

Queen Alexandra College External Board Review, July 2022

Executive Summary

Introduction

Queen Alexandra College (QAC) is an independent specialist college located in Harborne, Birmingham. The college offers residential and day provision for students with a visual impairment, autistic spectrum disorder, physical disabilities and/or other learning difficulties and is currently graded Requires Improvement by Ofsted (March 2022). There are currently 347 students studying on day programmes and 29 students living in college residential provision. The college offers a wide range of personal development and vocational courses from pre-entry level to level 3. The college is established as a registered charity and Company Limited by Guarantee.

Following the recently published DfE interim guidance on strengthening governance, early in 2022 the board commissioned an external review of governance effectiveness to take place across the summer term so that any changes could be implemented in time for the 2022/23 academic year. The review was carried out by Shirley Collier MBE, of Shirley Collier Consulting. The approach used was based on the Charities Governance Code and a model piloted by the Association of Colleges (AoC) and Education and Training Foundation (ETF) in 2021. The methodology included a desk-based review of selected board documents such as the governing documents and Minutes; confidential surveys of governors and management staff; individual confidential discussions with board members and senior staff; and attendance at and observation of board and committee meetings.

Structures and processes

The governing documents and arrangements of the board are clear and its processes are well documented. Financial reporting is clear. In other areas, management's intention is to be transparent but it is not always clear how papers relate to strategic objectives and risk. Board members have access to a significant number of sources which are independent of management allowing them to triangulate.

Areas for development include a review of the framework for reporting, including development of committees' oversight of risk. Clarity is needed with regard to serious incident reporting. Consideration should also be given to reducing the number of board members over time, and continuing to support the development of the Governance Director in line with the requirements of the Skills Bill.

People and Attributes

The board is composed of members with a breadth of skill encompassing finance and education. There is also a mix of people who are working and those who have retired. Members have the specific skills necessary for effective strategic oversight of the college (strategic thinking, analysis and synthesis of information and communication) and the soft skills required to build constructive relationships. They also show an attitude and mindset that fosters independent thought, a commitment to the Nolan Principles and those of good governance (independence, curiosity, ethical and mission-focused) and which is open to critical reflection including of the board.

Areas for development include mechanisms for sharing information about governors' knowledge, professional contacts and networks; and consideration of co-opting more independent governors to address skills gaps without increasing the overall number of board members.

Board Culture and Governors' Interactions

The board is active in recruiting, inducting, developing and deploying of its members, though all of these "people processes" have suffered during the pandemic. There is a culture focussed on trust and relationships which may mitigate against holding management clearly to account. The Ofsted outcome has made management and governors question themselves, and risks eroding trust. There is room for more challenge.

Areas for development include a more rapid induction process and clarity of the role of committees; more opportunities for board members and College Management Team (CMT) to get to know each other post pandemic; better preparation for meetings on the part of some governors; more timely response to governors' requests by management; and confidence building for governors.

Overall Impact and Effectiveness

The evidence from the review shows that the board of QAC is proficient in some of the key effectiveness features of governance and that there is room for greater impact in others. The impact of governors and governance on the college's strategy is evident in the occasional "big decisions" such as those regarding property, though some governors feel that they are largely responsive to senior management's proposals, rather than shaping strategy themselves. All governors who responded to the survey said the board's activities have some impact on the college's achievements and that there is room for greater impact. They found it hard to identify the impact of regular monitoring and scrutiny activities. The Principal and Chief Executive, however, feels that the board's activities have considerable positive impact on the college's achievements. CMT identified challenge and support as having positive impact but some felt there was insufficient challenge due to lack of knowledge of the college's operation. Areas for development are already noted in this report with regard to strengthening these areas.

Conclusion

The governance review has found that at Queen Alexandra College governance has firm foundations and is effective. The pandemic and the March 2022 Ofsted grade have shaken governors' confidence slightly and this needs to be rebuilt. This review suggests doing so through reviewing and fine tuning the reporting framework to make clear both the bigger picture and the detail of progress in achieving strategy, at the same time as governors engaging more with each other, with staff and with students.