further education sector presents a significant challenge for governance in colleges.

From shifting government policies and funding models to rapid technological advancements and evolving learner expectations, governing bodies must remain agile and forward-thinking. Effective governance now requires not only compliance and oversight but also the capacity to anticipate and respond to change with strategic foresight. This means investing in continuous professional development for governors, fostering a culture of adaptability, and ensuring governance structures are flexible enough to support innovation while maintaining accountability and managing risk. By embracing a proactive approach, colleges can ensure their governance remains robust, relevant, and capable of guiding institutions through an increasingly dynamic educational landscape.

Boards should look to their own practice, undertake a review of ability across all roles and collectively, and assess their perceived responsiveness to change requirements



5.2.3

Governance Professionals need resource to manage reviews

In colleges of further education, it is increasingly important to recognise that Governance Professionals need both the space and capacity to engage meaningfully with external governance reviews and to act swiftly on their findings.

These reviews offer valuable insights into board effectiveness, compliance, and strategic alignment, but their impact depends on the ability of Governance Professionals to interpret recommendations and influence change. To support this, colleges should ensure Governance Professionals are given adequate time, resources, and authority to participate in reviews and lead on implementing improvements. Recommendations include: (1) allocating dedicated time in governance workloads for review engagement and follow-up; (2) involving Governance Professionals in strategic planning discussions; (3) ensuring senior leadership and boards are receptive to their insights; and (4) embedding review outcomes into governance development plans that are translated into timely action.

Empowering Governance Professionals in this way strengthens institutional accountability and drives continuous improvement.

5.2.4

Boards need confidence to adapt and change

In colleges of further education, boards must develop the confidence to adapt and embrace change, even when it brings uncertainty.

Change can often feel daunting, particularly in a sector facing constant policy shifts, funding pressures, and evolving learner needs. However, this confidence can be built through structured approaches such as assurance mapping, which helps boards visualise risks, responsibilities, and areas of strength or vulnerability. When combined with strong, visible leadership from the Chair, Chief Executive, and Governance Professional, boards are better equipped to make informed decisions

and adopt new practices with clarity and purpose. These leaders play a crucial role in fostering a culture of trust, openness, and continuous improvement – empowering boards to evolve while maintaining stability and accountability.

5.2.5

Creativity, innovation and vision in governing should become qualities to develop and celebrate

In the context of further education colleges, fostering creativity, innovation, and vision within governance is essential for navigating a rapidly evolving educational landscape.

Boards should not only safeguard the core values of stability and resilient leadership but also actively cultivate a culture where forward-thinking ideas are encouraged and celebrated. This dual focus enables colleges to remain agile and responsive while maintaining the trust and continuity that underpin effective leadership. To achieve this, boards should consider the following recommendations:

- 1** Embed innovation in governance training – Include discussions on creative thinking, scenario planning, and visionary leadership in governor development programmes.
- 2** Encourage diverse perspectives – Recruit governors from varied professional and cultural backgrounds to bring fresh insights and challenge conventional thinking.
- 3** Create space for strategic foresight – Dedicate time in board agendas for horizon scanning, beyond routine compliance and performance monitoring.
- 4** Celebrate innovation and resilience – Recognise and share examples of innovative governance practices and resilient leadership within and across colleges.
- 5** Balance change with continuity – Ensure that while new ideas are welcomed, the board also preserves and builds upon proven governance practices that support long-term institutional health.

5.2.6

Recognition that sustained and relevant training is required

To achieve and maintain a high standard of governance, as outlined in sector guidance and governance codes, college boards must recognise the importance of sustained and relevant training for all board members.

One-off inductions are no longer sufficient in a landscape marked by rapid policy changes, increasing accountability, and evolving learner needs. Boards should adopt a structured approach to continuous professional development that is tailored to individual and collective needs. Recommendations include: (1) developing an annual training plan aligned with strategic priorities and governance self-assessment outcomes; (2) ensuring all governors have access to sector-specific training on topics such as finance, safeguarding, and curriculum oversight; (3) encouraging participation in external networks and events to share best practice; and (4) regularly reviewing training impact through the Search and Governance Committee.

By embedding ongoing learning into board culture, colleges can strengthen governance effectiveness and better serve their communities.

5.2.7

Giving the selected code of governance more prominence

Giving the selected code of governance greater prominence is essential for embedding consistent, high-quality governing practices and processes.

Whether adopting the Code of Good Governance for English Colleges or a regional equivalent in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland (or another approved Code), boards should treat the code not as a compliance checklist but as a strategic framework that actively shapes their culture, behaviours, and decision-making. This involves regularly referencing the code in board reports, discussions, self-assessments, and policy reviews, as well as aligning governance development activities with its principles. By integrating the code into the fabric of governance, colleges can ensure greater transparency, accountability, and effectiveness, ultimately strengthening their ability to deliver positive outcomes for learners and communities.

5.2.8

Boards should make more effort to achieve a diversity of membership

Achieving greater diversity on boards is essential to ensuring inclusive, representative, and forward-thinking leadership.

Governing bodies should take proactive steps by developing and implementing a clear, measurable action plan aimed at broadening the range of backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives among board members. This plan should be regularly reviewed and monitored by the Search and Governance Committee to ensure progress and accountability. Key actions might include targeted outreach to underrepresented communities, transparent recruitment processes, and the removal of barriers to participation. By embedding diversity as a strategic priority, colleges can enhance the quality of governance, better reflect the communities they serve, and foster more innovative and equitable decision-making. Equality, diversity and inclusion should not be things that boards do but are instead what boards are, diverse, inclusive and equal in opportunity.



We were able to see distinct, measurable and real changes within multiple institutions as a direct result of engagement with reviewers and the review process.



6.0

Proposed next steps

Building on these findings presents a valuable opportunity to deepen the impact of the study and contribute meaningfully to the ongoing development of governance in general further education colleges in England and beyond.

The proposed next steps are designed to ensure that the insights gained are not only disseminated widely but also translated into practical improvements at both institutional and national levels.

6.1

Sharing this report with colleges and relevant agencies and sector bodies

The first priority is to ensure that the research findings are shared with all participating colleges, as well as with key sector bodies such as the Association of Colleges (AoC), the Sixth Form Colleges Association, the Education and Training Foundation (ETF), and the Further Education Commissioner and Department for Education (DfE).

Dissemination will include this formal report, executive summaries tailored for different audiences, and presentations at sector events and conferences.

Accompanying this will be a number of associated research journal articles. This will help ensure that the research reaches those in a position to act on its recommendations and embed its insights into policy and practice. The research findings should also inform the evaluation and evolution of the requirements on colleges for external board review more generally – in anticipation of a policy intent that reviews should support development in governing practices to enhance the effectiveness of governance.



6.2

Encouraging and supporting ways to address the recommendations at institutional and national level

To move from insight to impact, colleges should be supported in reviewing their own governance practices in light of the findings. This could involve facilitated workshops, self-assessment tools, and guidance documents that help boards reflect on their current approaches and identify areas for development.

At national level, sector bodies and their supporters should consider how the recommendations can inform future iterations of governance codes, training frameworks, and quality assurance mechanisms. A coordinated effort will be essential to ensure that improvements are systemic and sustainable and that there is a clear, common understanding around what the role of Governance Professional is.



6.3

For reviewers to reflect on the key messages which can influence future external governance reviews

The research also provides a valuable opportunity for reviewers to reflect on their own practice.

By engaging with the findings, reviewers can identify areas where the review process might be enhanced – for example, by placing greater emphasis on post-review impact and strengthening feedback mechanisms. This reflective process will help ensure that future reviews are even more effective in driving meaningful change within colleges.

6.4

To contribute to a research and development agenda to continue to search for ways to improve the performance of governing colleges in the UK and internationally

Finally, the research should serve as a springboard for a broader research and development agenda focused on governance in further education.

Future studies could explore the long-term impact of governance reviews, the role of student and staff voice in governance, or the effectiveness of different training models for governors. Establishing a collaborative research network involving colleges, academics, and sector bodies would help maintain momentum and ensure that governance continues to evolve in response to emerging challenges and opportunities.

In summary, these next steps are essential to ensuring that the research delivers lasting value. By sharing findings widely, supporting implementation, reflecting on practice, and committing to ongoing inquiry, the sector can continue to strengthen governance and, ultimately, improve outcomes for learners and communities.





7.0

Authors' details



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My background is in social care settings, engineering, and teaching and research in further and higher education. I have held several teaching and leadership roles in the further and higher education sectors in Scotland, England and Wales.

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