

The John Fisher School

External review of governance

Ian Wilson





National Governance Association

The National Governance Association (NGA) is an independent charity representing and supporting governors, trustees and clerks in maintained schools and academies in England. The NGA's goal is to improve the wellbeing of children and young people by increasing the effectiveness of governing boards and promoting high standards. It does this by providing information, guidance, research, advice and training. It also works closely with, and lobbies, UK government and educational bodies, and is the leading campaigning national membership organisation for school governors and trustees.

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Key contact and email	Philip McCullagh, HT, p.mccullagh@johnfisherschool.org
Chair of governing body	Simon Drury
Chair's email	s.drury@johnfisherschool.org
Headteacher	Philip McCullagh
Ofsted status and date	Good; January 2018
Local authority	London Borough of Sutton
Membership details	
Reason for commissioning the review	
<p>The school had an external review of governance in 2017, and wished to have an external evaluation of current strengths and areas for development. A particular focus was on whether the areas for improvement identified in the previous review had been addressed.</p>	
Background information	
<p>The John Fisher School is an 11-18 VA non-selective Roman Catholic school with 1126 students on roll. The proportion of FSM6 students is 7.1%, well below national and local figures. The proportion of EAL students is 17.3%.</p> <p>The headteacher has been in post for five years.</p> <p>Due to the pandemic there are no nationally published results for 2020, but figures for 2017-2019 indicate GCSE performance at 5+EM was above national in 2017 and 2018, and well above in 2019. Progress 8 increased markedly in 2019 to 0.23. A level results show an average grade score in line with national over this period. The London Borough of Sutton has several selective schools, thus skewing local comparison figures.</p> <p>The school has a LA licensed deficit , with measures being taken to reduce this. The current year's budget is balanced, including an element of payback.</p> <p>The headteacher's performance management is carried out by the chair and vice-chair of governors, with the help of an external adviser.</p>	
The governance framework	
<p>There are currently 12 governors: seven foundation governors, appointed by the Archdiocese of Southwark (two vacancies in the process of being filled); two elected parent governors; one elected staff governor; one LA appointed governor; and the headteacher ex-officio. The information on the school website aligns with that on GIAS. Three governors joined the board in 2020, and four in 2018/9.</p>	



The website contains up to date information on governors, including declarations of interest and membership of committees. An annual statement explains the roles of the governing board (GB) and its committees, and an annual impact report details the work carried out in the last academic year. The attendance of governors and the code of conduct are also provided on the website.

The governing board has the services of an experienced clerk.

The chair (a governor since 2010) has been in place since November 2020. The vice-chair was previously the acting chair, having stepped in to stabilise the leadership of the Board.

The GB has committees for Resources, Student Learning Achievement and Welfare, Admissions and Pay. Governors also sit on the school's Spiritual Life and Ethos committee.

An independent audit of policies and the website was conducted in the autumn term 2020, and the school was found to be fully compliant.

The external review process

The process was discussed in a series of on-line discussions with the chair, vice-chair, headteacher and clerk.

A revised version of the NGA questionnaire was prepared using Google Forms, and sent to all governors. Eleven governors (out of twelve) responded, which is a strong rate of response.

An analysis of the responses and documentation was discussed with the core group.

The clerk provided sample agendas, minutes and governor visit reports. A self-evaluation document was also provided.

The findings and suggested areas for action were presented to a full GB meeting on 25 March, and some revisions made to this report and the action plan following suggestions by governors.

Key message

The governing body has been diligent in seeking external evaluation in a timely manner, and has demonstrated that it has the capability and commitment to improving its practice. It is now a governing body with a proportionate and effective governance structure, and a good understanding of its three core functions which it is largely carrying out effectively.

Governance practice could be developed even further through a collegiate approach to reviewing the school's vision and strategy for the next three to five years. The governing body and senior leadership team (SLT) should seek to harness the future commitment of stakeholders by consulting them on their vision for what the school should look like in 2025, and what students will have learned when they leave. Agreeing with the SLT the strategy for achieving this vision will provide the framework against which resources should be allocated and against which leaders can be held to account. This should serve to further streamline governance practice making succession planning easier and further reducing workload for staff.

Findings

Evaluation of the responses to the questionnaire has taken into account the fact that three governors are relatively new to the board.

Findings are organised with reference to the three core governance functions and NGA's eight elements of effective governance.

The three core governance functions

1) Ensuring clarity of vision, ethos and strategic direction



- a) There was very strong agreement in the survey that the vision is clear.
- b) The annual statement reinforces the vision and ethos.
- c) The strategic aims are used to scaffold the SIP and inform the headteacher's performance management objectives.
- d) There was some evidence of risk management at a strategic level, but this could be strengthened.

2) Holding executive leaders to account for the educational performance of the organisation and its pupils, and the performance management of staff

- a) Clear evidence in the minutes and other documents of appropriate challenge from governors.
- b) Training has been provided in order to improve governors' knowledge of performance data and the questionnaire responses indicated that governors have a good understanding of this area.
- c) Three governors responded in the survey that they are unsure about knowing how effectively staff are managed.

3) Overseeing the financial performance of the organisation and making sure its money is well spent

- a) There is clear evidence in the documents seen that this is carried out effectively.
- b) Governors commented in the survey on how this has improved after work by the headteacher, vice-chair and the SBM.
- c) Governors receive independent advice from a financially qualified external Responsible Officer.

NGA's eight elements of effective governance

1) The right people round the table

- a) A skills audit is used to inform selection of new governors.
- b) The size, composition and structure of the board was assessed by governors to be effective. There is evidence in the documents that this is the case.
- c) An induction programme is in place, and governors have access to training programmes including those from the NGA.
- d) Questionnaire responses indicate that succession planning is weak, and the board's self-evaluation document acknowledges this.

2) Understanding the role and responsibilities

- a) The questionnaire responses strongly indicate that governors understand their roles and responsibilities.
- b) Questionnaire responses show that annual discussions with individual governors are not undertaken.
- c) There is an agreed strategy with priorities for achieving the vision, and governors report on progress in the annual impact statement.
- d) A policy register is maintained, showing which committees are responsible and when policies are due to be updated.
- e) There is a named safeguarding governor who discharges the role effectively.

3) A good chair

- a) The chair is elected annually. He has been in this role for a few months but has long experience as a governor.
- b) There is currently no annual review of the performance of the chair.

4) Professional clerking

- a) There was unanimous agreement in the questionnaire responses that the clerk is professional and effective.
- b) The minutes and agendas are clear and well-structured. The minutes are full, but not over detailed,



with challenge and support identified, and further actions recorded.

5) Good relationships based on trust

- a) Scrutiny of the documents shows that governors have a good understanding of their strategic role.
- b) Governors know the senior leaders well and are in regular communication with them.
- c) Senior leaders attend relevant committee meetings.
- d) Relationships between governors were observed to be based on mutual respect, with governors being encouraged to contribute.
- e) The board has a code of conduct, and would be used if necessary to deal with any issues.

6) Knowing the school

- a) All governors have at least one link governor role.
- b) Written reports are provided following governor visits.
- c) A half-hour informal drop-in is available to all governors to meet prior to governors' meetings and some governors make use of this opportunity.
- d) Subject leaders discuss their achievements and plans at the Student Learning Achievement and Welfare committee.

7) Committed to asking challenging questions

- a) There is strong evidence in the documents of challenging questions on, for example, performance, health and safety, safeguarding and finance.

8) Confident to have courageous conversations

- a) Senior leaders are challenged with regard to performance and proposed changes (e.g., to the curriculum).
- b) The performance management process is regularly reviewed by the board.

The 2017 ERG proposed four areas for action:

1) Develop better ways to communicate with stakeholders

Progress has been made in this area, but some questionnaire responses suggest that improving communication with key stakeholders remains a point for further action.

2) Consider governor workload and use other methods such as teleconference

Action has been taken to streamline the workloads of governors and the committee structure. The CV-19 situation has changed the ways in which all boards operate,

3) Develop a forward plan of work (strategic plan), monitoring the SIP

In the three years following the last ERG, a good deal of work has been devoted to this, and there is strong evidence in the questionnaire responses (and in documents) that this is now effective.

4) Appoint an external clerk

This has been achieved, and the comments in the questionnaire responses show how well regarded the clerk is for her professionalism and efficiency.

Summary recommendations

1) Issues concerning the governance structure and practice itself

Undertake annual reviews of the chair's performance and of individual governors



Develop a succession plan

2) Issues concerning the vision, ethos and strategic direction

Consider conducting a survey to ascertain stakeholders’ satisfaction with the content and frequency of communications in order to contribute ideas for refreshing the vision and strategy.

Detailed actions to be undertaken

Issue	Action	By whom	By when
1) Governance structure			
The Board needs to know more fully the contributions and effectiveness of each of its members, including the chair, and how well it is performing collectively.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Obtain feedback on the effectiveness of the chair either by means of a 360 appraisal or a short questionnaire and questions in the 1-1 discussions with governors. Conduct developmental sessions with other governors by a combination of self-assessment and 1-1 discussions with the chair and vice-chair, see Reviewing governors' contributions for an example Timetable annual self review from Jan 2022 	All governors Chair and vice-chair Chair	Dec. 2021 July/Aug 2021 Summer 2022
The board needs to develop a succession plan.	Use the NGA document Preparing your board for the future to produce a plan. There is an on-line training module available through the NGA Learning Link Succession Planning	Chair and Vice-Chair	Oct. 2021
2) Vision, ethos and strategy			
The board needs to ensure the school’s ethos is being lived out	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Governors should continue to attend parents’ evenings and feedback to the board Continue to seek feedback from senior leaders on staff, student and parental views Conduct a survey to find out from stakeholders if they are satisfied with the content and frequency of communications from the board. 	HT and clerk	July 2021

Ongoing support



- ❖ Once this review is finalised the school will have **free access to the NGA advice lines for three months**. The membership team, membership@nga.org.uk, will be in touch with you shortly to arrange this.
- ❖ NGA is able to provide professional development for all kinds of governing boards. There are sessions for new governors and trustees, for chairs, for clerks, and for the governing board. Details can be found on the [NGA website](http://www.nga.org.uk) or contact consultancy@nga.org.uk for more details.
- ❖ For further consultancy support, including external advisors for headteacher performance management, contact consultancy@nga.org.uk

Acknowledgments

My sincere thanks to Philip, Simon, Tony and Lindsay for their cooperation and help in this review.

NGA sign off

21 April 2021