

Education Partnership NorthEast

Board Advisory & Leadership and Talent Consultancy

External Board Review Report

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Prepared for:

The Board of Education Partnership North East

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1.0 Executive Summary

1.1 The Government's White Paper, Skills for Jobs: Lifelong Learning for Opportunity and Growth (January 2021), drew attention to the pivotal role that strong governance and effective executive leadership plays in the Further Education (FE) sector, stating that it is the combination of these factors which enables high quality provision and enables the workforce and learners to succeed. This built on the findings coming from a variety of sources in the recent past, all of which cite those issues stemming from governance, have contributed to failings in some colleges and other educational institutions.

1.2 Ofsted's 'Improving Governance' report of 2017, FE Commissioner's annual reports and the Ney Report (independent review of college financial oversight 2019) both raised concerns about governance arrangements in FE. The requirement for annual self-assessment of governance and a three-yearly external review of governance is one of the mandatory reforms to governance activity for sixth-form college corporations dictated by the Skills and Post-16 Education Act 2022. The stated objective of the external review is to support continuous improvement by demonstrating where an organisation is working well, identifying areas for development and helping boards keep up with good practice. Future financial returns will need to confirm when a governance review took place or reported to the board and give the name of the external reviewer.

1.3 The increased focus on the importance of good governance has been welcomed by many in the FE sector, and Education Partnership North East (EPNE) see the value in not only engaging external assessors in reviewing their governance arrangements, but benchmarking themselves against best practice, or even next practice in good governance. They have an ambition to be outstanding in all that they do, and governance is no exception.

1.4 Methodology:

1.4.1 We utilised a range of methods of gathering data, information and insight. These included:

- Meetings with key stakeholders and members
- Desktop research
- Meeting observation
- Online survey of internal stakeholder groups

1.4.2 Reporting: The research is collated and triangulated and brought together in a final report that provides a summary of the key findings, and presents a series of suggestions (S), and recommendations (R), whilst also benchmarking and sharing best practice (B) against FE and other sectors.

1.4.3 We recognise that a number of processes and changes around the governance arrangements are currently being developed, and therefore the benchmarking information and suggestions have been outlined in an effort to support the thinking in these areas.

1.4.4 Our approach was to review and benchmark EPNE's governance arrangements against excellence in governance practice, not compliance, and therefore although there are a broad range of recommendations within this report, we have found no significant red flags in our research. The recommendations and suggested actions will support EPNE in stretching their approach to good governance practice even further to achieve excellence in governance.

1.5 Key Findings:

1.5.1 EPNE has been brave in its ambitions in the past, seeing through two very successful mergers with colleges that had challenges and supporting significant improvements both financially, and in terms of performance. They have also been very successful in attracting significant funding to develop and improve a number of its campuses, improving the student experience and outcomes which is to be commended.

1.5.2 The tremendous progress they have made in developing out their governance arrangements and processes since the mergers took place also deserves recognition. Appropriate steps have been taken to accommodate the shift in the structure, whilst being mindful of retaining corporate memory and evolving the structures through a smooth transition into one that is fit for purpose longer term and will effectively support the ambitions of the college group.

1.5.3 Feedback from across the Board has identified strong leadership, effective chairing, and an appreciation of the breadth of backgrounds and expertise in place on the Board. Diversity and skills data is collected regularly and analysed, and comprehensive training and development records are held with regular opportunities being provided for further development.

1.5.4 Robust and effective administration and support was also celebrated throughout the process, with members being appreciative of the work that goes into running arrangements effectively and providing support to members.

1.5.5 EPNE have taken steps to build capacity through defining comprehensive Lead Governor responsibilities and by appointing two Vice Chairs to represent the North and South geography, providing specialist areas of focus and support for the Chair.

1.5.6 There is recognition that the CEO has a very positive impact on the college group, and that the Chair has also impacted positively since his appointment. The triumvirate is also very effective, working well to support both the framework of governance and its implementation and this was highly praised by a range of internal stakeholders throughout the process.

1.5.7 There is a strategic focus on developing external relationships with stakeholders, with an appetite for members to take an increasing role in supporting these partnerships and realising the benefits of broader stakeholder engagement.

1.5.8 A number of key opportunities exist for developing out the governance arrangement further as EPNE matures.

1.5.9 There is capacity for the committees to take on further responsibilities and more of the 'heavy lifting', building more capacity for the Board to focus on strategic matters.

1.5.10 Committee Chairs have the ability take a stronger role in reporting back to the Board through summary reports following each meeting outlining areas considered by the committee, decisions taken and recommendations being presented to the Board.

1.5.11 The further development of external stakeholder relationships through members will support the influence EPNE is able to have across their geography, and bring further insight into the Board to inform strategic decision making.

1.5.12 Broadening out the diversity of the Board will support the richness of insight being considered in decision making processes, as well as considering how students' voices are heard, and how they can contribute to, and inform decisions taken at Board level.

1.5.13 Overall, there was an overwhelming enthusiasm from all who engaged in the process, and strong motivation to support EPNE on its journey and provide excellent opportunities for a broad student base was clearly apparent.

1.6 Summary:

1.6.1 We find the governance exercised by the Board to be highly effective, with some exemplary characteristics, and some areas where EPNE can stretch and grow. With the implementation of our proposals, on top of existing good practice, the Board could achieve its objective of becoming outstanding in relation to its governance arrangements.

1.6.2 In comparison to other FE institutions and governance arrangements in other sectors used as benchmarks throughout this exercise, we found EPNE to be performing strongly and highly effective, and one of the strongest we've seen.

1.6.3 In all areas we were met with enthusiasm and passion for both the College and what it stands for, and the impact members and the staff group can have on students, their educational experience and their life opportunities.