

The Further Education College Governor role

In the Further Education college sector in England there are some 8,000 individuals who are governors of Further Education and sixth form colleges; volunteers committed to the success of their establishment. But voluntary does not mean amateur. The governing body, together with the Principal, constitutes the highest level of decision making in the College, having overall responsibility for the strategic direction and financial health of the institution.

The College Governor

Governors are at the heart of how a college operates. They are responsible for determining what education and training it will provide and the strategy for delivering it. They also lead the drive for improved standards in teaching and learning by ensuring good control systems and challenging areas for improvement.

The governing bodies of colleges require a range of skills. Board meetings can cover a wide variety of topics ranging from the college's business strategy; quality of learning and teaching; buildings and financial investment; business model and delivery, including partnership working. Boards will also discuss recruitment and succession planning, including of the board itself, and its performance. Governors will consider performance indicators and financial information on all aspects of the College's activities and will need to be able to interpret and use this information to collectively develop a clear and comprehensive strategic plan to enable the College to achieve its aims.

Authority and accountability of the governing body

The governing body has overall responsibility for the conduct of the College, with responsibility for the day-to-day running and management resting with the Principal and Senior Management Team, who report and account to the governing body.

The governing body is responsible for the appointment and remuneration of senior staff, including the Principal.

A governing body is entrusted with a significant level of public funds and oversight of important local assets. Governors therefore have a particular duty to fulfil the highest standards of corporate governance at all times. They are accountable for ensuring effective and efficient use of resources, and safeguarding the College assets, property and estate.

The governing body's ultimate accountability is to the students and the wider community the College serves. To achieve this, the governing body must work in partnership with and support the Principal, but they must also be prepared to challenge the Principal and senior team, asking searching questions when necessary to maintain a rigorous focus on improving the standards and quality of delivery. They also need to work in partnership with the College's many key stakeholders and partners, including employers, local authorities and Local Enterprise Partnerships.

In performing these duties governors are expected to follow a Code of Conduct which has regard to the accepted standards of behaviour in public life including; leadership, selflessness, objectivity, openness, integrity, honesty and accountability. The English Colleges' Foundation Code of Governance also establishes a common set of recommended standards of good governance practice for college governing bodies.

Impact of the governing body

A consistent characteristic of any successful college is strong leadership and management. The importance of the governing body in achieving this cannot be overstated.

Governors are not there to rubber stamp decisions but are directly responsible for how the College is performing. Their importance was recently acknowledged by Vince Cable who talked of governors' "vital role in driving the strategic direction of colleges, helping to build and grow local economies, tackling the issues of skills gaps and unemployment, and supporting communities to flourish".

Quite simply, good governance is the cornerstone upon which excellent colleges are built.

“Wherever [Ofsted] find success, good leadership is behind it.”

Chief Inspector Of Ofsted

The rewards

The role of a college governor is exciting and extremely worthwhile. It provides enormous insights into the social and economic challenges facing local communities and offers opportunities for direct contact with senior people in local firms and community bodies.

Becoming a governor enables individuals to make a significant and very real contribution to the success of the college that they govern, helping the students to develop and achieve their full potential. It allows those who want to be engaged with a college to make good use of their existing skills and provide them with the training and support to develop new ones. These can include making staff appointments, financial management, chairing meetings and team and project working.

The role of a governor isn't easy and requires dedication and real commitment. A governing body typically meets five or six times a year and in addition a governor is likely to participate on sub-committees, undertake background reading and attend various events over the course of the year. Governors are rarely remunerated for their role, although expenses are available to reimburse out-of-pocket expenses for attending the various meetings and events.

The rewards of the role to the College, community and the individual are clear, and governors are supported every step of the way to ensure both they and the College benefit from their valuable contribution.