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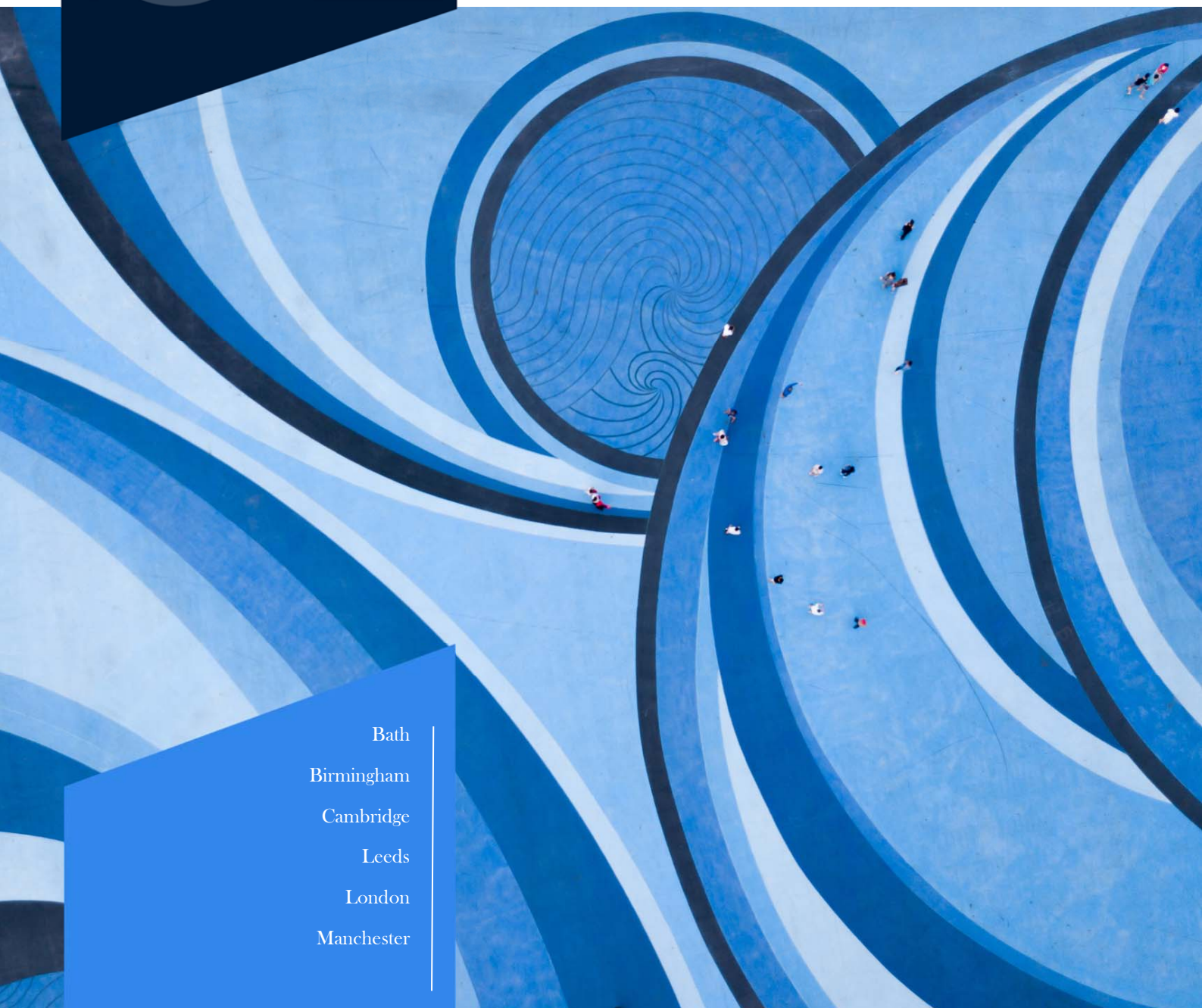
East Sussex College Group

External Governance Review

October 2025 – April 2026

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## Introduction

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This external governance review of East Sussex College Group was commissioned by the Governing Board. The review began in October 2025 and concluded in April 2026.

East Sussex College Group (the College) is a large further education college group operating from three main campuses in Eastbourne, Hastings and Lewes. In the financial year ended 31<sup>st</sup> July 2025, the College had approximately 14,300 students including 16-18 students, apprentices, HE students, international students and adults. The College's mission is 'To provide an exceptional student experience through expert teaching, inspiring facilities and our ambitious partnerships'. The College's PROUD values, which help to shape and guide its culture, are positivity, respect, opportunity, unity and diversity.

The external review of governance was undertaken in the context of the most recent inspection by Ofsted (January 2025) which graded the overall effectiveness of the East Sussex College Group as 'good'. The following quotation is taken from page 6 of the Ofsted inspection report:

*Governors know the strengths of the college and recognise where improvement is needed. They support leaders and hold them to account where further improvement is required. They rightly recognise the need to improve the quality of the apprenticeships offered by the college and have worked closely with leaders to review the provision and agree improvement priorities. This has contributed to an increase in the proportion of apprentices who complete their programme and pass their final assessment. Governors rightly recognise that work continues to be required in this area and are monitoring leaders' progress closely.*

This external governance review was undertaken by Stone King LLP, specifically Rachel Robson (Governance Consultant). We would like to thank all the contributors from East Sussex College Group for their time and insight regarding governance at the College.

## Code of Governance

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The Governing Board of East Sussex College Group has adopted the AoC Code of Good Governance (the Code) and, as stated in the Statement of Corporate Governance for year ended 31 July 2025, endeavours to conduct its business in accordance with the Code and with due regard to the principles and guidance in the UK Corporate Governance Code.

A full and robust review of compliance against the Code, with evidence to support the outcomes, is undertaken on an annual basis.

Whilst this review is not an audit against code expectations, this review took account of these codes in reaching an understanding of governing practice.

## Methodology

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The methodology adopted for this review, undertaken between October 2025 and April 2026, was as follows:

- Observation of the Governing Board (23<sup>rd</sup> March 2026: in-person), Audit, Risk & Compliance Committee (4<sup>th</sup> March 2026: on-line), Curriculum, Skills & Quality Committee (26<sup>th</sup> February 2026: in person), Governance, Performance & Reputation Committee (5<sup>th</sup> February 2026: in person), Resources, Culture & Impact Committee (12<sup>th</sup> March 2026: in person), Capital Development Board (13<sup>th</sup> November 2025: on-line)
- Interviews with the Chair of the Governing Board, the CEO and Principal (CEO), the Director of Governance, the Vice Chair and Chair of Governance, Performance & Reputation Committee, the Chair of Audit, Risk & Compliance Committee, the Chair of Curriculum, Skills & Quality Committee, the Chair of Resources, Culture & Impact Committee, two of the staff governors, one of the student governors, an independent governor who joined the Governing Board in 2024 (to consider the induction process), the Chief Operating Officer and the Deputy Principal
- Core governance documentation supplied by the Director of Governance to support a desk review

## CONTENTS

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Our external governance review documentation is provided in two parts:

- **KEY REFLECTIONS**
  - Executive summary
  - Table of reflections on what works well, what could work better and new ideas
  - Recommendations
- **MAIN REPORT**
  - Strategy and planning
  - Capability and culture
  - Structures and processes
  - Appendix 1: Observations

The 'Key Reflections' section is designed to present our messages in a clear and accessible format. The content of the Key Reflections derives from our review of governance documentation, observation of meetings (as listed above), and interviews with key governance role players. To assist understanding of our key reflections and supporting the creation of a governance action plan, our accumulated evidence and commentary is provided in the section headed 'Main Report'

# KEY REFLECTIONS

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## Executive Summary

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In summary, taking account of meeting observations, discussions and documentation available, this review recognises that the governing of East Sussex College Group is committed, well-structured and demonstrates highly effective processes. The Governing Board continues to refine and develop its practice to further enhance governing and add benefit to the College. Governors value the College and its place in their community, as a result they undertake their roles diligently.

The positive culture within the members of the Governing Board and in their relationships with staff enabled and supported the balanced and well received challenge and support given at the meetings observed as a part of this review. Discussion and questioning were open and inclusive enabling key issues to be considered without impediment. This in turn enabled conclusions and decisions to be reached.

There remains potential for further development with adjustments to reporting aimed at better supporting strategic governing.

The following table is intended to provide a summary, on the basis of our evidence, of what works well, what could work better and offer some new ideas.

### Works Well

- *Governors and leaders are proud of the College and its place in the communities that it serves*
- *Governors have a good knowledge of the issues that the College faces*
- *There is a valuable positivity and enjoyment of governing which runs throughout the culture observed, that is reflected in feedback given by both governors and executive leaders and supports a healthy, respectful and appropriately challenging relationship*
- *Student and staff governors are actively supported and encouraged to participate in meetings as full governors*
- *There are clear maximum terms of office for governors, which are adhered to*
- *There is a good level of attendance by governors at meetings of the Governing Board and its committees*
- *Governors have relevant skills and experience and use those to provide appropriate challenge and support*
- *Governors' skills and experience are reviewed and used to support recruitment and allocation of committee membership and link governor roles*

- *Recruitment is driven by the skills required with a recognised need to increase diversity in membership of the Governing Board*
- *There is active succession planning in place for governance leadership roles*
- *The Director of Governance provides proactive input in meetings where required to ensure discussion remains at a strategic level and to clarify and confirm actions placed*

#### **Could work better**

- *A refresh of the KPIs would support a more strategic approach to governing*
- *Reschedule the Governing Board agenda to provide a more visible link between KPIs that show progress against the strategic plan and the risk register*
- *Refresh executive summaries to include the key points to drive discussion and to better support governing and ensure that they are completed consistently for all reports*
- *Revisit decision to combine the reporting of risk, recommendation tracking and KPIs into a termly report to the Audit, Risk and Compliance Committee in order to stimulate discussion across all of the separate elements*
- *Committee Chair feedback to the Governing Board being more concise, in the form of a written summary and focussed on assurance, alerts and approvals coming through from each committee*
- *Reconsider how to use the Cyber Governance Code of Practice across the Governing Board and the Executive Leadership Team*

#### **New Ideas**

- *Reporting of KPIs to show progress against the strategic ambitions to the Governing Board to be immediately followed by review of the risk register to better link the two reports*
- *Take deep dive presentations into areas of the Strategic Plan at Governing Board meetings*
- *Revisit the Governing Board meeting agenda structure to ensure greater emphasis on strategy and a more succinct flow through the meeting*
- *A more concise report with separate reports from other contributors such as for safeguarding may lead to broader discussion at the Curriculum, Skills and Quality Committee. The committee may also benefit from hearing directly from each of the campus leads on an annual basis.*

#### **Recommendations**

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- Any recommendations which are adopted by the Governing Board should be placed in a specific plan for design, implementation and monitoring of effectiveness.

- The Governing Board is encouraged to use the text of this report as well as the summary table below in determining an agenda for continued improvement.

N.B. The paragraphs and appendices referenced in the table below are contained in the Main Report section Recommendations are further cross referenced in the Main Report and marked [R]

	Objective with desired impact	Recommendation
1	<p><i>The Governing Board's impact on the success of East Sussex College Group</i></p> <p><b>Impact:</b> <i>Taking action to address 1.1 – 1.4 should lead to a more strategic, risk-focussed Governing Board, holding senior managers to account for the performance of East Sussex College Group in relation to the Strategic Plan</i></p>	<p>1.1 Ensure meetings of the Governing Board pursue an appropriate strategic agenda using agreed KPIs to monitor the implementation of the Strategic Plan. (para 1.3 and 1.8)</p> <p>1.2 Introduce strategic deep dive presentations at Governing Board meetings (para 1.4)</p> <p>1.3 Introduce a Governing Board agenda with an increased strategic focus (para 3.4)</p> <p>1.4 All agenda items to require a decision from governors (para 3.8)</p>
2	<p><i>How the Governing Board works with the executive leadership team to provide strategic direction for East Sussex College Group</i></p> <p><b>Impact:</b> <i>Adopting 2.1 will assist the Governing Board in the achievement of becoming a more strategic, risk-focussed Board.</i></p>	<p>2.1 Refresh executive summaries to include the key points to drive discussion and to better support governing and ensure that they are completed consistently for all reports (para 3.6)</p>
3	<p><i>The Board's accountability for oversight and assurance of East Sussex College Group's educational and financial performance</i></p> <p><b>Impact:</b> <i>Adopting 3.1 will improve the Governing Board's accountability</i></p>	<p>3.1 Revisit decision to combine the reporting of risk, recommendation tracking and KPIs into a termly report to the Audit, Risk and Compliance Committee in order to stimulate discussion across all of the separate elements (para 3.10)</p>

	<i>through clearer procedures and defined expectations</i>	
4	<p><i>The extent to which the Governing Board fosters high quality learning</i></p> <p><b>Impact:</b> <i>Addressing 4.1 will improve the ways in which the Governing Board secures high quality learning experiences for students</i></p>	<p>4.1 A more concise report with separate reports from other contributors such as for safeguarding may lead to broader discussion at Curriculum, Skills and Quality Committee. The committee may also benefit from hearing each of the campus leads on an annual basis (para 3.11)</p>
5	<p><i>The potential for the Governing Board to evolve in the context of the future needs of East Sussex College Group</i></p> <p><b>Impact:</b> <i>Implementation of 5.1 – 5.4 will prepare the Governing Board for the foreseeable future</i></p>	<p>5.1 Reschedule the Governing Board agenda to provide a more visible link between KPIs that show progress against the strategic plan and the risk register, (para 1.6)</p> <p>5.2 Further develop review of risks by committees (para 1.7)</p> <p>5.3 Review Standing Order 5.2 in relation to the number of staff governors permitted (para 2.3)</p> <p>5.4 Further develop committee Chairs' reporting to the Governing Board to ensure clarity on the assurance gained from the committee, any areas of concern and items for approval (para 3.5)</p>

# MAIN REPORT

## 1. Strategy and Planning

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### Strategic Plan and Reporting

- 1.1 The Governing Board has approved a 'Strategic Plan' for the period 2025/28 with the following strategic ambitions:
- i. Curriculum & skills – We will enable all students to reach their full potential and thrive by designing and delivering inspiring and careers-led learning pathways*
  - ii. People & culture – We will create an empowering culture that inspires purpose, belonging and progression the valuing and investing in our people*
  - iii. Reputation & partnership – We will build our reputation for innovation, excellence and dynamic partnership by positioning ourselves as the East Sussex productivity 'engine'*
  - iv. Economy & digital transformation – We will fuel the aspirations of our students, colleagues and community partners by providing adaptable physical and digital learning spaces*
  - v. Resources & investment – We will ensure East Sussex College's long-term sustainability and protect investment in our students, people and infrastructure by strengthening out financial foundations*
- 1.2 Each of the strategic ambitions recognises how the College will achieve that ambition in partnership with key stakeholders and the local communities the College serves. It also identifies the desired impact from the implementation of each of the strategic ambitions by 2028. Each strategic ambition is underpinned by an operational 'master plan', for example the Curriculum & skills strategic ambition is underpinned by the Curriculum & Skills Master Plan that focuses on refining curriculum pathways, employer-led delivery models and campus specialisms.
- 1.3 An Executive Team Report is taken to every Governing Board meeting and presented jointly by the CEO, the Chief Operating Officer and the Deputy Principal. This report includes chosen KPIs aligned to the work of governor committees rather than being specifically aligned to the agreed strategic ambitions. Alignment of the KPIs to the strategic ambitions would provide greater clarity to the progress made against the implementation of the strategic ambitions in year. [R 1.1]
- 1.4 The introduction of a deep dive presentation on one of the strategic ambitions or underpinning master plans at each Governing Board meeting would provide governors with the opportunity to grow their knowledge in that area and concentrate discussion at strategic level. [R 1.2]

## **Risk Management**

- 1.5 There is a high level risk register which is considered by the Audit, Risk and Compliance Committee at every meeting. This is then brought forward to the Governing Board on an annual basis.
- 1.6 Following a recent internal audit review of risk each of the 11 identified risks on the risk register is now linked to one of the strategic ambitions. Taking the review of risk immediately after the review of progress against agreed KPIs in the Executive Team Report at Governing Board meetings would create a more themed approach to the agenda, better enable governors to easily identify the risks to the achievement of the strategic ambitions and, in turn, provide greater opportunity for further scrutiny and challenge on the effective mitigation of those risks. Ideally the Governing Board would review the risk register, with any recommendations from the Audit, Risk and Compliance Committee, at every meeting. [R 5.1]
- 1.7 The internal audit review of risk has also recommended including the appropriate committee with oversight for each risk on the risk register. These references were included in the risk register reviewed at the observed Audit, Risk and Compliance Committee meeting. It is good practice for committees to then specifically consider and regularly review the risks relevant to the respective terms of reference for each committee. This can be achieved by considering those risks in an agenda item at the end of a meeting, governors can then reflect on whether, by virtue consideration of the preceding items, they have assurance that mitigating actions are being progressed as detailed within the risk register. Governors can also highlight any additional risks that may have been identified by items on the agenda and should be considered for inclusion on the risk register. A summary of this practice could then be presented to each meeting of the Audit, Risk and Compliance Committee. [R 5.2]

## **Key Performance Indicators**

- 1.8 At the observed Governing Board meeting a RAG rated KPI report was included within the Executive Team Report. It would be preferable if a separate KPI report aligned to in year progress against the strategic ambitions was shared with the Governing Board. Such a report would stimulate increased governor focus on progress against the strategic plan and support more strategic discussion. It would also be preferable for this item to be much earlier, and therefore more prominent, on the Governing Board's agenda. [R 1.1]

## **Scheme of Delegation**

- 1.9 The Governing Board has a comprehensive scheme of delegation that summarises the delegated responsibilities documented in the internal and external framework for governing the College. In

addition, the scheme of delegation provides clarity on the requirements for approval of key documents and policies and is used to drive the annual cycle of business.

## 2. Capability and Culture

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### Membership

2.1 The Instrument and Articles provide for the Governing Board to comprise:

- up to fifteen members with necessary skills (Independent Governors)
- the CEO
- at least one and not more than three members of staff
- at least two and not more than three students

During the period of this review the Governing Board was comprised of thirteen Independent Governors, the CEO, three staff members and three student members.

2.2 The Standing Orders state the terms of office applicable to each category of membership. Independent Governors and Staff Governors are appointed on a four-year term of office and are eligible for one re-appointment of four years providing a maximum tenure of up to eight years. The overall maximum term is adhered to. Reappointments are reviewed by the Governance, Performance and Reputation Committee with recommendations made to the Governing Board. Student Governors' terms of office shall usually be for two years, but this may be extended on an annual basis at the discretion of the Board through to a student's final academic year for a maximum of four years.

2.3 It is suggested that Standing Order 5.2 in relation to the appointment of staff governors is reviewed to ensure compliance with Instrument 2.(1)(c) to ensure clarity on the number staff governors permitted. [R 5.3]

### Attendance

2.4 Governor attendance data is reported to every meeting of the Governance, Performance & Reputation Committee. Standing Orders refer to an expectation of at least 75% attendance for every governor. Procedures for managing diminishing governor attendance including the removal of a governor are set out in Standing Orders. Overall mean average attendance for 24/25 at 83%

compares favourably to the annual FE Clerks' Network annual survey which confirmed mean average attendance (based on the response of 91 colleges) of 82%.

### **Governors' Skills and Expertise**

- 2.5 A skills audit is undertaken regularly by governors. Governors are asked to assess their skills and experience against general skills areas such as chairing and interrogating data, as well as key skills for a governor at an FE college such as financial acumen and knowledge of the education sector. The audit could be further enhanced by including weightings for areas of core significance.
- 2.6 The outcome of the skills audit is used to identify skills gaps within the overall Governing Board membership to support both the consideration of reappointments and recruitment activity. It is also used to ensure that governors are asked to join committees and undertake link governor roles that best reflect their skills and experience. Contributions at observed meetings, together with evidence from interviews, confirmed relevant specialist knowledge across the membership of the Governing Board.
- 2.7 The outcome of the skills audit also supports relevant and targeted governor training.

### **Recruitment and Appointment**

- 2.8 The Governing Board delegates responsibility to the Governance, Performance and Reputation Committee to undertake the appropriate recruitment, selection and assessment procedures for Independent Governors and to advise the Governing Board on candidates for appointment, as detailed in the Committee's Terms of Reference and the Governor Recruitment & Succession Planning Policy. The Governance, Performance and Reputation Committee is required to consider possibilities for new governors based on a needs assessment. To ensure positive recruitment practice, and to increase the diversity of the Governing Board membership, the Policy states that advertisements for new governors will set out the skills required and will include clear messages that indicate that the College strongly encourages applications from all sections of the community.

### **Induction**

- 2.9 Newly appointed governors are required to take part in a comprehensive induction process on appointment as set out in the Governor Recruitment & Succession Planning Policy. Further detail is provided in the Governor Handbook. Induction includes presentations on governance, tours of the campuses, and meetings with key staff and governors. New governors are offered a mentor for the first twelve months of their membership of the Governing Board if they wish. The role and purpose of the mentor is clearly set out in the Policy for Mentoring New Governors. During the induction

process new governors are directed to key governance documentation and advised of their role as trustees. Mandatory training and onboarding checks are required in accordance with best practice.

- 2.10 During interviews an Independent Governor, staff governors and a student governor all reflected positively on their induction to the Governing Board. All felt that the process had supported them to be active and effective Governing Board members soon after joining, and that they were able to have a clear understanding of the nature and responsibilities of the role.

### **Training and Development**

- 2.11 On joining the Governing Board new members are advised of the necessity to complete mandatory training modules in cyber security, diversity equity inclusion and belonging, GDPR, health and safety, Safeguarding and Prevent.
- 2.12 Governors are offered training and development opportunities both internally and externally throughout the duration of their board membership. All Governing Board meetings have a pre-Board briefing or training event. The observed Governing Board meeting was preceded by a training session delivered by the College's external auditor on novel, contentious and repercussive transactions. All governors attending the meeting attended the session, with all those present actively engaging in the session.
- 2.13 Governors are directed to training through the Education & Training Foundation and Association of Colleges and are encouraged to undertake relevant sessions. All governors receive an individual training plan and record; this provides details on priority training and skills gaps driven by the completion of the skills audit, essential training and recommended training. Governors are asked to agree training with the Director of Governance and to record all training undertaken. All of the training activity in place is reflective of best practice.

### **Ambassador Governors and Governor Visits**

- 2.14 Governors may be linked to an area of focus as an ambassador. There are governor ambassador roles for Safeguarding, SEND, Diversity Equity and Inclusion, Careers and Skills and Devolution, each with a clear role description in place. All ambassadors are asked to meet termly with the relevant lead officers to gain assurance in respect of that area of focus. Ambassadors then report directly into Governing Board meetings. At the observed meeting of the Governing Board written reports were received from three ambassadors enabling governors to triangulate information received from management.

- 2.15 A Governor Visits Policy is in place; this recognises the value of governor visits in developing knowledge of the College, bringing the work of the Governing Board to life and raising the profile of governors with staff and students at the College. The Policy establishes guidelines for visits to ensure that governors understand their role and purpose so that visits are productive. Visits are planned in advance and enable governors to meet staff and students. Learning walks for the academic year are planned in advance at each of the main campuses with governors invited to attend. Such visits enable a greater understanding of the College, can support monitoring of the delivery of the strategic ambitions and to enable governors to build relationships with staff and students.

### **Succession Planning**

- 2.16 There is a Governor Recruitment and Succession Policy in place that recognises the need to ensure a consistent and effective approach to the development and succession planning of governors into key governance roles. This extends beyond the Chair and Vice Chair of the Governing Board to include Chairs of the Committees. Annual Governor 1:1 conversations, undertaken with the Chair of the Governing Board, amongst other activity such as completion of self-assessment questionnaires, provide an opportunity to identify governors that may wish to be considered for governance leadership roles. Succession is a standing item on Governance, Performance and Reputation Committee agendas.
- 2.17 At the time of the review a recruitment process for a new Chair of the Governing Board was underway. The Governing Board should reflect upon the significantly positive governing culture in place and consider what it wants to preserve during the transition of the Chair role.

### **Annual Self-Assessment of Governance**

- 2.18 An Annual Self-Assessment Report is presented to the Governing Board. The report provides a detailed analysis of self-assessment activity including the outcome of Governing Board and committee effectiveness surveys, the skills audit, Chair of the Governing Board 360 annual review, annual Chair and governor 1:1 conversations, governor training and a summary of other aspects of effectiveness (such as attendance). The report identifies aspects of governance where improvements have been made that have led to positive impact and areas for development. The Governance, Performance and Reputation Committee reviews progress against the Governance Improvement Plan. The Plan is RAG rated and provides detailed updates on progress against the actions within each focus area. The Plan contains a considerable number of actions, some of which are college or management actions that the Governing Board wishes to see fulfilled as opposed to actions to develop and strengthen the effectiveness of governance. It is suggested that moving

forward the Governance Improvement Plan concentrates on improving governing rather than including areas of focus and actions that might be better pursued through monitoring of the Strategic Plan.

### **Senior Post Holders**

- 2.19 The Governance, Performance and Reputation Committee undertakes the regular review of Senior Post Holder (SPH) performance and consideration of SPH pay. Recommendations from the Committee are taken to the Governing Board for approval. The Committee has reviewed the DfE's '*Effective senior post holder appraisal and chair performance review*' guidance and has identified that it is content that its practice is line with the guidance. The Committee has also reviewed its practice against the recommendations from the FE Commissioner in the report on Weston College and has confirmed that the practices in place are compliant with those recommendations.

### **Previous external governance review**

- 2.20 The previous external governance review was undertaken by The Education Training Foundation, with a report to the Governing Board in July 2023. The areas for improvement were reviewed and where deemed appropriate actions were incorporated into the Governance Improvement Plan. Considerable progress has been made against the adopted recommendations.

### **Director of Governance**

- 2.21 The Governing Board is served by a highly capable, engaged and well-respected Director of Governance. All governors and members of the Executive Leadership Team interviewed during this review reflected very positively on the impact of the Director of Governance on the effectiveness of governance at the College.
- 2.22 During the meetings observed the Director of Governance actively contributed to the meeting when it was appropriate to do so. On more than one occasion she offered guidance to governors on their roles and responsibilities and on the appropriateness of their discussion, guiding them from conversation that was heading to being operational in nature back towards a more strategic footing.
- 2.23 Many of the governing practices in place are reflective of sector best practice; key governance documentation is reviewed and updated annually, ways to continually improve governance to reflect the ever-changing nature of the sector are sought and innovative methods of reporting and working are undertaken where this will support continued improvement. An example of this is an annual report which has been developed to provide the Governing Board with assurance on the independence of the role of the Director of Governance.

## Culture

- 2.24 Overall, there is a positive, respectful relationship between governors and senior staff during meetings that is encouraged by both the Chair and the CEO. Governors and staff alike are invited to contribute to discussion and are thanked for their contributions. This relationship is highly valued by all involved.
- 2.25 Governors and senior staff are very proud of the College and of its place in the communities it serves. This was evident at the meetings observed and during interview. All are keen to ensure that students achieve and progress to positive destinations.
- 2.26 Staff and student governors are acknowledged by Independent Governors and senior staff as full governors and are treated as such. They are actively asked to contribute to discussion at committee and Governing Board level. During interview staff governors confirmed that they feel that they are viewed as full members of the Governing Board, that their views are valued and that they are actively supported by other governors to contribute to meetings. Staff and student governors are invited to present reports to meetings; at the observed Governing Board meeting a staff governor and a student governor presented reports on one of the College's values. The student governors observed spoke freely and confidently at meetings, adding value to the discussions. The student governors spoke positively about the induction process and how this contributed to their confidence in their roles as governors. Independent Governors and senior staff spoke positively about the contributions from the staff and student governors during interviews. This level of engagement from staff and student governors should be seen as some of the best practice within the sector.
- 2.27 The relationship between the Chair, CEO and Governance Professional remains important to the success of a Governing Board. The working relationship between the 'triumvirate' at East Sussex College Group is positive; all reflect on the beneficial nature of the relationship confirming that they understand each other's roles in relation to the Governing Board and how to work together.
- 2.28 Good use is made of the wider governance space outside of formal meetings. Governors are invited into the College for learning walks and events outside of the formal meetings. The Governing Board holds strategic away day events in the autumn and summer terms and attend pre-meeting development sessions which include working in groups.

## 3. Structures and Processes

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### Committee Structure

- 3.1 The Governing Board has established the following committees:

- Audit, Risk & Compliance Committee
- Capital Development Board
- Curriculum, Skills & Quality Committee
- Governance, Performance & Reputation Committee
- Resources, Culture & Impact Committee

Each committee has formal terms of reference that are reviewed on an annual basis in the summer term by that committee and recommended to the Governing Board for approval.

This governance model should be reviewed on an annual basis to ensure that it enables the Governing Board to gain the necessary assurance required to take all necessary decisions.

### **Meeting Calendar and Business Cycle for Governing**

- 3.2 There is a governance meeting calendar in place for 25/26 which provides for scheduled meetings of the Governing Board and its committees as well as strategy events. There is a detailed annual cycle of business in place for all Governing Board and committee meetings. Once approved by the Governing Board the annual cycle of business is used in the planning agendas for meetings.

### **Agenda Formation, Reporting, Minutes and Actions**

- 3.3 There are well-planned arrangements in place for the agreement of agendas. The relevant lead member of the Executive Leadership Team, the Director of Governance and the Chair of the Governing Board, or relevant committee, meet a month in advance of the meeting to agree the agenda. The agenda is based on the annual business cycle, any actions placed at previous meetings and any other items that it is felt necessary to be taken to governors at the meeting in question.
- 3.4 The ordering of items on the Governing Board agenda is that verbal feedback from each of the committees is taken very near to the front end of the meeting. In our experience it is more usual for a report from the CEO to be the first substantive item on an FE college's governing board agenda. The content of the CEO's report should set the overall backdrop for the rest of the agenda in terms of looking externally at current issues for the sector and the locality that impact the college, together with a view of current key internal issues. In the case of East Sussex College Group this purpose is fulfilled by the Executive Team Report which is presented by all three members of the Executive Leadership Team. If this report were to include, or be followed by, a review of KPIs as agreed by the Governing Board that are relevant to the progress of the Strategic Plan and then the risk register the focus at the start of the meeting would then be at a higher level and more strategic in nature and content. Taking these items first is also likely to add value to the subsequent items as relevant

contextual information will have already been provided and add to the overall flow of the meeting. [R 1.3]

For example, the ordering could be:

- Executive Team Report
- Review of KPIs to monitor progress of the Strategic Plan
- Review of risk register
- Curriculum, Skills & Quality Committee feedback with items for approval – to prioritise learner progress and performance
- Other committee feedback with items for approval

3.5 The reporting of committee business by committee Chairs to the Governing Board is a key source of assurance. At the observed meeting this practice was variable in terms of length and content. It is suggested that the Governing Board meeting pack includes both a report from each committee Chair and the draft minutes. It is essential both of these are shared with the Governing Board to provide assurance around the work of the committee and to limit the temptation to re-run the committee meeting or to provide feedback in too much detail. The report from committee Chairs to the Governing Board can be in the same executive summary format as used for all other reports. An added summary section should focus on what assurance the committee can give to Governing Board, what issues gave the committee cause for concern that it needs to alert the Governing Board to and what approvals the committee is seeking. This information can be set out as bullet points in the report and will provide the basis of the script for the Chair at the meeting. A draft can be shared along with the draft minutes from the committee for review and amendment by the committee Chair. [R 5.4]

3.6 An executive summary is provided ahead of reports. This sets out certain key information in terms of the author, the request of governors, the link to the Strategic Plan, link to risk and implications for students amongst other things. All of this is good practice which provides support to governors. However, in its current format it does not include a summary section that would enable the author to highlight the key issues in the paper that they wish to focus governor attention on in order to drive the required discussion and the outcome from the item. Including these key points would in turn focus the attention of the author on what is needed, assist with the presentation, and in some cases reduce the time spent in presentation, and support effective governing by highlighting the key issues in advance of the meeting. [R 2.1]

- 3.7 In terms of the main body of reports, the creation of Reporting Guidelines could be developed to improve the overall standard and consistency of reporting. Such guidelines, developed in conjunction with senior staff, should aim for succinct and well-ordered reports, that are clearly expressed and that contribute to effective governance. At present some reports have a tendency to be overly lengthy and dense with the use of acronyms that are not well known to those that do not work in the education sector.
- 3.8 Not all papers taken to governors currently require a decision. Each item on the agenda should require a recorded decision from the Governing Board regarding satisfaction (or otherwise) with progress towards agreed targets and expectations. This will provide more active and effective governing throughout each meeting. So, for example, rather than recording that the Governing Board 'received' or 'noted' a report, this could be recorded as 'received with concern' or 'the Governing Board were pleased to receive the report and noted the positive progress made [in relation to a specific strategic priority]'. [R 1.4]
- 3.9 Minutes are well-presented, accurately record the meeting and are of a high standard. Scrutiny, challenge and support offered by governors is evidenced within the minutes. The minutes can be long and could be reduced in length if desired by including less of the information shared in the reports themselves. Decisions taken are recorded clearly. Actions placed are clearly noted together with the follow up taken. During the period of the review an inter-committee referral log was introduced to track actions placed by the Governing Board or a committee that are to be undertaken at a different committee. This has been well received by governors who feel assured that such actions will not be lost. As noted by the Director of Governance this log will require active management in order that such actions are appropriate and will add the intended value.
- 3.10 At the Audit, Risk & Compliance Committee a termly report is now shared that combines reports on KPIs, risk and recommendation tracking. At the observed meeting the result of this was that discussion was concentrated on some aspects and not others; for example there was no discussion on the risk register. To ensure that these key reports all receive the appropriate level of attention it is suggested that this report is split back out into separate reports for each item moving forward. [R 3.1]
- 3.11 The main report to the Curriculum, Skills & Quality Committee is lengthy and presented in detail. The ordering of that report led to some repetition in discussion. A more concise report with separate reports from other contributors such as for safeguarding may lead to broader discussion. The committee may also benefit from hearing each of the campus leads on an annual basis (one to each meeting) on key aspects of their campus. [R 4.1]

### Observation of Meetings

3.12 The observation of meetings (listed in the methodology section of this report) demonstrated a positive governing culture. The detail is provided in Appendix 1.

In summary:

- Overall governor support and challenge is strong and is welcomed by the executive.
- A reordering of the Governing Board agenda would support more strategically focussed discussion.
- There is a respectful relationship between governors and the executive.
- There were contributions made at one meeting which were inconsistent with the wider governing culture and practices observed during this review.
- Staff and student governors contribute well to meetings. Their input is welcomed and their reports are well received.

### Annual Reporting

3.13 From the documents provided, annual reports are provided to the Governing Board regarding

- Health and Safety
- Safeguarding and Prevent
- Equality, diversity and inclusion

The Governing Board would benefit from all annual reports including an action plan (in a SMART format) to address areas for development. The action plans could be monitored by the Governing Board mid-way through the year to identify the degree to which progress is being achieved.

### Voice Frameworks

3.14 The outcomes from student surveys are considered by the Curriculum, Skills and Quality Committee. The committee receives regular feedback on the issues raised at student council meetings and the actions underway to respond to those. In addition, the student governor on that committee brings an update report to meetings that reflects on student voice matters.

3.15 The outcomes of the most recent staff survey were reported to the observed Resources, Culture and Skills Committee meeting. This item was given significant time and consideration at that meeting. Governors were particularly keen to understand where improvements were being recorded, what the key issues raised by staff were and the plans in place to respond.

## College Website

- 3.16 Every FE college must publish specific information on its website to comply with its accountability agreement and statutory obligations. This is detailed in DfE guidance '*What academies and further education colleges must or should publish online*'. The Governing Board has a role to play in ensuring that the college's website is compliant with legal and regulatory requirements. More generally, an annual review of compliance against the 'musts' and 'shoulds' set out in the guidance would be a useful addition to the Governance, Performance and Reputation Committee cycle of business.

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