

# Lakes College West Cumbria External Board Review

## Executive Summary, May 2023

### Context for the Review

Lakes College is a medium sized college (£12m turnover) serving the Districts of Allerdale and Copeland in the West of Cumbria, with one campus located between the towns of Workington and Whitehaven covering a large geographical area. The nuclear industry including its supply chain is a significant local employer but the sub-region has twin challenges of a sparse rural population and areas of inner city type deprivation. The college offers a broad and deep range of courses, with the largest vocational areas being health and social care, engineering and construction. There is currently a renewed focus on digital under the local skills plan. The college was judged Good at its most recent inspection in 2017 and participated, in 2022, in an Ofsted pilot skills review. This was based on a full inspection with supplementary discussion and evidence request around how the college meets local need. The turnover of the college is c£12M and at the time of this review its financial health grade was Good.

The board review was commissioned in response to the new requirement under the Skills Bill 2022, at a point of relative board stability. The Chair, the Principal and the Clerk have all been in post for a significant period and their established ways of working stood them in good stead during the Covid-19 pandemic. The review was undertaken by Shirley Collier MBE who has completed similar work for 10 other FE Colleges. Her methodology included a document review; questionnaires (92% completion rate), interviews with 11 people and observation of five meetings between February and April 2023.

### Structures and processes

The board's structures and processes positively underpin its effectiveness. The cycle of business is arranged so that governor engagement in strategy development and the SAR process is maximised. The board has embraced risk management both through its development of its collective risk appetite and subsequent risk management monitoring, and through regular review of opportunities for consolidation and growth. Written papers and the graphic presentation of Key Performance Indicators allow governors to interrogate and scrutinise progress and hold management to account. The impact of strategy on students and employers is central to discussion and the college has established a student shadow board both to develop students' skills and to allow them to comment on pertinent issues. Annual conversations between the Chair and governors allow for personal contributions to be discussed and encouraged, and any issues addressed.

Areas for development were identified in several areas, though none constitutes a weakness. The board's meetings are currently hybrid, which is challenging to manage. In-person meetings would strengthen relationships could result in more contributions to debate. Some governors could increase their sources of triangulation by attending college more – for governance meetings, student events, lesson observations or learning walks. The board's evaluation of its own performance could be enhanced if governors briefly evaluated after each meeting. The separation of the Chair's appraisal from the overall self-assessment of board effectiveness could also be a benefit.

## **People and Attributes**

Board members have appropriate skills and experience, as well as a mindset and attitude, which allow them to exercise the duties of effective governance and strategic oversight. Board succession is managed well and has resulted in a cognitively diverse board with a broad range of lived experience. Governors are motivated to take on their roles through a desire to improve the quality of education locally, and find their role rewarding. Their technical/professional skills, knowledge, contacts and networks are largely utilised to the extent that the college needs them. This view is corroborated by the Principal, Executive and SLT.

Areas for development include building on the work already being done to achieve an appropriately diverse board for example considering the diversity of working group and committees, including their chairs, as well as explicitly including governors in the college's EDI Strategy. Also, chairs could summarise key points from wide ranging conversations during meetings which would highlight and emphasise governors' oversight role.

## **Board Culture and Governors' Interactions**

At Lakes College, board culture is inclusive by design. Behaviours, interactions and team based strategies allow for a diverse and inclusive culture which encourages both effective challenge and supportive collaboration. The Principal, members of the Executive and SLT and Clerk are open and readily share information and levels of trust and transparency between senior staff and governors are high. There is considerable agreement over prevailing board culture – one of care, trust and respect. Meetings at Lakes College are well chaired which is pivotal to the governance culture and to enabling governor interactions.

Possible areas for development which build on the strong foundations already in place include governors identifying and developing an area of special interest, expanding the link governor scheme, and increasing governors' social contact time with each other. The board could also consider allocating new governors to a committee immediately on appointment to facilitate their integration into the board.

## **Overall Impact and Effectiveness - Conclusions**

The Department for Education defines the core functions of a corporation board as:

- setting and communicating the college's educational character, strategy and goals
- holding executive leaders to account for the educational performance and quality of the college, and for the performance of staff
- exercising effective control to ensure that funds and assets are protected, and legal obligations are met.

The board review uses the principles of the Association of College's Code of Good Governance as the basis for reflecting on whether the board's work has translated into impact. The evidence from the review shows that the board of Lakes College is proficient in all of the key effectiveness features. The majority of governors and senior staff scored the board's impact as a strength and governors were able to articulate how their own contributions contributed to impact. A possible area for development would be for governors and the Executive to continue to discuss the impact that governance has, the value that individual contributions add to discussion and how more value could be added without spending more time on governance.

To conclude, governance is well managed and has a beneficial impact on Lakes College. In terms of risk oversight and management, the Board provides the college with one of its lines of defence. The current approach should give assurance to stakeholders that the college is managing its assets prudently and putting the student experience at the heart of its deliberations.