

The Education Training Foundation

External Board Effectiveness Review Report

Prepared for

East Kent Colleges Group

FEBRUARY 2024

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1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In September 2023, The Education Training Foundation (ETF) was asked to undertake an independent review of the board of East Kent Colleges (EKC) Group. The request was in line with the objective to strengthen further education governance as set out in the 2021 Skills for jobs white paper. To meet this objective, EKC Group outlined the following priorities as part of the review:

1. Sets out a commitment 'to good governance and continual improvement'.
2. Is framed around the principles of the codes of governance the board uses, and other expectations set out in the DFE's guidance.
3. Seeks to look beyond just the governance processes and focusses on the culture and impact of governance.

The objective of the review was to gain an understanding of the strengths of the board and the areas that need development. Core aspects of the review included an initial review discussion to understand the context of the Group, their perspective of the effectiveness of governance and key areas of focus to consider within the scope of the review. There was ongoing dialogue between the lead reviewer and governance lead for EKC Group and Chair of Governors. The framework and methodology used to undertake the review was developed by ETF in collaboration with governance experts and stakeholders in the Further Education and Training sector.

Key areas of review included the following:

- Discovery and analysis – review of governance and background documentation
- Tailoring and distribution of the ETF Governance Survey
- Board members' skills and competencies assessment.
- Structured confidential interviews
- Observations of a main board meeting and committee meetings
- Presentation of finding and recommendations

Reviewer to Define the Scope of the Review.

The process involved interviews with the Executive, Chair, Governors, and Group Director of Governance; a survey; examination of a sample of governing documents and papers; an observation of 1 full board meeting (12th December 2023) and committee meetings for Education Committee (16th November 2023) and Business Committee (23rd November 2023). In addition to three update sessions with Group Director of Governance.

This executive summary should be read in conjunction with the full report as the report contains important contextual information and rationale and evidence for all the recommendations made.

Principal Strengths

There is a culture of excellence and an absolute focus on learners being central to all decisions within the EKC Group. EKC is led by a very effective Chair of Governors and a strong CEO who works 'hand in glove' with the board.

There is a collaborative and challenging relationship between the governance professional, CEO and chair, which serves the board well.

There is a strong and clear governance structure, with robust processes and systems to monitor and support the continued learning and development of the organisation. The Group has harnessed the skills and experience of the board and staff, to build its strategy of growth and improvements. The Board is well-served by strong, independent governance professional. The Group Director for Governance has extensive experience and throughout the review demonstrated considerable depth of knowledge and commitment to the board and peers.

Governors fully understand their roles and responsibilities and have brought their 'professional and lived experiences' to the benefit of EKC Group and learners. Local Boards provide a unique and important bottom-up assessment of social and economic needs and opportunities, thus driving the operational and strategic development of the organisation. Local Boards oversee and drive curriculum changes within their areas.

There are clear lines of delegated responsibilities and terms of reference for each of the committees, these are reviewed annually and approved by the board.

Governors are passionate about learners and are keen to consider whether their actions and decisions are impacting positively on learners' experiences and wider community. The student governor plays an effective role in representing the 'student voice' in meetings.

Governors set demanding key performance indicators, and these are monitored by the committees and main board.

Governors and Local Boards have worked closely with The Executive leadership team to align their curriculum to local, regional, and national skills needs.

Principal areas for improvement

Succession planning should be discussed with the whole board; There should be an open discussion within the board, with clear priorities and timescales set out. Good practice within the FE sector recommends a maximum of three terms of office, except in very exceptional circumstances.

Closer monitoring of governor engagement, as this may help to identify any issues at very early stages of appointment of new governors, with the opportunity to put the appropriate support in place.

Review of Local Boards role and delegated authority to ensure that its remit is in keeping with the wider strategic remit of EKC Group.

Review of board representation and establishing clear priorities for EDI.

2 INTRODUCTION & METHODOLOGY

2.1 Introduction and Context for the Review

The East Kent Colleges (EKC) Group invited the Education and Training Foundation (ETF) to put forward a proposal to conduct an external review of governance. This request is in line with the objective to strengthen further education governance as set out in the 2021 Skills for Jobs white paper. To meet this objective, a requirement was introduced for colleges to conduct an annual self-assessment and 'an external governance review at least once every three years, based on the governance code(s) used by the governance body' as set out in the ESFA (Education and Skills Funding Agency) agreements for 2021-2022 (effective 1st August 2021 to 31st July 2022) and 2022-2023 (effective 1st August 2022 to 31st July 2023).

ETF have developed a service that combines ETF's deep governance expertise within further education and board reviews. We can provide boards with an independent, holistic, and rigorous assessment of their performance and impact. Our methodology is tried, tested and outcomes focused.

2.2 Review Methodology

The approach to conducting the reviews was developed after extensive research on methods of conducting board reviews and consultations with members of college boards. This was supported by the IoD who have delivered corporate board reviews for over 20 years.

The process used with the board of EKC Group involved:

- An initial planning meeting with the Chair, CEO/Principal and Governance Professional to agree the approach to our review, the timelines for the review activities and the focus of our review.
- An online Board Review Survey was tailored for the board and was issued to all board members. This was completed by [15 of 16] board members, 5 senior leadership team, the chair and governance professional
- One to one interview with 9 members of the board, including [*Chair, Governance Professional, CEO/Principal*].
- Desk-based review of selected board documents such as the governing documents and minutes. There was also a review of the responses to the board review survey that was completed by board members.
- An observation of a full corporation meeting on 12th December 2023.
- Observations of committee meetings, Education Committee on 16th November 2023, and Business Committee Meeting on 23rd November 2023.
- Regular update sessions with the Group Director of Governance.
- A meeting with Chair and Governance Professional to discuss initial findings, recommendations, and co-design pathways for development, which was held on 12th December 2023.

- A Board Review Workshop to discuss findings, recommendations, and co-design pathways for development which will be held on 5th March 2024 to the audit and search and governance committees online.

The Board Effectiveness Review questionnaires allowed a snapshot view to be taken of how the board is currently operating. This Questionnaire looked at 10 areas, namely:

1. Purpose, Vision & Strategy
2. Board Composition & Structures
3. Effective Behaviours, Culture, Values & Inclusivity
4. Performance Management & Quality
5. Internal Controls & Risk Management
6. Stakeholder Relationships- No external stakeholders interviewed
7. Board Meetings
8. The Chair
9. Board Support & Information
10. Members key recommendations and comments

The interviews and observations then allowed us to analyse and assess:

- areas of perceived strength and weakness; and
- variations in opinion between different board members (the report does not identify individuals)

College Context and Background

The EKC Group consists of six colleges serving the communities of Ashford, Broadstairs, Canterbury, Dover, Folkestone, and the Isle of Sheppey. Each area is served by a Local Board whose chair is selected from the Full Governing Body. The Group offers learning from nursery age through to Higher Education. There is a focus on lifelong learning, adult education, and skills training as well as continuing professional development.

3 FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This section of the report uses the same categories as those within the Board Effectiveness Survey that was completed by board members. However, all aspects of the review fed into the findings and analysis outlined below.

3.1 Purpose, Vision, Strategy

The board is clear about its responsibilities in terms of setting the educational character and vision for the Group. Governors work very closely with the senior leadership team and key external stakeholders to review and set out its strategic direction.

Strategic aims:

All Governors agreed that governors take the lead in setting and reviewing the Group's ethos and mission. They ensure that the Group's priorities are based firmly on local, regional, and national priorities.

EKC Strategic Plan between 2020 and 2024 - Key Goals

1. Create a revolutionary model of education, delivering a new range of nationally recognised education solutions for the benefit of East Kent and beyond.
2. Deliver inspirational, inclusive, and purposeful education that enables young people and adults to achieve their ambitions and meet the needs of East Kent.
3. Successfully integrate Ashford College Group family, developing the provision to enable the Group to truly meet the needs of the whole of East Kent.
4. Continue to invest in industry-standard facilities and first-class Group services that support our business units to deliver aspirational, relevant, and high-quality learning experiences.
5. Ensure that EKC Group is an employer of choice and responds appropriately to the social, ethical, and moral issues of its communities, supporting the development of well-rounded and responsible young people.

There is a strong relationship between the chair, CEO, and the Group Director of Governance. They meet monthly to discuss key issues for the board/Group. This includes future agendas and general Group business. They are well respected by their peers and display a high degree of integrity and professionalism in all aspects of Group business. The chair is paid and has therefore been able to devote considerable amount of time to supporting and working with the Executive team and other stakeholders. The Group has gone through several mergers, and a major transformational program of curriculum development and teaching and learning improvements. This investment has concluded with the Group achieving an 'outstanding grade' by Ofsted in 2023 and being winners in the Beacon Award for 'Excellence in Governance', by the Association of Colleges.

The Group Director of Governance operates independently and is very well respected by colleagues. There is a very strong level of respect between the chair and governance professional. They hold regular meetings and are in contact on a weekly basis. They discuss planning issues, the workings of individual entities within the governance structure, succession planning, agenda setting, agenda for the main board and ensuring the right things are discussed at the right time.

The board operates by consensus and works with senior team collaboratively. The Board provides effective challenge and support, minutes show a level of scrutiny and challenge that is impactful. For example, there is evidence of debate, scenario planning in relation to previous merger discussions, curriculum changes for example 'specialisation' which was discussed with the Local Boards and main board.

The annual strategic review day is well attended by governors, with contributions from external stakeholders. There is also representation from each of the six Local Boards, which provide that rich local knowledge and understanding of community needs and social issues. For example, as part of their Group's strategic review, they commissioned external research by Steve Matthews and Dr Jonathan Pratt (2021), to inform the colleges 'Curriculum 2030' strategy, the report focused on three key priority areas:

- Local stakeholder views on Economic Needs
- Community Needs Analysis

- Young People and SEND

The report has helped to inform key strategic decisions taken on curriculum development.

The chairs of the Local Boards provide regular feedback, with a specific focus on 'Education'. The Group's Education committee is comprised of the 6 Local Board chairs. The strategic awaydays are welcomed by all governors, as they provide the space for open discussion and debate. The sessions also provide the opportunity for the board to build relationships and trust with the Local Boards.

The production of its recent 'Accountability Statement', provided a further opportunity to engage and reaffirm with key stakeholders its strategic direction, priorities and commitment to learners and the wider community. The Group also participated in the pilot for producing the 'Accountability Statement', the learnings from this process was implemented.

EKC Group provides a standard induction for all new governors, and this really sets the context for a detailed understanding of their roles and responsibilities, the priorities for the EKC Group and an outline of the range of support that is available to new governors both internally and externally. Governors are positively encouraged to engage with professional development opportunities with the Education Training Foundation and Association of Colleges.

Over the last 5 years the board has taken key strategic decisions that has impacted positively on the learning experience for the communities the Group serves, this includes the following:

- College mergers, which has enhanced the overall offer to learners and widened the range of courses available.
- Major capital investment, to improve the overall facilities and environment provided by the Group for its learners, so they are in keeping with industry standards.
- Curriculum changes, so that they are better aligned to employment opportunities and local, regional and national skills priorities. As part of their 'apprenticeship roadmap', the introduction of five new standards in , surveying technician, lead engineering maintenance technician, countryside ranger, landscape supervisor and healthcare science associate.

Key corporate performance indicators are agreed with the board, and these are monitored and reviewed in the first instance by each of the relevant sub-committees and by the Board.

Selected comments made during review:

We had mature internal debate with two or three governors, challenging the senior team, how would you respond to various scenarios.

We had external reports and due diligence.

Members of the Local Boards attend the strategy sessions. Local Board focus on Education.

We cannot divorce governance from the college. The values and vision are driven by leadership.

Board supported Executive Team throughout mergers and rebranding.

Education Leaders at local level don't have to deal with money.

The things that make governance work are, we have open dialogue and engage formally.

The Local Boards work well when the Chair understands the EKC Group.

Meetings with Executive to triangulate what is going on.

Organisation is large, bottom-up information is important so that main board can be reassured.

Delivering excellence and improving the opportunities for all learners in East Kent, having the right courses and resources and facilities for learners

The Group should have on the horizon where the academies and schools are going to fit in to the future.

There is a strong leadership team in place within the college.

Do we need to continue growing as a college?

New governors are taken through how the structure works and what the college is trying to achieve.

Strategy day was scary with up to 70 people, different types of questions were welcomed.

Student Governor impressive and asked some direct questions.

Huge fan of the senior team. Strategic plans well thought through, and front and centre students were a priority.

There was always an explanation for governors about the process that they are going through.

Recommendation 1: *The Executive Team should continue its current good practice of conducting a regular cycle of independent research on social and economic needs, to inform strategic debate and decisions by the board.*

3.2 Board Composition & Structures

There is a main board which is supported by committees and working groups as follows:

- Main Board meets 4 times per year and has 16 members (inc. chair) and staff and student and CEO.
- Search and Governance, meets 2 times per year, 3 members, chair, and CEO.
- Remuneration meets 1 per year, 3 members and chair.
- Education meets 3 times per year and has 7 members and CEO and staff.
- Business, meets 3 times per year and has 4 members and CEO and staff.
- Audit meets 3 times per year and has 4 members.
- 6 Local Boards who meet 3 times a year.

The Board has been refreshed with new members over the last couple of years, with personal and professional constraints resulting in some board members stepping down.

In the event of poor attendance and the lack of engagement, this is picked up by the Chair and Group Governance Director, to ensure no one slips through the net. The appropriate support is provided for governors that may be going through personal and or professional challenges. The wellbeing of the Board is given priority, and the appropriate support put in place.

The size of the board works well and the interlocking nature of the Local Board with a primary focus of Education and understanding community needs works well. The Local Boards do not have the distraction of other matters, for example finance and or estates. There is likely to be continuing healthy tension between the focus on local educational needs and the wider Group financial and other constraints. The main board representation at a local level, has helped to raise awareness and provide the wider EKC Group consistency and drive in strategy.

The target for governor attendance in the academic year ending (July 2023) is 85%, attendance at Board and Committee meetings for the academic year 2022/2023 was 87.8%.

Most governors are involved in a minimum of two committees or working groups. Board meetings can be up to 2.5 hours, and very well structured and managed, all governors were pleased with support they received from both the Executive Team and Governance Professional, to support the decision-making processes.

The board has a very good spread of skills and experience, which has worked extremely well to support the Executive Team through a major transformational program. There has been a good balance of both new and old governors, and this has been critical to sustaining its continued growth and improvements. With an emphasis on 'local needs', at the heart, strengthened by the main board representation, learning across the group and financial sustainability, the model is effective and demonstrates local community accountability.

The EKC Group has expanded its geographical area, range of learners and core activities quite considerably over the last 5 years. With increased devolution likely and local accountability becoming a much more prominent feature within the skills and regeneration arena, ensuring the Group continues to have a governance structure that supports its ambitions will be important.

The structures and reporting mechanisms of the Board's committees are working well. There is good relationship between the Chair/Governance Professional and committee chairs. The chair engages with committee chairs outside of formal board meetings where necessary and conducts individual appraisals with each of the members. The Group does not have a vice-chair currently but may need to consider this option moving forward as part of succession planning.

There does not appear to be a clear understanding of the succession planning process for the Chair amongst all governors. It is important that there is a transparent and objective process that is understood by all governors.

Selected comments made during review:

Local boards are about delivery of the group structure and group strategy and mission interpreted at a local level.

Chairs of the local boards come with a constituency as representing the local.

Keep delegated authority of local boards continually under review.

The Board engages and challenges outside of board meetings.

Love the fact that Education is being looked after through the local boards.

We have a balanced group of board members with broad skills.

We should have been thinking about succession planning.

EKC Board is polished but needs to have the right level of support and senior management.

Due to the size of the organisation, that sense of belonging sometimes difficult.

Recommendation 2:

The review of the scheme of delegation to ensure that it continues to reflect the level of scrutiny and accountability required by the Local Boards. The perceived lack of empowerment by some Local Boards, will inevitably continue to provide that healthy tension within the Group.

Recommendation 3:

All governors should clearly understand the process for, and progress of, succession planning for key Board roles.

Recommendation 4:

Th Board to consider the appointment of vice-chair roles, to build capacity within the Group, this may be focused on the Main Board initially, but could also apply to the other committees.

3.3 Effective Behaviours, Culture, Values & Inclusivity

All Governors are engaging and will ask questions. There is rich spread of views and experiences which is evident from the broad ranging discussions. There is no sense of a core group within the board, but more of a collective of board members with a common purpose that is understood by all. There is healthy debate and a very strong sense of corporate accountability. The Executive team respond well to questions and are genuinely open to challenge. The board acknowledges good practice and commends the Executive team on their achievements.

Governors abide by the principle of collective decision-making and stand by decisions of the Board, there is a sense of corporate accountability. There are clear examples of this in relation to curriculum development and initial concerns about mergers, which were debated at length with the board standing behind decisions once they had been taken.

Governors fully utilise their professional expertise within the EKC Group.

Governors are clearly guided and work within the Nolan Principles for service in public life. The Group's values are clearly embraced and understood by all governors.

There were several examples given:

- Governors with professional experience were able to raise questions and support the Executive Team, this helped with decisions on capital investment in facilities and site improvements.
- Governors' attendance at different learner events, across different sites, is an intentional strategy, and has helped them to demonstrate their commitment, and contribute their skills and insights more effectively to each local area.

The Governance Professional leads on the induction process for new governors. There is standard formal presentation, which covers all aspects of governance, roles, and responsibilities, EKC Group priorities. The diversity of the Board continues to be a key priority for the Board, which is reviewed by the governance professional on an annual basis.

There is healthy debate between governors and staff on a range of issues. There was clear respect for all contributions and the chairs of committees actively encouraged debate between governors and the Executive team. Some meetings were 'hybrid', which worked well. However, the Chair and board are supportive of in-person meetings whenever this is possible.

The volume of paperwork was raised as an issue, but equally board members were pleased with summary sheets and the consistency in presentation. The effective management of meetings by the CEO and Chair has helped to carefully navigate items that require rather longer for debate, whilst providing assurance for items that have perhaps gone through several committees.

The Governance Professional invites governors to a range of internal and external events, which are also well attended by governors.

Selected comments made during review:

CEO is very good at bringing people along. Some colleges were not happy with some of his decisions but came round.

Meetings held in different locations to show commitment to other sites.

Governors are visible at all sites.

We used to have a governor who used to say no to whatever was proposed, without giving an alternative, that person is no longer on the board. We do not have those issues now.

Building an organisation around people.

Succession Planning for CEO role, creating assistant roles.

We have a very diverse board.

Recommendation 5:

Continue to encourage governors to take advantage of the informal events organised by the Governance Professional and engage in range of student events across college.

3.4 Performance Management & Quality

There is an extremely good relationship between the Governance Professional, Board, and Executive leadership team. There are high level KPIs agreed with the Board, and these are discussed within each of the committees. The Local Boards and the chairs of committees provide feedback on their meetings to the board.

There are regular meetings between the principal and chair, and the chair meets on a weekly basis with the Governance Professional for updates and discussions concerning the effective Governance of the Group. Each of the governors is monitored for their attendance, professional development, and engagement with EKC. Key objectives and performance measures are agreed for all senior postholders.

Selected comments made during review:

Local Boards feed information into Group curriculum planning.

Could local data be more effectively analysed at Group level and therefore help to inform our decisions.

Scenario planning discussed in detail, not just financial but also student numbers.

What would be best for EKC Group after all, would it be a market in terms of vocational areas.

Proud of Learner outcomes.

Students are asked what their aspirations/destinations, also questions about pastoral care, that gets fed back into the main college board.

Extended period of counselling to six periods of counselling, following consultation with leadership.

3.5 Internal Controls & Risk Management

The review of risk management and internal controls is the function of the Audit committee. The Board receives an update of the key risks and the mitigation measures for discussion and approval. The Board monitors the Board Assurance and Risk Management Framework throughout the year to satisfy itself that risks are being actively managed.

Based on the profiles and contributions of the governors witnessed, the audit committee is highly experienced, and robustly reviews the risks to assure itself that the Executive leadership team is taking the appropriate actions. This committee was not observed as part of the schedule of meetings.

Selected comments made during review:

Continue to review delegated powers of Local Boards. They sometimes feel disempowered without the responsibility for finances.

Finance and Audit staff are longstanding and therefore provide answers to the questions from the committee.

CEO has good understanding of the accounting structures.

Group went through turbulent period, having external board experience at Partner level, helped to understand what the auditors would be prepared to accept, so no issues of 'going concern'.

Executive will raise issues outside of normal business/meeting cycle if they consider appropriate. For example, whistleblowing incident the appropriate people were informed.

Chairs report on any issues of each committee.

3.6 Stakeholder Relationships

Governors are aware of the key stakeholders and engage with them through the strategic days, which are organised by the Group. The Executive team, CEO and Chair regularly engage with key strategic partners and feedback to the main board. As a paid chair he has been able to provide extensive support to the Executive team at various events.

External stakeholders play a key role in presenting to the Board as part of the strategy day. This provides the Board with the opportunity to triangulate the management information being presented by its own team. There is ongoing dialogue with a range of agencies throughout the year, this provides the board with further opportunity to challenge, scrutinize and reaffirm its strategic priorities.

Selected comments made during review:

Local boards provide that local knowledge which is important to the EKC Group strategy.

We need to ensure we have the support of local stakeholder groups.

Recommendation 6:

To consider utilising local boards as a pipeline for future board appointments.

3.7 Board Meetings

This review included the observation of one Corporation meeting on 12th December 2023 at the Yarrow Hotel, Sir Alfred Yarrow Room. The agenda was full and structured items under the general headings as follows:

- Chair's Report
- CEO's Report

- Group Director of Governance Report
- Strategic Plan
- Annual Report and Financial Statements
- Annual Audit Committee Report
- Annual Safeguarding Report
- Annual Remuneration Statement
- Annual Report on Health and Safety
- Staff Disciplinary Policy
- Group Self-Assessment Report
- Education CPIs 2023-24
- Minutes of Committee Meetings

The agenda usefully focuses on issues of a similar nature. The agenda was timed to allow for important items of business to be discussed for longer if required. Board papers were circulated to the board on time. There is consistency in presentation of reports, with clear actions and decisions required by the board.

There was healthy debate and questioning throughout the meeting, and all board members engaged in the meeting. The student governor is exceptional and is supported by the governance professional and chair of governors outside of meetings. There were 24 staff and governors in attendance. Chair feedback to the board on key meetings attended, for example AOC conference and a parliamentary event. He reported that the Group has been shortlisted for the governance beacon award.

A very interesting discussion about the possibility of bidding for teaching license, CEO did not shut down the discussion, but left it open for board consideration at a later stage. An example of the board and Executive team working together to explore opportunities for the Group.

The board also had an interesting discussion about the introduction of T Levels, and unlikely event of A levels ever being got rid of. The debate demonstrated a clear understanding between staff and board about the national and political context in which they were having to work. The student governor raised concerns about the impact of any changes on 'lower income learners, further evidence of the importance of 'lived experience', informing debate and decisions made by the Group.

Governors are expected to attend in-person for main board meetings, however, in some exceptional cases remote attendance was available.

Selected comments made during review:

'Review of scheme of delegation', particularly in relation to Local Boards.

Recommendation 7:

Consider posing discussion points and/or questions for key agenda items.

3.8 The Chair

The Chair of the Group is very well respected within the Group. He is professional with his engagement and demonstrates extensive knowledge and experience of Further Education and governance. He is inclusive in his approach, but also decisive in manner, summarising key issues and reflecting the tone of debates and key decisions.

The Chair has a professional relationship with the CEO and Governance Professional, which makes for the very smooth running of meetings. A genuine, heartfelt commitment to community and learners, which is completely aligned to the leadership of the CEO and wider executive team. Debate and challenge are encouraged, but with the primary focus on impact on learners.

As the Board considers its succession planning, it is important to consider the currency and relevance of skills required as the Group moves forward and continues to develop. The current chair is paid and has therefore been able to devote a lot of time to the Group. A future Chair may or may not be paid, based on the agreement of the board but whatever the decision, this will inevitably impact on the type of person likely to take up the role. Given the likely changes within the Executive team, it is important for the board to carefully consider the relative timing of such changes within the Board and Executive Team.

Selected comments made during review:

The chair encourages debate and is inclusive.

The chair engages with board members outside of board meetings.

The chair conducts monthly meetings with the CEO and Director of Governance.

The chair conducts annual review meetings with each governor.

The chair engages in a wide range of events and meetings with key stakeholders and partners.

Chair and Governance Professional work well together.

CEO/Governance Professional/Chair work well together.

3.9 Board Support & Information

The Governance Professional is well respected within the Group. The Group has recently appointed an officer to provide support for the Governance Professional. The GP has extensive experience and has worked with the board through a long period of transformational change at all levels within the Group.

There is very structured and well-presented framework for the identification of skills needs required within the board, recruiting and selection of board members, and finally a formal structure of induction and professional development support. Governors commented on the support they receive from the Governance Professional, advice, induction training and her support during merger process.

Extensive training and information sessions are offered to the governors, either internally with the support of the Executive team or internally with the Association of Colleges or Education Training Foundation. Governors are encouraged to engage with the Executive team, and this has clearly helped to build a rich and productive relationship across the organisation.

Governor's training and support needs are identified primarily by the chair as part of the review process; however, the Governance Professional has ongoing dialogue with all governors and makes them aware of any opportunities for professional development on offer.

Board papers are very well presented, in a consistent manner which enables governors to identify the key issues very quickly and what is expected of them. The Executive team are open to discussions and engagement outside of formal meetings and once again board has found this extremely helpful.

The Board annual strategy meetings are very well organised, and governors find them quite enriching with information. Local Board representation is felt to be extremely helpful, although the size of the group is a little overwhelming for some governors as it is difficult to build key relationships with so many participants. Nevertheless, all governors expressed their gratitude for the strategy sessions, as this gave them the opportunity to engage on important issues for East Kent, in a safe environment and with a range of external stakeholders contributing to the session.

Finally, the Group provides all new governors with a comprehensive outline of its expectations in terms of roles and responsibilities from the outset. A detailed framework of induction, support, and expectations, sets the context for a professional relationship, and one which is very engaging.

Recommendation 8:

Continue to monitor, promote and encourage governor participation in development programmes to improve understanding of FE sector and college performance.

3.10 Key Recommendations

Recommendation 1:

The Executive Team should continue its current good practice of conducting a regular cycle of independent research on social and economic needs, to inform strategic debate and decisions by the board.

Recommendation 2:

The review of the scheme of delegation to ensure that it continues to reflect the level of scrutiny and accountability required by the Local Boards. The perceived lack of empowerment by some Local Boards, will inevitably continue to provide that healthy tension within the Group.

Recommendation 3:

All governors should clearly understand the process for, and progress of, succession planning for key Board roles.

Recommendation 4:

Th Board to consider the appointment of vice-chair roles, to build capacity within the Group, this may be focused on the Main Board initially, but could also apply to the other committees.

Recommendation 5:

Continue to encourage governors to take advantage of the informal events organised by the Governance Professional and engage in range of student events across college.

Recommendation 6:

To consider utilising local boards as a pipeline for future board appointments.

Recommendation 7:

Consider posing discussion points and/or questions for key agenda items.

Recommendation 8:

Continue to monitor, promote and encourage governor participation in development programmes to improve understanding of FE sector and college performance.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The EKC Group is well served by an extremely effective and impactful Board and Executive team.

There is strong leadership from the CEO, and he is supported by the Chair of Governors. The governors show a strong commitment to the East Kent region, with a bottom-up strategy for skills and economic development. The board has a broad range of skills, and they bring their 'lived and professional experiences' to support EKC Group.

The board is dynamic in its approach to governance, operates by consensus, and brings in the appropriate expertise and external stakeholders where it feels this will add value to their decision-making processes.

Throughout the review, there was concern from some board members that the achievement of 'outstanding', should not lead to complacency and that there was room for further improvements.

This strong appetite for excellence, open debate, development, focusing on learner needs, is admirable and in-keeping with the values and behaviours required for the Group to achieve an outstanding Ofsted Inspection.

A key factor moving forward, will be its ability to adequately replace key board members and staff over the next 2-3 years as part of its succession planning. There is strong confidence within the organisation, which is supported by an evidence-based strategy and a central focus on improving the learner experience and outcomes.

Having the right leadership in place, to continue that drive of excellence and the continued improvements in learner experience, will be extremely important for the East Kent region.