

Aquinas College: Review of Governance

November 2024

Introduction

This review was carried out between May and December 2024.

It focusses on the effectiveness of the governing board and its relationships with the senior management team. It should not be considered an audit of the work of the governing body.

In addition to observation of both Governing Body and Committee meetings, the process entailed examination of governing body papers and minutes of previous meetings for 2022/23, 2023/24 and 2024/25. There was also a series of one to one meetings both face to face and using Teams with members of the governing body and the management team.

In preparing this report due consideration was given to:

- The recently updated FE and Sixth Form College Corporations; governance guide (November 2024).
- The Association of Colleges' Code of Good Governance.
- The Code of Conduct for voluntary aided schools which has been developed by CES and approved by the Diocese of Shrewsbury.

The Department of Education has set out advice and guidance on external reviews of governance. This document was updated in 2021 and took into account the 6 features of effective governance as set out in the Governance Handbook. These features have been redrafted and are set out in the documents referred to above.

- Determination of aims and strategic oversight
- Responsibility and accountability
- Leadership and integrity
- Collaboration and stakeholder engagement
- Regularity compliance
- Board and organisational effectiveness

The National Governance Association was one of the organisations working with the department in the development of the guidance and has produced a series of 20 questions with guidelines which are intended to be used as a tool for governance self-evaluation. These questions have been used as a framework for this review.

It is clear that the governing board is very effective and have a significant impact on the lives of the young people who attend Aquinas College. This is evidenced by the first class performance of the college. Exam results are excellent, students enjoy a wide range of opportunities for personal development and learner satisfaction is high. The

recommendations made in this report are intended to provide suggestions for further improvements. In the observed meetings it was evident that governors were acting in accordance with the Diocesan code of conduct.

Question	Descriptor
Board Culture and Practice	

<p>1. Governance culture</p> <p>The governing board is a committed team that works well with senior leaders and the governance professional (clerk to the board).</p>	<p>Observations of meetings demonstrated that the board collaborates well with senior leaders and the clerk, and that these relationships continue outside formal meetings.</p> <p>Members of the senior management team attend meetings regularly to present papers and information and to assist governors in their understanding of the college. Papers are well prepared and detailed. Governors are expected to read them before the meeting to ensure that discussions are well informed. There are times when some of the matters being discussed become quite technical and difficult to understand. It might be useful for managers to provide a simple summary of the matters being discussed. This could be either done verbally or in writing. It would also be useful to indicate on agendas the purpose of agenda items; for example, whether something is for noting, approval, discussion.</p> <p>Other college managers are occasionally asked to attend meetings to provide briefings on their areas. It may help the board understand college operations if they were to occur more frequently.</p> <p>Meetings are well attended and quorate.</p> <p>The record of governor training records that 10 of the board carried out some form of training in 2020/21.</p> <p>There are a number of link Governors responsible for helping the board understand certain areas such as Careers, Equality and Diversity, Health and Safety, Safeguarding and Special Educational Needs. These link governors report verbally to the board and have a good understanding of their area of expertise.</p>
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	<p>It is possible that these areas might need reconsidering on a regular basis to ensure that Governors are focused on the most useful areas. It might also be useful to develop a reporting schedule with an agreed format so that there is regular consideration of these issues.</p>
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<p>2. Leadership</p> <p>The chair is elected annually, leads with integrity, is supported by a vice chair and ensures the board stays strategic and does not shy away from making the right decisions for the college.</p>	<p>The Chair is elected annually at the autumn meeting. Chairs of committees are appointed at the summer term meeting.</p> <p>In its discussions it is clear that the members of the governing body embrace the Catholic ethos of the college. Debates are centred around the well being and development of young people. They are carried out in a spirit of mutual understanding. The Catholic life of the College is celebrated and considered by governors</p> <p>Examination of minutes of meetings demonstrates that the board stays strategic and makes appropriate decisions as required. At its meeting in November 2024 there was a considerable amount of time given to the potential academisation of the college and it was resolved to schedule a single agenda item meeting to consider Aquinas' approach to this critical matter.</p> <p>The college has built up an unusually large financial reserve. Senior leaders and governors believe that, given the current financial climate, this is an appropriate strategy which will help to protect the college in the future. Governors should take the opportunity to consider whether this is the best strategy or whether the money should be used more immediately.</p>
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<p>3. Governance professional</p> <p>The college employs a dedicated governance professional with an up-to-date job description who supports the board with independent advice and guidance.</p>	<p>The College employs an independent, professional Clerk who is very well qualified and experienced. It is evident that he has the skills, knowledge and understanding required for the role. Observation of meetings demonstrates that the board listens to his advice and guidance and acts accordingly.</p>
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<p>4. Skills and diversity</p> <p>Succession is planned, the recruitment process is designed to ensure new board members are recruited to fill skills gaps and ensure diversity of knowledge, experience, perspectives and approaches.</p>	<p>The board carries out an annual review of its own performance based on a questionnaire that all members are asked to complete. This year 12 questionnaires were returned and the response was very positive (although marginally less so than last year). The review could be developed further to include a skills audit and a record of training undertaken. This would allow governors to develop an action plan to ensure that any gaps in knowledge, understanding or skills are filled. It would also inform the potential recruitment of new governors.</p> <p>Currently there are vacancies on the governing body. The board is also aware that the board lacks financial expertise and is actively searching for someone with appropriate skills. As with many colleges, there are imbalances in the ethnic and gender mix. Governors are aware of this and are taking steps to rectify the situation.</p> <p>It might be useful to consider establishing a Governance Committee which would search for new members and also regularly review the performance of the board. It would develop an action plan which would help ensure that training and development needs are met.</p> <p>The chair is highly experienced, knows the college exceedingly well and leads with integrity, purpose and in accordance with the Catholic nature of Aquinas. In addition, he is the long standing Catholic Governor representative on the Sixth Form Colleges' Association, and so has an in-depth knowledge and understanding of the sector. The board is aware that there will be challenges, if and when he decides to retire. Consideration needs to be given to the development of a succession plan.</p>
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<p>5. Induction and ongoing development</p> <p>There is a quality induction programme in place for new board members and a culture of ongoing governance training and development.</p>	<p>Discussions with some of the more recently appointed members of the governing body showed that they were a little uncertain about their role as governors and needed a little bit more explanation of the remit as well as the context and understanding of the sector.</p> <p>It would be useful to have a structured induction for members so that they can be more confident and play a full role on the board.</p> <p>Training is offered to governors on a regular basis. This is often provided as briefings by members of the leadership team.</p>
<p>6. Collaboration</p> <p>Those governing are committed to collaboration and the sharing of best practice.</p>	<p>The College collaborates with a number of other bodies. These include the Sixth Form Colleges Association (the chair is its long standing Catholic Governor representative), the Diocese, the Diocese of Shrewsbury Heads (DASH), a range of other Colleges in Greater Manchester, the Association of Catholic Colleges as well as its partner schools.</p>

Board Structure

7 Size

The governing board is the right size with a proportionate committee structure.

At the time of this review the governing body had a similar number of members as other successful sixth form colleges. There are some vacancies which the college is addressing.

The committee structure also resembled those high performing institutions. This structure allows for the consideration of matters in appropriate detail. It is recommended that a governance committee be established. The minutes of the committees are an agenda item for full governors and members are able to ask for detail and clarification. It might be useful for the clerk to provide a short, bullet point summary of matters from committees which require the attention of governors.

Chairs run the meetings in a firm but open fashion which keeps the meetings on track but also allows for clarification and debate where necessary. Individuals discuss matters in a non confrontational manner which allows decisions to be arrived in a collaborative manner.

Meetings are short, compared to many other organisations but most governors I met were content that they had time to raise any issues, make comments, ask questions and contribute to decision making.

The documentation provided by senior members of staff is professional and high quality and provides the right level of information.

<p>8 Delegation</p> <p>Committee terms of reference are up to date, are comprehensive and the work undertaken is not duplicated.</p>	<p>Committee terms of reference are up to date and comprehensive.</p> <p>Work undertaken is not duplicated unless there is a specific reason why different committees need to debate a topic from different perspectives.</p>
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Core Functions

9 Values, ethics and culture

The governing board and headteacher have agreed the school's values which are evident in policies and practice, ensure ethical behaviours and underpin a healthy culture across the college.

Observation of meetings demonstrate that the members of the governing body, the Principal and his team have a shared understanding of the principles upon which a Catholic college is based. Meetings begin with a "thought for the day" or a prayer and decisions are taken based on the values which are clearly set out in the statement of purpose, values and vision on the college website. The website also states clearly that Aquinas is a Catholic college.

The board receives regular reports on Catholic life and RE at the College.

These principles permeate all the discussions which I observed at the meetings and the conversations I had with individuals. Members of the board displayed a strong awareness of the ethical implications of their decisions and how they are communicated.

10 Vision

The governing board and headteacher have established a clear and ambitious vision which describes what the college should look like in three to five years and what pupils will achieve.

The College leadership, together with the members of the governing body have been very ambitious in establishing their vision for the future of Aquinas. This is evident in the way in the superb recent exam results, in the new building which has just been opened and in the culture of learning and respect which is apparent to visitors to the college.

They are currently considering the next phase of development, which may be academisation. In the discussions about this critical issue, governors have kept the needs of young people at the forefront of their thinking.

<p>11 Strategy</p> <p>Those governing have agreed with the headteacher a limited number of measurable strategic aims which need to be met in order for the college to achieve its vision; these aims drive the board's business.</p>	<p>Strategic aims are kept simple. They are framed in the mission and monitored in several ways:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Through the departmental quality reviews in the autumn term • Through the college self assessment report and the resulting quality improvement plan • By the committees of the governing body • By the college Joint Management Group <p>In addition there are occasional extraordinary meetings to discuss major developments. For example, a meeting has been convened to consider the college approach to academisation.</p>
<p>12 Employer responsibilities</p> <p>The governing board acknowledges its employer responsibilities and ensures the development and wellbeing of the principal.</p>	<p>The board is aware of its employer responsibilities. It uses the staff governors to gauge staff morale and views. Employment matters are considered by the Employment Committee. It is serviced by the Principal and Vice Principal.</p> <p>The college undertakes an annual staff climate survey although the results are not regularly reported to the board. In order to make sure that the governors are aware of staff morale it would be useful to establish a regular benchmarked staff climate survey and to use its results to inform actions.</p>

13 Accountability – quality of education

Those governing hold the principal to account for the quality of education, ensuring school leaders develop, implement and deliver a broad and balanced curriculum which is taught effectively.

The college has an established Teaching and Learning Committee which has the task of monitoring the quality of education provided by the college. The Assistant Principal (Curriculum and Quality) services the committee. It considers a range of data: including exam results and value added scores, student withdrawal numbers and the results of the annual quality review programme. Detailed information is provided to governors who debate its implications in depth. The annual quality reviews are attended by individual governors. These meetings consider data and actions in great depth, giving the governing body a detailed knowledge and understanding of the student experience at Aquinas.

Discussions with individual governors demonstrate that they know the college well and can confidently identify where the strengths and weaknesses are.

One area which could potentially be developed further is the introduction of a formal method of reviewing student perceptions. The college collects data about how young people perceive their experience but this is not routinely reported to the governing body.

<p>14 Accountability – financial oversight</p> <p>Those governing have sufficient understanding of how the college's funds are managed to hold the headteacher to account for the efficiency, sustainability and impact of the school's financial planning and management.</p>	<p>The responsibility for the oversight of the college use of its funds is allocated to the Resources Committee, service by the Senior Assistant Principal (Finance). Direct responsibility for the oversight of college funds is carried out by the Finance and Resources committee. This committee has recently lost a member with a great deal of financial expertise and, at the moment, has no one who can fill the vacancy. The governors are aware of this and are taking steps to recruit appropriately.</p> <p>The Assistant Principal is highly experienced and manages the finances very well. She has an in depth knowledge of her area of responsibility and provides excellent documentation for the members. As a result, discussion is well informed and takes into account the educational impact of financial decisions, as well as the cost.</p>
<p>15 Accountability – stakeholders</p> <p>Those governing know their college, engage with its stakeholders and take into account their views when making key decisions and report on their work each year.</p>	<p>The board has staff, student and parent governors as well as foundation and co-opted. The chairs of committees and the full board take advantage of their understanding to inform decisions. In this they are aided by the link governors. As suggested earlier, this could be strengthened using more structured ways of taking into account stakeholder views.</p>

Compliance	
<p>16 Statutory requirements</p> <p>Those governing are confident that the college meets all legal requirements and takes into account statutory guidance.</p>	<p>The focus of this review was not on compliance. For this reason I have not considered the statutory requirements laid upon the governing body.</p>
<p>17 Managing risk</p> <p>Those governing are involved in the identification and assessment of key strategic risks.</p>	<p>The responsibility for oversight of the college's approach to risk falls to the Audit Committee. They have approved a Risk Management Policy and developed a Risk Management Plan which is regularly reviewed. There is a detailed Risk Register which identifies key risks, their implications and controls. It is RAG rated. In addition the college has retained the use of an Internal Audit service. At its November meeting it was noted that the external auditors had identified no issues in its July 2024 report.</p> <p>It is clear that the college approach to risk management is robust and able to address any issues that may arise.</p>

Evaluation and Impact	
<p>18 Evaluation of individual contributions</p> <p>A 360° appraisal process is used to evaluate the chair's effectiveness, and the chair or vice chair reviews board members' individual contributions and effectiveness each year.</p>	<p>Each year governors carry out an individual self evaluation. An analysis of Governor attendance is also completed.</p> <p>The results of this evaluation are collated by the clerk and reported to the board. The most recent evaluation was very positive.</p>
<p>19 Evaluation of board practice</p> <p>The governing board undertakes annual self-evaluation and commissions an external evaluation every three years.</p>	<p>Individual governors carry out a self evaluation as described above. The results of this self evaluation are reported to the board and consideration is given to appropriate actions.</p> <p>They have also commissioned this review.</p>
<p>20 Evaluation of impact</p> <p>Those governing are confident that the decisions the governing board makes have led to both improved outcomes for pupils and ongoing financial stability for the college.</p>	<p>The evidence from exam results and the current financial stability of the college demonstrate clearly that this criterion has been more than met.</p>

Conclusion

The evidence I have seen demonstrates that Governing Board of Aquinas College is highly effective and efficient. The board consists of group of individuals who have a range of different skills. They work well together as a team and with senior leaders. They are completely committed to ensuring that the college continues to provide the very best educational experience and that it goes from strength to strength. They understand their role as governors and focus on the key tasks of leading and monitoring the college's strategic progress.

Together with the tremendous support of the Principal and his team they have an in depth understanding of the college. As a result they have a through understanding of the college and its students, staff and the wider community. Decisions are made which are based on evidence and a clear enthusiasm to improve.

Their work is underpinned by Catholic principles and they always act in accordance with the diocesan code of conduct.

I have identified no significant issues but I have indicated 12 matters which the governing body might consider for further development. These are not in priority order, but reflect the order in which they arise in this report.

Recommendations

That the Governing Body:

1. Asks authors of papers to provide simple explanations of complex, technical matters.
2. Ensures that the purpose of an agenda item is clearly stated on the agenda.
3. Invites college managers other than SLT to provide briefings on their areas to assist the board in understanding the operation of the college.
4. Introduces an annual, formal election of chair and vice-chair which is minuted.
5. Develops a schedule for link governors to report to the board together with a simple, agreed format for the reports.
6. Formally considers the high level of reserves held by the college.

7. Establishes a Governance Committee to review the performance of the governing body, search for new members and work to ensure that the board reflects the wider community whilst maintaining an appropriate skill set.
8. Develops a succession plan for when the current chair decides to retire from office.
9. Introduces a formal induction programme for new governors.
10. The meeting of the full governing body is supplied with a bullet point list of matters arising from the committees.
11. Receives an annual report based on the staff climate survey which is used to inform future actions.
12. Establishes a similar report based on student perceptions of their experience at Aquinas College.

Rob Peacock

December 2024