



**EXTERNAL GOVERNANCE
REVIEW REVIEW OF
GOVERNANCE
UNITED COLLEGES GROUP
SEPTEMBER- NOVEMBER 2025**

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Context for the External Review of Governance

United Colleges Group is a large General Further Education College formed in August 2017 by the merger of the College of North-West London and City of Westminster College. It has five campuses across London, the largest of which are in Paddington and Willesden, with other campuses at Maida Vale, Wembley and a construction skills centre at Euston. It has around 8,000 students on full-time and part-time courses and apprenticeships.

The College received its last full Ofsted inspection in December 2024, achieving a 'good' outcome for overall effectiveness, an improvement from the previous inspection, and was judged as making a 'strong' contribution to meeting skills needs. In the report, inspectors commented on governance that:

'Since the last inspection [leaders including] Governors have worked tirelessly to improve the quality of education, training and the outcomes that learners and apprentices achieve. [Leaders and] governors have good oversight of the college'

The extent to which this approach has been upheld will be commented on in this report.

The College's financial health for 2024/25 was good, however it is expecting this to fall to 'Requires Improvement' for 2025/26 due to the level of borrowing required to support the major capital redevelopment project at the Wembley and Willesden campuses.

The Chief Executive Officer/Group Principal has been in post since November 2022 and is supported by a solid senior management team. The Director of Governance is highly experienced, well thought of by the Board and prominent in the sector.

The chairing of the Board has changed since the last governance review in 2022-23 and the background, approach and practice of the new Chair is strongly valued by other Board members.

The Corporation self-assesses its performance annually and graded itself as 'Good' in summer 2025.

This is the second external governance review undertaken by the Board since the inception of required tri-ennial reviews introduced by the Department for Education in 2022. As a result, the review includes some reflections on progress since the last review alongside the current arrangements observed.

1.2 Methodology and Approach

This review was commissioned in summer 2025, and undertaken between September and November, with initial outcomes shared verbally on 1 December for feedback with the Chair, CEO/ Group Principal and Director of Governance, with the final draft report outcomes agreed to be presented to the Board on 17 January 2026 at a Governor Development and Strategy Day.

The scope meets the requirements of the Department for Education Guide on External Governance Reviews in Further Education and the Post 16 Education and Skills Act. Through discussion with the Chair, CEO/Group Principal and Director of Governance, it was agreed that progress since the last review should be considered.

The methodology included a review of key documentation, review of the Board's recent own online survey (largely using the same questions as the standard Rockborn survey but with some slight differences), the Governor Improvement Plan and Skills Audit, conversations with the Director of Governance, observation of all committee meetings and a Board meeting during the timeframe of the review and individual meetings with the Chair, committee Chairs, staff and student governors, the CEO/Group Principal and members of the senior leadership team. This approach enabled us to develop a comprehensive picture of the College and its governance and to check and triangulate our findings as we proceeded.

The review considered previous compliance with the sector Code of Good Governance and other governance improvement activities as part of its work. Details of the scope of the review and the activities undertaken are contained in Appendix 1.

Rockborn would like to thank Franklin Asante, Chair, Stephen Davis, CEO/Group Principal and members of the UCG Board and Executive Team for their time and cooperation with the review. Particular thanks go to Zoë Lawrence, Director of Governance, for providing us with the information we requested, coordinating meetings and responding to our questions promptly to support the smooth running of the process.

1.3 Response to previous review recommendations

The governance review in 22-23 made a series of recommendations as set out below. These have largely been addressed since that time in governance improvement plans. A number of issues are ongoing and where this is the case, they continue to receive attention and have not been set aside.

Previous Recommendation	Update
<p>Encourage all governors to be more involved in college engagement activities and student events</p> <p>Expand the link governor scheme and develop a possible link governor reporting template</p> <p>Maximise opportunities for governor involvement in external engagement activities and to utilise these external activities</p>	<p>Governors attend 'coffee mornings' with a group of students and the Vice Principal and are also invited to and attend other student events and awards.</p> <p>The Link Governor Scheme has been expanded to include Link Governors for Apprenticeships and Finance.</p> <p>A reporting template for governors to feedback on college engagement activities has been implemented and these are included on the Corporation meeting agendas at the end of each term. The Governance and Search Committee continues to work to increase governor engagement and monitors this.</p>
<p>Implement a Student Engagement Plan, prioritising support to student governors, enabling them fully to engage</p>	<p>There is strong evidence of support for student governors with both student governors commenting on their good induction, the excellent support from the Director of Governance and the positive welcome from other governors. The Board recognises that more work is needed in this area and ongoing discussions about student engagement will continue. This area can need constant attention given annual changes in student governor appointments.</p>
<p>Implement 'quick wins' to further streamline committee and Board meetings - a 'taken as read' reporting protocol in meetings from the Executive, further refine reports and identify attendees at meetings by role and job title in the minutes.</p>	<p>These points were actioned at the time, including the development of the report template and training for report writers. This report suggests some further work which may be of benefit in relation to reporting in meetings and some further refinement to report writing to assist governor understanding of the 'ask'.</p>

Continued overleaf.

Previous Recommendation	Update
<p>Enhance self-assessment and review processes to draw out the impact of governance against areas of strategic focus, resulting in an annual governance improvement and action plan.</p>	<p>There has been strong work in this area, enabling a clear focus on areas of improvement in governance.</p>
<p>Continue to promote the diversity balance in the Board membership.</p>	<p>This has received regular consideration, although more recently the primary focus has been seeking certain skills needs. Nonetheless, there is a creditable 55% female and 33% ethnic diverse membership of the Board. Good work has been done and no doubt will continue.</p>
<p>Ensure consistent understanding of governors of the new strategic risk register and risk management processes.</p>	<p>This has received attention and a session on the risk process was provided at a Governor Development Day. Further comments about the area of risk are made later in this report.</p>

1.4 Survey outcomes

17 respondents (governors) responded to the College's survey, conducted in May 2025. It was agreed at the commencement of this Review that as the survey had been conducted very recently and most of the questions were either identical or very similar to those used in the standard Rockborn survey, that the data from this could be used and not trouble the governors with a repeat of more or less the same questioning only a very short time later. Outcomes will be referred to throughout the report where relevant. Compared to the benchmarking data that we have compiled from the EGRs that we have undertaken, UCG's scores were roughly on average for most of the 'indicators of good governance' questions, only differing by relatively small percentage points. The only exception to this was in the area of engagement with students and the understanding of their needs where the College score was lower than would be expected given the mechanisms in place. This is dealt with later in the report.

A comparison table of UCG survey scores is provided in Appendix 2.

1.5 United Colleges Group Governance Structure

The Corporation operates a 'traditional' committee model with a Corporation supported by the standard committees expected in a college and, additionally, a Property & Infrastructure Committee. The meetings calendar for 2025-26 comprises:

- **Corporation, 4 times a year** (October, December, March, July)
- **Audit Committee, 4 times a year** (October, December (jointly with Finance and Resources Committee), March and June).
- **Finance and Resources Committee, 4 times a year** (September, December (jointly with Audit Committee), March and June).
- **Governance, Search and Remuneration Committee, 3 times a year** (September, March, June)
- **Property & Infrastructure Committee, 4 times a year** (September, November, February, May)
- **Teaching, Learning and Skills Committee, 4 times a year** (November, January, March and June).

The Corporation also has two scheduled Away Days, in January and in May. The number, type and frequency of Corporation and Committee meetings is supported by a clear schedule of business.

1.5.1 Committee terms of reference

The Corporation's Committees have some appropriate delegated authority, making recommendations to the Corporation and can approve certain policies. Committees report into the Corporation via their minutes. Much of the core, detailed work of the Corporation is carried out by the committees.

The Property & Infrastructure Committee is a temporary committee introduced in 2020 to enable more focus to be given to the large capital redevelopment scheme. This is an appropriate development for governance oversight. It is likely that the Committee will be disbanded once the project is complete.

1.5.2 Composition of the Corporation

The Corporation currently has a designated composition of 18 governors, comprising 13 'independent' governors, the CEO/Group Principal, two Staff Governors and two Student Governors. In addition, there are three co-opted members who sit on either the Audit or Property & Infrastructure Committees. At the start of the review, there was a vacancy for a staff governor and a student governor, which were both filled by mid-October. A new independent governor was also appointed in October, to serve on the Audit Committee.

The Corporation has well-established members. The Chair and Vice Chair will be reaching the end of their second terms of office as governors in the next 12 months or so. Succession planning is a priority here and it is understood this is about to be actively considered in Spring 26.

Governors serve a four-year term of office, with recommendations for reappointment for a second term being considered and made by the Governance, Search and Remuneration Committee for Corporation approval. There are no governors who have been appointed currently to serve beyond two terms.

SECTION 2

THE ROLE AND DUTIES OF CHARITY TRUSTEES AND FE GOVERNORS

2. THE ROLE AND DUTIES OF CHARITY TRUSTEES AND FE GOVERNORS

2.1 Overall Compliance

a. Summary of highlights

Governors have a good understanding of their role and responsibilities, including the governance/management divide led by a respected Chair and supported and led by a highly proficient and experienced Director of Governance.

In response to the survey, 53% of governors strongly agreed and 47% agreed with the statement 'Governors understand their roles and responsibilities'. This view was supported by both governors and senior staff in discussion.

Governors are provided with regular briefings and training to keep them up to date with changes in and updates to the regulatory and policy framework for Colleges and Further Education Governance, and comply with Department for Education (DfE) guidance, including Conditions of Funding, the Financial Handbook and as a consequence, Managing Public Money requirements.

The Corporation has engaged fully with the duties placed on Governing Bodies to ensure that college provision meets local skills needs. As Ofsted observed in its recent inspection, the college's response to meeting skills needs is 'strong' and the actions taken by leaders to strengthen and establish strong links with stakeholders was recognised. There has been increased engagement with a wide range of stakeholders and an extensive curriculum offer aligning exceptionally well with skills priorities of the locality, pan-London and nationally. In its recent survey, however, a small number of governors considered that they did not understand how the college meets local skills needs and the survey also included comments from governors about the potential benefit of reporting on local skills needs more explicitly to the Board. Further briefings on this aspect, particularly for those Governors not involved in the TLS Committee may be of benefit.

Governors' roles and responsibilities are set out in the Instrument and Articles of Government, the Standing Orders and Committee Terms of Reference, which are regularly reviewed and updated as needed. The Standing Orders document is a particular example of good practice.

The role, responsibilities and expectations of governors, chair, vice chair, committee chair are set out in a clear role descriptions. All new governors are provided with a detailed induction into their role, statutory duties and expectations of the Nolan Principles of Public life. New governors are also required to sign the governor Code of Conduct (Eversheds model) and to abide by it for the duration of their appointment.

The register of interests, eligibility and code of conduct forms are signed and updated by governors annually. All governors on appointment complete a 'composition of the Corporation' form (EDI) and GDPR permissions forms.

2.2 Key Statutory Duties and Responsibilities

2.2.1 Determination of the Educational Character, Mission and Vision of the Institution

a. Survey responses

“Governors maintain a strong focus on strategy”

88% either agree or strongly agree.

“The balance between strategy and oversight at meetings is appropriate”

82% either agree or strongly agree

“Governors understand how the college meets local skills needs”.

88% either agree or strongly agree

The majority of Governors are clearly satisfied with the current balance between strategy and operational review. However, in the summer survey, some governors identified that they wished to see a greater focus on strategy and asked that this aspect should be given more time. The ‘Strategy’ days during the year are a clear opportunity for this which should continue to be carefully planned and utilised to fulfil this purpose.

b. Summary of highlights

- There is a good approach to reporting on progress through the use of a Balanced Scorecard which explicitly underpins the Strategic Plan and deliberately puts student outcomes and experience at the start. The balanced score card includes SMART metrics for each area of Strategic Focus and these feed into the Senior Post Holder objectives which then cascade within the organisation. The Balanced Score Card and risk register include external benchmarks as comparators wherever possible, which is good practice.
- There is a strong practice of providing regular and clear reporting of performance, benchmarking against other similar institutions which governors were seen to test and understand in their meetings.

c. Commentary

The Corporation and Executive have a positive approach to both strategic planning and oversight. There is recognition that the Board is currently governing during a pivotal time in delivering the final agreements and contracts for a significant capital redevelopment scheme and ensuring that all funding is secured.

The College has a strong and clear overall risk policy, including risk appetite well addressed. The Risk Register as currently constituted is understandably dominated by the risks associated with the redevelopment scheme. Given recent positive assurance regarding scheme financing it would be appropriate to review other elements, though we accept this may already be in hand.

The Corporation has taken the formal decision to proceed with the major development scheme. There remains a risk that there may be yet unknown elements which could impede progress. This scenario has been recognised by the Property and Infrastructure Committee which has contemplated alternative options and developed a 'Plan B' should the worst happen. It is suggested that this could be formally recorded within the Strategic Risk Register at its next review.

2.2.2 Quality of Teaching, Learning and the Student Experience

a. Summary of Highlights

The quality of teaching, learning and the student experience underpins all governance business. Performance is measured against Balanced Score Card targets, national benchmarks and data from previous years and this work by governors is strong, especially through the Teaching, Learning and Skills Committee. However, as stated elsewhere, this was not so evident across discussion at Board level at the meeting observed although this is recognised to have been as a result of pressure on time caused by the required decision-making concerning the capital redevelopment scheme. There are, nonetheless, other specific opportunities provided to all governors to focus regularly on quality issues in the annual cycle which includes strategy events with a specific focus on quality and governors are clearly involved in Self-Assessment Review validation meetings and regular monitoring of the Quality Improvement Plan. Some Governors however, did comment that the capital scheme had been the primary focus on other occasions and therefore the Board will wish to maintain a watching brief on the balance of time spent at main Board meetings between the capital programme and other business.

The mechanisms for engagement with the student experience aren't recognised fully by all governors, with almost half commenting in the recent survey in summer 25 that they didn't consider they understood student needs, although this is planned to be given more attention at the forthcoming Strategy Day.

“Governors understand the strengths and weaknesses of teaching and learning and student experience.” All governors agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. This should be juxtaposed against the question – “Governors engage regularly with students and understand their needs” where 47% of governors disagreed with this statement. This view may well emanate from the external pressures on some governors’ time, although there has been good attendance lately at the events organised to meet with students since May when the survey was completed. The Board will wish to revisit this element to assess progress made at the next review.

“Overall, the balance between the focus on finance and resources and curriculum, quality and students at meetings is appropriate.” Most governors either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, however 18% considered the balance wasn't appropriate, which may underline comments made above.

b. Commentary

There are good link governor arrangements in place which work well, covering most of the areas which are recommended and several links to the curriculum are not with members of the Teaching, Learning and Skills Committee including HR, Finance and IT. Link governors also provide written reports back to the Corporation thus broadening governor knowledge. However, it has been a recent DfE recommendation that a link governor for the area of Careers be established and so this is suggested be added to the group of link activities.

2.2.3 Ensuring the efficient and effective use of resources, the solvency of the Institution and safeguarding assets

a. Summary of Highlights

The Board of Governors provides robust oversight of finance, and input into financial planning. In the survey, All governors agreed that “Governors have a strong oversight of finance and resources”.

b. Commentary

Under the stewardship of the Board, financial performance is regularly and carefully monitored. Financial health was ‘requires improvement’ in 23-24, meets the criteria for ‘good’ for 24-25 though it is anticipated that financial health for 2025/26 will be ‘Requires Improvement’ due to the level of borrowing to support the capital redevelopment scheme.

The Chair of the college recognises that the capital project is the college’s single biggest risk. The fact that there is significant finance and accountancy expertise on the Board is helpful in that respect. It is also helpful that the project’s complexity has now been simplified and summarised for the benefit of all governors (see below).

i: Finance and Resources

The Chair of the Finance and Resources Committee (FRC) provides a very strong lead for the college on financial oversight. There is good crossover of membership between this committee and that of the Property & Infrastructure Committee.

The FRC provides additional financial assurance to the Corporation to that of the P&I Committee in considering the wider financial implications of capital project on the college. Governors can be reassured that the time spent in committee on other key areas in the scope of FRC such as Human Resources and staff EDI data are not at the expense of financial oversight more generally and the capital project specifically.

The Corporation has a considerable number of governors with financial qualifications and backgrounds. Having the breadth of this experience is a helpful situation given the current major financial commitment decisions facing the Board. However, in its forthcoming appointments, the Board should, as planned seek to ensure that a balance of skills is maintained.

The Finance and Resources Committee membership includes governors with a range of financial and other relevant experience. At the meeting observed, there was evidence of strong scrutiny and challenge. FRC Committee members should continue not only to provide strong oversight of finance and resources but also to identify when there might be a need to accept arguments that might challenge a prevailing approach.

The argument that an investment in teacher pay was needed at the beginning of 2023/24 is a good example of that, even though the college had to accept an operational deficit for a period as a consequence.

ii. Audit

The Corporation's Audit Committee is chaired by an experienced governor with a strong risk management background. The Committee receives regular reports from the Internal Audit Service and there was substantial consideration of the reports presented, with extensive discussion taking place at the meeting observed. The Internal Audit Plan is linked to a review of the college's risk profile within the audit universe. There is regular reporting, including nil reporting of any whistleblowing or fraud.

The statement that "The Audit Committee provides effective oversight and assurance on internal controls, risk management and corporate governance" was agreed by all survey respondents.

Areas for consideration

- Audit is a key committee for the college. The new Chair who recently stepped up to chair the committee will want to assure himself - working closely with the Director of Governance - that the scope of the committee and its operation is clear and effective - providing leadership for its members and required assurance for the Triumvirate towards full Board. This will include consideration of issues such as quoracy, executive reporting including timeliness of paper submissions and member engagement.

iii. Property & Infrastructure

The Property & Infrastructure Committee provides oversight of the high-profile Estates Strategy and the capital redevelopment scheme. Recently the committee membership has been enhanced with strong co-options of people with experience of redevelopment schemes of a similar scale and value. It offers important review of this critical project and the Corporation Chair as a member of this committee provides a strong link for the overall Board oversight.

Governors welcomed the additional Q&A briefing provided for the capital project and would welcome similar documents to summarise complex issues in the future.

Area for consideration

- The nature of the project matters discussed in this committee can lend themselves to straying into too much operational detail and this tendency which was observed needs to be watched so that the main focus strongly stays at the strategic level.

iv. Governance, Search and Remuneration

The college operates effective governance in this area. The relevant committee functions well and is effective. The Committee Chair notably invited contributions and questions from all committee members and navigated sensitive issues at the observed committee with skill, providing support to the Executive team whilst also offering well judged – but appropriately sustained – challenge. The Committee Chair’s professional background as well as their separate role as link governor for the executive HR team is complementary and helpful.

The Committee is well positioned to offer the college valuable perspectives on EDI as it relates to the whole college (the committee chair usefully sits on FRC) as well strong leadership in relation to the current and future membership of the Corporation which is being planned.

Area for Consideration

- Whilst the GSR committee operates strategically overall the nature of the items considered can sometimes tend towards detail and they can sometimes be discussed at length – for instance in relation to targets and objectives for senior post holders which are important to be appropriately set. This detail may also be sensitive on occasion. The confidential part of the subsequent Board meeting was not observed as part of the review and so we are unable to comment on process. We would expect, however, that the committee chair should always be provided with enough time to explain to colleagues why the committee considers any proposed changes important, stepping through the requisite detail as appropriate. We are aware however that a detailed report on the matters discussed was provided by the Governance Professional to the subsequent Board meeting.

c) Senior Postholders

Oversight for matters relating to the performance, development and remuneration of the College Senior Postholders, including the CEO/Group Principal and Director of Governance is with the Governance, Search and Remuneration Committee and this works well with the other work of this committee. The Terms of Reference are compliant with the sector and charity best practice in terms of chairing and reporting and reinforce the Committee’s advisory role with all recommendations being approved by the full Corporation Board.

d) Other areas

- **Safeguarding** is recognised as a key governance responsibility. Termly safeguarding reports are received by the Teaching, Learning and Skills Committee, included in the 'Grey Box' for Corporation and an annual report is brought to the Corporation. There is a strong safeguarding link governor who is a specialist in this area and this arrangement is effective.
- **Health and Safety** is also considered to be a whole Corporation responsibility. The Audit Committee receives termly Health and Safety reports; these are included in the 'Grey Box' for Corporation and the Corporation receives an annual Health and Safety report.
- **Equality, Diversity and Inclusion** oversight is at whole Corporation level and is given good attention, with a clear EDI strategy and action plan. The College is an accredited Leader in Diversity (Gold) and sets clear performance indicators.

SECTION 3

MEMBERSHIP, RECRUITMENT AND SUCCESSION PLANNING

3. MEMBERSHIP, RECRUITMENT AND SUCCESSION PLANNING

a. Summary of highlights

- Governors bring financial acumen and good links to quality organisations in the sector.
- The skills and backgrounds on the Board brings diversity of thought, and a wider range of perspectives to be brought to the Boardroom.
- New governor recruitment is skills and values led, and processes are rigorous, transparent and equitable. There are clear targets set to maintain an ethnically diverse membership and an equitable gender split. (Current percentages are 33% ethnically diverse and 55% female). This is regularly monitored through reports to the Governance, Search and Remuneration Committee.
- Staff governor input and involvement is good.

b. Commentary

Governors and Co-opted members bring a good range of relevant skills to the Corporation Board and there are no obvious skills gaps, although there is a high proportion currently of governors with predominantly financial skills but this is offset by a near equal proportion of governors with FE sector knowledge/ teaching and learning experience.

The Corporation Board faces the loss potentially of two long-standing senior members over the next year and, with this, an amount of organisational knowledge and expertise and critically, of leadership which is a risk. This principally affects the Chair of Corporation and a Committee Chair position. This is due to be considered by the Governance, Search and Remuneration Committee in March 2026.

A few comments were received via the survey and in our one-to-one conversations that more could be done to encourage engagement from student governors, although it is recognised that the student governor who has served for the past year has been making a good contribution and the newly appointed student governor has rapidly become engaged following a strong induction. The engagement of student governors is an issue for the majority of Corporation Boards that we have worked with. The Board is considering student engagement again shortly and no doubt this will include some continued focus on student governors as part of this.

SECTION 4

GOVERNANCE PROCESSES AND PRACTICES

4. GOVERNANCE PROCESSES AND PRACTICES

a. Summary of highlights

There is a well-functioning ‘triumvirate’ of Director of Governance, CEO/Group Principal and Chair, with strong communication between all three parties facilitating governance processes.

The contribution and leadership of the current Chair is highly regarded.

Governors are strongly committed to the college and there are good levels of engagement with purposeful meetings of positive discussion and decision-making, which are facilitated by good processes and practices.

b. Overall

Meetings are well-organised, smooth running and productive. In the survey, all agreed, that “meetings run smoothly and are productive”.

Governors acknowledge that striking the right level of detail in reports is a continual challenge and both the Executive and governors, need to resist the urge to delve into operational detail both in reports and in the case of governors, in questioning. A report template is in use with a developed standard format the content of which prompts all the right questions for report writers but is not always used consistently to provide governors with an ‘at a glance’ summary of the key messages contained within the more detailed report (i.e. a ‘two minute’ read) and also clearly to articulate the ‘ask’. Consistent usage of the report format should avoid anything other than a brief introduction being necessary at the meeting itself. In some instances, the stated purpose of reports and the action required of governors needs attention as there were a few instances of reports seen which cited their purpose being ‘for information’ whereas this description was incorrect; they were for strategic consideration and decision. Care should also be taken with reporting of the key ongoing commitment to the financing plans for the major redevelopment project as these are not for information either as the ongoing commitment needs to be recorded. This is especially important as there may need to be clear minuting to show continued review and active decision-making by governors that the scheme should continue to go forward. Some development or refresh for report-writers in the use of the report template may be useful.

Having said that, efforts have been made to ensure that reports for meetings meet the needs of the audience and governors have commented on how they have improved over time. 95% of survey respondents agreed, 56% strongly that *'Papers for meetings are of a good quality and enable governors to do their job'*.

The nature of Governors' discussions is generally at the right level, although some stepping into operational matters was observed, especially at the Property & Infrastructure Committee by senior committee members - temptation to do this needs to be resisted and the focus to stay at strategic level reminded.

A timed agenda is provided as a guide for the Chair/Committee chairs. The introduction of an explicit timed agenda for all Governors is suggested as this indicates the relative intended level of discussion for all items, whilst allowing contestability and indicates to all attendees the likely shape and relative focus of a meeting. A timed agenda should of course be indicative and there should always be room for flexibility in how the meeting is operated in practice depending on preferences and developing debate by governors in the meeting itself. Experience elsewhere has shown that governors generally welcome the additional understanding indicative timings give about the intended shape of a meeting. The governance professional has provided a case why this practice has not been adopted by the Corporation to date and that this would be unlikely in the future. Nonetheless, it is suggested that the Corporation remains open to consideration.

The 'grey box' mechanism on agendas (items identified in the grey box are items for information which unless an individual requests otherwise will be taken without discussion) is used very effectively and efficiently and is a good means to ensure that time in a meeting is used well. In addition, written resolutions are used for the approval of regular existing policies following committee review, to save time at Corporation meetings.

All Executive members in their reporting to the Board and to Committees should continue to take care that they adhere to the agreed principle in meetings that they assume reports are taken as read apart from a brief presentation of the main messages and a reminder of the request being made. This allows for the meeting time, as it should, to be largely devoted to governor questioning and discussion of the issues.


In individual discussions some governors commented that they would welcome ready access to an electronic repository of key documents and past papers as a reference tool without having to trouble the Director of Governance for documents. This facility is available through SharePoint for governors who use college email but may need communicating or other means made available for others who have not chosen to have a college email.

The Committee operation generally works well, with trust by the Board in their activities and good knowledge of their work. Committee Chairs report into Board meetings verbally, making reference to the minutes of their recent meetings which are included in the 'grey box' part of the agenda. Although this practice works reasonably well, the effectiveness and consistency of this practice could be improved by a short standard written summary from the meeting.

Minutes are of an excellent quality, suitably detailing the debate and bases for decision-making and highlighting decisions and actions clearly. Their good standard is of special note. Governors are content that actions are followed through well by the Executive. There is a comprehensive and robust approach taken to governance self-assessment and as previously noted, the new AoC Further Education Code of Good Governance has been adopted in which the Director of Governance played a key national role in its development.

c. Areas for development

- Restatement of 'taken as read' protocol in presenting reports
- Careful analysis of the purpose of reports with possible need for refresher training for report writers
- Consideration of timed agendas available to all
- Reminder to all governors of the boundaries between operational and strategic
- Confirmation of mechanisms for access to governance documents.



SECTION 5

GOVERNANCE CULTURE, WORKING RELATIONSHIPS AND DYNAMICS

5. GOVERNANCE CULTURE, WORKING RELATIONSHIPS AND DYNAMICS

a. Summary of highlights

Underpinning the work of the Corporation Board, is a positive and open governance culture where support and challenge are welcomed and strong relationships, based on mutual respect and trust have been developed.

All governors agreed favourably with the following survey statements:

“Governors and senior managers understand each other’s role and work effectively together”

“There is an appropriate level of challenge and scrutiny at meetings”

“The governance/ management divide is closely observed by all”

b. Commentary

Governors are fully committed to the values and ethos of the College and they enjoy their role. New governors are made to feel welcomed and valued.

There are good levels of trust between governors and the executive, and this is considered to be fundamental to providing the Board with the assurances that it needs. During our observations, the reviewers saw plenty of evidence of constructive and respectful challenge and this is welcomed by the Executive. Governors confirm that they’re ‘not afraid to challenge’ but equally, value the expertise and dedication of their Executive colleagues. The Corporation and Committee chairs play an important role in ensuring that all governors are sensitive to the potential impact on management of any additional requests for information.

SECTION 6

THE IMPACT OF GOVERNANCE

6. THE IMPACT OF GOVERNANCE

a. Summary of highlights

Governors, the CEO/Group Principal and Director of Governance are aware of the need to demonstrate the impact of governance and there are clear examples where discussions and decisions have added value to the College.

b. Commentary

The impact of governance is evaluated through ongoing discussion and was a specific area of questioning in the most recent self-assessment and recorded through actions and decisions recorded effectively in the minutes. As part of the review, the impact of governance was explored through conversations with individual governors, and several examples were provided:

- Robust scrutiny and challenge in areas such as business planning, financial reporting, and pay award decisions.
- Genuine interest in improving student experiences although not all governors are able to give the additional time required to meet with students, but those that do welcome the opportunity to do so and there is an appetite for more opportunities.
- Critical support and challenge of college performance from experts in quality, finance and capital development.
- Examples of Governors encouraging management to think again or build stronger cases for proposals.

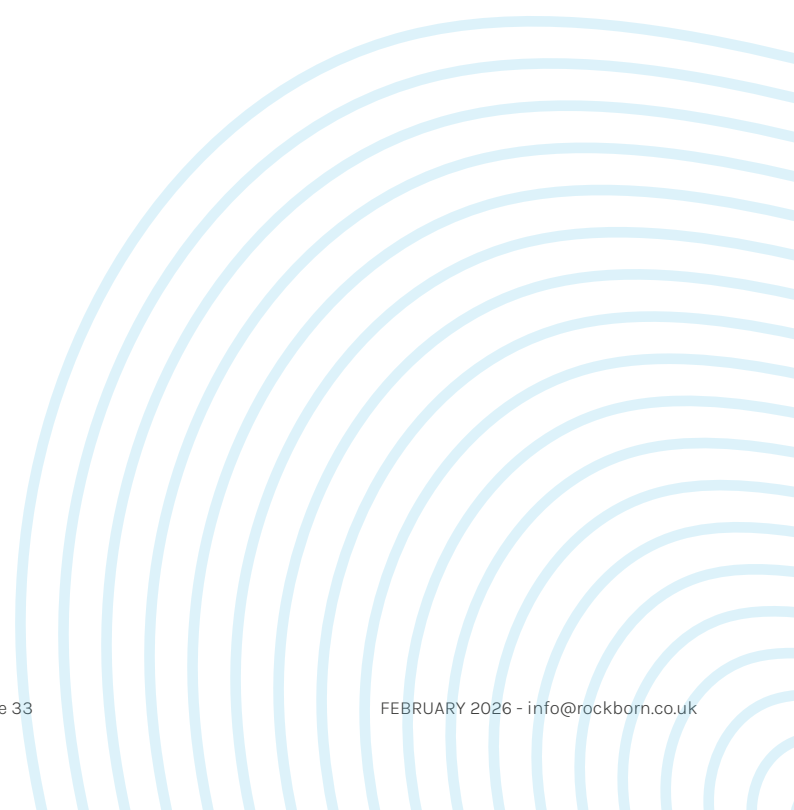
SECTION 7

THE ROLE AND INFLUENCE OF THE DIRECTOR OF GOVERNANCE

7. THE ROLE AND INFLUENCE OF THE DIRECTOR OF GOVERNANCE

The Director of Governance has been in post for seven years, is very highly thought of by all governors and has a national reputation. The question in the recent self-assessment concerning the effectiveness of the support they experience from the role is the highest positive response of all the questions asked, with 94% strongly agreeing with this statement. The Corporation should continue to invest in the ongoing development and support needs of the postholder and the amount of time given to the role. Whilst at 4 days a week, the post was at the higher end of resourcing a few years ago, the requirements of the governance role have been growing in all colleges and with the additional governance demands associated with the significant capital project, the level of support required should be kept under review.

The Director of Governance is a vital part of a 'triumvirate' of CEO/Group Principal, Chair and Governance Professional and has developed positive working relationships with other senior postholders and Committee Chairs which are highly valued. She plays a key effective role in providing good advice and planning for decision-making by the Board and its committees.



SECTION 8

GOVERNOR INDUCTION, TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

8. GOVERNOR INDUCTION, TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

a. Summary of highlights

New governors receive a comprehensive induction, including training on safeguarding, Prevent and EDI.

Governors receive regular training relevant to their role and are provided with opportunities to attend external events.

Link governor arrangements are perceived as a way for governors to tune into how well the College is providing a safe, respectful and cohesive environment in addition to the specific areas being covered. Key areas are covered by the arrangements, however the area of careers is now recommended centrally be included, as mentioned earlier.

b. Commentary

In discussion, several governors commented that, the earlier new governors can gain an understanding of how the college and FE Sector works, including education, finance and safeguarding, the earlier they can play a full part at Board meetings. In some colleges where we have conducted reviews, new governors have observed other committee meetings as part of their induction. This has been valued as a way to understand the breadth of responsibilities and it was good to see that this practice has been adopted at UCG, not just for induction but for governor development generally.

Governors also value the opportunity to undertake training remotely and flexibly so that they can fit it round their other commitments.

SECTION 9 CONCLUSIONS

9. Conclusions

Governance at UCG is strong and effective across a range of areas, (which are set out in the summary of strengths on page 16), shows visible leadership and makes a significant positive impact on the College. This has not happened by accident but is the result of a determined effort by the Chair, Director of Governance, CEO/Group Principal, Corporation and SLT to strengthen the Board's membership, strategic focus, culture and underlying processes.

SECTION 10

SUMMARY OF KEY STRENGTHS OF GOVERNANCE AT UNITED COLLEGES GROUP

10. SUMMARY OF KEY STRENGTHS OF GOVERNANCE AT UNITED COLLEGES GROUP

- There is a shared commitment to the mission, vision and values of the College and clear understanding of the local context. Strategic objectives are integrated well into governance business. Governors have strong oversight through the Balanced Score Card to achieve the College's strategic objectives.
- The Corporation has a strong and clear overall risk management policy. The risk register and the Corporation's risk appetite is reviewed regularly.
- The current Chair is highly regarded by all governors, and his influence in ensuring smooth-running and productive meetings and upholding high standards of governance are recognised.
- In conversation, many governors expressed their pride in the College, and their admiration for their governor and senior management colleagues.
- Governors are committed to the College's students and want to place learners at the centre of its decision-making.
- There is strong oversight of quality and curriculum matters at committee level and a range of opportunities for all governors to review and consider teaching, learning, skills and student matters through strategy events and annual self-assessment review meetings, together with link governor activity.
- Under the Corporation's stewardship, financial health is given close attention. Governors have a strong grasp of the college's financial position and are appropriately challenging in discussion. This is especially important given the college's current position with regard to a major capital development project.
- There is a good governance culture of appropriate support and constructive challenge, based on positive relationships, transparency, trust, mutual understanding and respect.

- The broad and diverse set of skills and knowledge on the Corporation enable a range of perspectives to be applied to oversight, support, challenge and decision making.
- EDI is strong in the college and this is actively supported through governance.
- Governors are aware of their statutory roles and responsibilities and comply with all regulatory requirements. The Corporation has adopted and complies with the AoC FE Code of Good Governance; the Director of Governance played a prominent role nationally in the authoring of this Code.
- There are rigorous and effective governance processes. These are managed well by the Director of Governance, supported by the Chair and CEO/Group Principal in an effective triumvirate.
- The Director of Governance is highly valued and supported in her role by governors and staff.

SECTION 11

AREAS FOR DEVELOPMENT / CONSIDERATION

11. AREAS FOR DEVELOPMENT/ CONSIDERATION

- Continue to ensure balance of attention re finances and teaching/learning - and proportionate strategic responses to property questions.
- Avoidance of governors getting too detailed operationally so that their focus remains principally strategic
- Carry out a refresh for the Executive and Managers on report writing to ensure that these always reflect the request being made of governors, the purpose of reports and provide a clear succinct summary of the issues.
- Ensure that time is fully available in meetings for governor discussion through Executive and Managers only providing short summaries of the issues and otherwise that reports are 'taken as read'
- Consider the introduction of explicit timed agendas for all
- Continue to offer new governors opportunities to observe other committee meetings as part of their induction.
- Introduction of a link governor for Careers

APPENDIX

APPENDIX 1

SCOPE OF AND METHODOLOGY OF THE EXTERNAL GOVERNANCE REVIEW

The following scope was agreed with United Colleges Group. It takes full account of the DfE guidance on External Reviews of Further Education Governance, first published in May 2022 and subsequently adjusted since that time.

Scope

- Discharge of roles and duties as charity trustees and FE Governors
- Board culture
- Impact of governance
- Strategy
- Equality and Diversity
- Governor membership, recruitment and induction
- Governance professional experience, and interaction between Board and Executive Team
- Governors' interactions with students and other stakeholders

In discussion, the Principal, Chair and Director of Governance were interested in gaining a view on how governance might move from 'Good' to 'Outstanding'.

In agreement with the College, the scope took into account the outcomes of the previous review undertaken in 2022-23.

Methodology and timeline

The review comprised the following activities:

Month / 2025	Task
September	Meeting with Chair, Principal/CEO and Director of Governance in commencing the review
September - November	Observation of all Committees and a Board meeting during this period
October - November	Review of constitutional documents, reports and agendas from meetings over the past year.
September - November	Individual meetings with Chair, Principal/CEO, Director of Governance, Committee Chairs, staff and student governors
December	Feedback of findings meeting with Chair, Principal/CEO and Director of Governance
Early January	Submission of draft report to the college
(17 January 2026)	Feedback to all governors at Strategy Day

APPENDIX 1

UNITED COLLEGES GROUP GOVERNOR SURVEY RESPONSES IN RECENT SELF-ASSESSMENT AND COMPARISON TO OTHER COLLEGES WHERE QUESTIONS IDENTICAL

Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements

Number of respondents: 17

		SA (4)	A (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Score	EGR ave Score*	Diff
1	Governors understand their roles and responsibilities	9 53%	8 47%	0	0	3.5 2	3.57	-0.05
2	Governors maintain a strong focus on strategy	7 41%	8 47%	2 12%	0	3.2 9	3.52	-0.23
3	Governors have strong oversight of finance and resources	10 59%	7 41%	0	0	3.5 8	3.53	+0.05
4	Governors understand the strengths and weaknesses of teaching and learning and student experience	4 24%	13 76%	0	0	3.2 3	3.23	0
5	Governors engage regularly with students and understand their needs	0	9 53%	8 47%	0	2.5 2	No equiv. Rockborn question	
6	Governors understand how the college meets local skills needs	3 18%	12 71%	2 12%	0	3.0 5	3.27	-0.22
7	Governors have strong oversight of safeguarding and understand their own role	5 29%	12 71%	0	0	3.2 9	3.57	-0.28
8	Governors lead a positive culture of equality, diversity and inclusion	7 41%	8 47%	2 12%	0	3.2 9	3.43	-0.14
9	The Audit Committee provides effective oversight and assurance on internal controls, risk management and corporate governance	9 53%	8 47%	0	0	3.5 2	3.55	+0.03
10	The Governing Body is committed to sustainability	3 22%	13 75%	1 6%	0	3.1 5	3.22	-0.07
11	The Governing Body has strong and regular oversight of risk.	11 65%	5 29%	1 6%	0	3.5 8	3.57	+0.01
12	The governance/ management divide is closely observed by all	8 47%	9 53%	0	0	3.4 7	3.38	+0.09

		SA (4)	A (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Score	EGR ave Score*	Diff
13	Governors and senior managers understand each others' role and work effectively together	7 41%	10 59%	0	0	3.4 1	3.50	-0.09
14	The Governing Body and Senior Team are effectively supported by the Director of Governance	16 94%	1 6%	0	0	3.9 4	3.64	+0.3
15	Papers for meetings are of a good quality and enable governors to do their job	9 53%	8 47%	0	0	3.5 2	3.48	+0.04
16	Meetings run smoothly and are productive	10 59%	7 41%	0	0	3.5 8	3.53	+0.03
18	There is an appropriate level of challenge and scrutiny at meetings	11 65%	6 35%	8 47%	0	3.6 4	3.44	+0.2
19	The balance between strategy and oversight at meetings is appropriate	7 41%	7 41%	3 18%	0	3.2 3	3.40	- 0.17
20	Overall, the balance between the focus on finance and resources and curriculum, quality and students at meetings is appropriate.	5 29%	9 53%	3 18%	0	3.1 1	3.39	-0.28
						3.2 3	3.44	- 0.21

*Based on all Colleges for which an EGR was conducted by Rockborn between September 2022 and July 2024.

Working with education providers to improve
strategic and operational performance

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