

External Board Review



Suffolk New College

Julie Dougill

May 2026

Executive Summary

The process set up for AoC External Board Review is based on statutory requirements set out in relevant Government legislation and as part of DfE conditions of funding. AoC has developed and updated the framework following completion of the first round Reviews that was based on the ETF/AoC pilot Review framework. The Framework considers, but is not limited to, principles from Codes of Governance, the Education Inspection Framework, Office for Students requirements and the DfE’s guidance on external board Reviews.

The objective of the Review is to identify the strengths of the organisation’s governance and where there are development needs, developing actions based on sector good practice, to bring about governance improvement.

An initial scoping meeting was held prior to commencement of the Review to outline the Review process and to identify any key areas of focus (see below). Reference is made to the outcomes of the most recent external Review and actions taken to address areas for development. Emerging findings have been discussed throughout the Review in a developmental and inclusive approach that supports College improvement and seeks to share best practice. An initial findings meeting was held prior to agreed completion of the final report to ensure factual accuracy.

The full report sets out the main findings made against the 3 Board dimensions in the Framework along with the key evidence that informs those findings.

The following table summarises the headline strengths and areas for development:

DIMENSION	STRENGTH	AREA FOR DEVELOPMENT
BOARD COMPOSITION	1.Experienced Governors with a broad and diverse range of skills and expertise, enabling strong oversight, constructive challenge, and effective support for the College.	1.Review the Co-Opted Governor model to: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ensure Co-Opted members make up no more than 30–40% of the overall Board. 2. Introduce bespoke induction sessions tailored specifically for Co-Opted Governors. 3. Strengthen safeguarding and training expectations within the Co-Opted Governor role description. 4. Review and update Standing Orders regularly to reflect any changes.
	2. The Board benefits from a wide range of perspectives, promoting meaningful discussion, constructive challenge and open sharing of different viewpoints.	2. Strengthen the formal interview process to enhance the recruitment and interview process for new Governors and Co-Opted Governors to ensure rigour, transparency and alignment with Board needs.
	3.Effective and confident Chairs across the governance structure ensuring meetings are well run, focused and contribute to strong triangulation and assurance.	3. Develop a structured approach to mapping Governors’ external networks and contacts to maximise opportunities for partnership, influence and stakeholder engagement.
	4.Positive attitude and mindset among Corporation members demonstrating a	4. As part of the self-assessment process gather feedback on the role and impact of the Chair.

	healthy governance culture and a shared commitment to the College.	
	5. Collective ambition and drive to work collaboratively with a clear sense of purpose, and ambition to support the College and deliver the best outcomes for learners.	
Board structures	1. Robust and effective governance processes and structures	1. Strengthen the executive summary in Board papers to highlight key KPIs and decisions required, improving clarity and strategic focus.
	2. Strong Committees with effective feedback loops to Corporation	2. Formalise and document the Boards risk appetite statement and review annually.
	3. Embedded risk management culture across the College with active discussion at Board and committee level.	3. As part of the self-assessment process gather wider feedback on the impact of governance from the Executive and wider Senior Management Team.
	4. The Board maintains a clear focus on long-term strategy and strategic direction, ensuring alignment with the College's vision and priorities.	4. Strengthen monitoring of long-term vision and strategy by developing a monitoring tool to track progress against long-term strategic objectives more systematically.
Board Interaction	1. A positive and collaborative Board culture The Corporation has established an open, supportive and constructive culture where communication is strong and challenge is welcomed.	1 Review training opportunities to consider the balance between online and face-to-face training to ensure Governors have access to a blended and engaging development offer.
	2. A strong and effective triumvirate where the working relationship between the Chair, Principal & CEO and Head of Governance is highly effective and provides stability, clarity and strategic alignment.	2. Refresh induction programme and Governor Handbook to ensure clarity, consistency and strong onboarding for new Governors.
	3. Highly committed and engaged Governors demonstrating a strong commitment, high levels of engagement and a shared sense of purpose in delivering the best outcomes for learners and the College.	3. Strengthen the Link Governor reporting template by including a section that captures the impact of visits, helping to evidence the value of governance activity.
	4. Experienced Head of Governance who is well-respected, experienced and plays a central role in ensuring high-quality governance support and practice.	

The overall conclusion on Suffolk New College Board's effectiveness is that there is strong evidence the Board is highly proficient and consistently impacts on College effectiveness and outcomes.

Thanks, and appreciation are recorded to all those who have engaged in this Review. Particular thanks go to Rebecca Witt, Head of Governance who worked diligently to ensure that arrangements were smooth and efficient.

Our Approach

This External Board Review (EBR) was undertaken by Julie Dougill over the period January 2026 – April 2026. She is the Chair of Plumpton College; an independent Land Based College and is the elected Chair of the AoC Southeast Chairs’ group and Chair of the AoC National Chairs’ Council. The review has been conducted against the published AoC framework for FE College External Board Reviews as shown in Figure 1 below. The Framework comprises 3 core areas for evaluation known as Board Dimensions – namely, Composition, Structure, and Interaction. Evidence for the review has been drawn from a variety of sources, some published, and others provided by Suffolk New College and triangulated to draw findings around an overarching question for each Board Dimension.

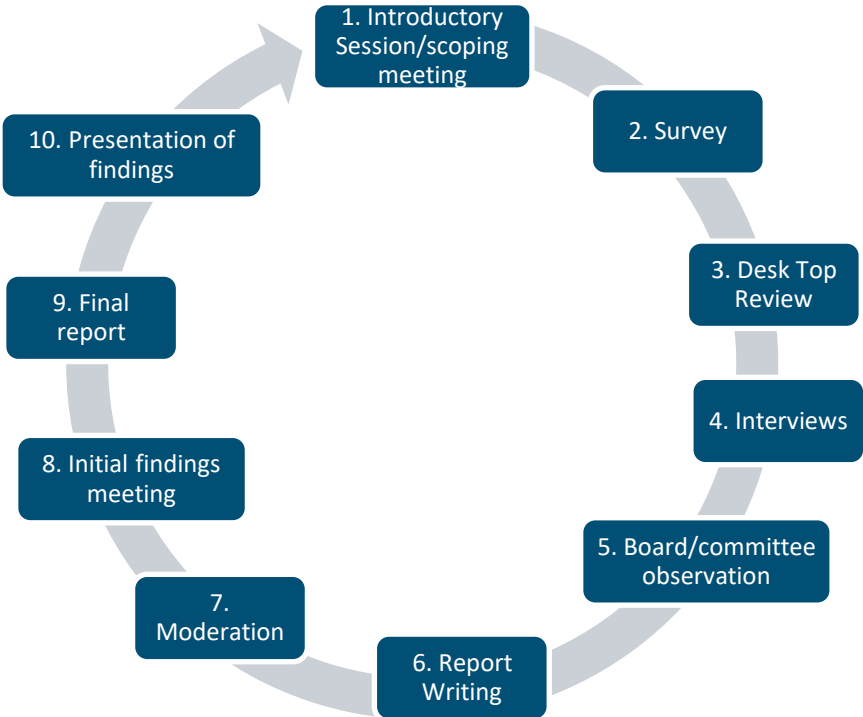


Fig. 2

The Review process used with the Board of Suffolk New College was as follows:

- An initial planning and scoping meeting held on January 6th 2026 with the Chair Terry Baxter, Principal and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Alan Pease, Head of Governance Rebecca Witt and Briony Denvir from the AoC, to agree the approach and set the timeframe for Review activities. It was agreed that the standard AoC framework would be applied to the Review with a tailored focus on the size of the current board and impact on Governor engagement at Corporation, the effectiveness of new Sub Committees and the role of Co-Opted Governors and the diversity of the Board.
- An online survey was issued to all Board members on Monday, January 16th, 2026, with responses required by Friday 2nd February 2026. The survey produced a return rate of 100% completing the survey.

- A desktop review of selected Board and key College documentation was considered, with the Reviewer being given access to the College’s Governance and Risk Management governance platform (DecisionTime). Further documentation was provided by the Head of Governance as required. Documentation considered included governance policies, Instrument and Articles, Standing Orders, Code of Conduct, Terms of References for committees and Governor role descriptions. DecisionTime also gave access to a wide range of resources, historic Board and committee minutes.
- The Reviewer also considered the governance area of the College website.
- A series of face to face or on-line interviews took place with Governors and members of the Executive. These included: Chair Terry Baxter; Principal & CEO Alan Pease; Head of Governance Rebecca Witt; Vice Chair and Chair of Remuneration and Vice Chair of Finance & Employment Andy Stevenson; Director of Service Industries and Science Lee Mandley, Director of Quality, Teaching Development and Student Progress Abigail Thompson; Chair of Finance and Employment Anne Gordon; Chair of Risk & Audit Simon Wingrove; Chair of Academic Standards & Quality Carol Snape, a recently appointed Governor and Safeguarding Link Governor Sarah-Jane Smedmor; staff Governor Ashleigh Hurrell and student Governor Beatriz Dos Santos Silva. Twelve 1:1 meetings were held in total.
- The Reviewer attended the College’s Corporation meeting at the Ipswich Campus on Thursday 16th April 2026 in-person. The Reviewer also reviewed meetings online of the following committees: Finance & Employment (12th March) Audit & Risk (16th March) and a recorded meeting of Academic Standards & Quality held on 9th March.
- Following completion of the evidence gathering phase an initial findings meeting was held on Tuesday 5th May
- A first draft of the report was sent for moderation on Friday 8th May and shared with the Head of Governance on Monday 11th May.
- The final report, including proposed action plan, was presented to Governance & Search on Tuesday 9th June.

The remainder of this report is structured to set out key messages across the following Review Dimensions and Board Outcomes:

Fig. 3



Background to the Organisation

Suffolk New College is a general Further Education College operating across four campuses in Suffolk: Ipswich, Suffolk Rural (a land-based site in Otley), and two coastal centres in Leiston and Halesworth, both branded as On the Coast. The College has experienced significant growth in student numbers, with an 8% increase last year and a further 8% projected rise anticipated for the next academic year. This growth is attributed to several factors, including the College's strong reputation, its broad curriculum offer, and local demographic increases. The College recognises that demographic growth will continue over the coming years and as a result is actively developing additional capacity across Ipswich and other parts of Suffolk to accommodate future demand on learning spaces.

The current Principal & CEO took up their post in 2023 and is supported by an experienced Executive Team, a Senior Management Team, and a wider College Management Group that includes Business Support Heads, Academic Heads, and Managers. Both the Chair of Governors and Head of Governance have been in these roles since 2024.

Working collaboratively with stakeholders, the Board and Executive have developed a clear strategic vision for the next phase of growth outlined in their Strategic Vision 2025–2030, which identifies six key priorities: Learner Success, Stakeholder Engagement, Sustainability, Technology, Growth and Diversification and Meeting Skills Needs.

Following its Ofsted inspection in November 2022, the College improved from *Requires Improvement* (2019 inspection) to *Good* across all key areas, with *Outstanding* recognition for *Personal Development*. Ofsted also judged the College to be making a 'reasonable contribution to meeting skills needs. In relation to governance arrangements the 2022 Ofsted report found that:

“Governors have a good understanding of local and regional skills needs. They provide effective support and guidance on emerging skills and the technical equipment learners will need in their future careers.”

“Leaders assess the quality of provision effectively. Governors and senior leaders have a good understanding of the key strengths and areas for development.”

The College is committed to providing a curriculum that meets the needs of learners, employers, and the wider community, ensuring that local and regional workforce skills demands are met. Its broad curriculum spans a wide range of subject areas and learning environments including successful delivery of several T Levels. The College offers extensive vocational, technical, and academic programmes from entry level, apprenticeships through to degree-level study in selected subjects. The curriculum covers 14 of the 15 subject sector areas, with strength in Engineering, Construction, Health and Social Care, Childcare, Science, Sport, Digital, and Creative and Media Studies. The College also operates a substantial re-sit programme for learners needing to achieve a grade 4 or above in GCSE English and Maths. It does not offer A Levels, as nearby schools and Sixth Form

Colleges meet that demand, allowing the College to focus on its strength in vocational and technical education.

Student numbers have risen steadily in the last three years:

- 16–18 learners: from 2,944 (2023/24) projected 3,152 (2024/25) to 3271 (2025/26)
- Adult learners: from 1,448 (2023/24) and projected 1,558 (2024/25) to 1822 (2025/26)

The College is actively engaged in a wide range of local networks and key strategic groups, including the Suffolk Chamber of Commerce (where it is a patron), the Local Skills Improvement Plan and Fund, Suffolk County Council, Ipswich Borough Council, the Strategic Development Fund, LSIF projects, Ipswich Central & Locus Board, the Ipswich Policy Development Panel, the Suffolk Agricultural Association, the University of Suffolk, LANDEX, and other regional Colleges. The College served as lead partner for both LSIF and Freeport East.

The Board undertakes an annual self-assessment, most recently in summer 2025, rating itself as '*strong*' against the new Ofsted criteria. It has adopted the new AoC Code of Good Governance for English Colleges.

The most recent External Board Review (2022/23) concluded that: '*There was evidence that there was effective governance in place at the College and that the governance arrangements were fit for purpose*'. It identified five key areas for further development; improving strategic focus in meetings, clarifying roles and accountability, enhancing Board diversity and succession planning, maximising technology and training and strengthening Governor stakeholder engagement. These areas for strengthening, along with actions from the Board's own self-assessment, formed an action plan which progress against is monitored by the Governance & Search Committee and reported to the Corporation. An internal audit of governance in April 2024 reviewed progress against the EBR actions and provided a '*significant assurance*' rating with no recommendations.

The College's financial health for 2024/25 was assessed as *Good* under the DFE Financial Health Measure.

Board Composition

The attributes possessed by the Board that enable the effective strategic leadership

Background

Board composition refers to the attributes possessed by the Board that combine to enable effective strategic leadership. An evaluation of the Board's composition involved an analysis of the knowledge and experience of members that are essential for effective governance and strategic oversight and the attitude and mindset that fosters independent thought and a commitment to the principles of good governance.

Findings

Suffolk New College currently has a Board of 13 independent Governors, 4 Co-Opted Governors, 2 staff Governors, 2 student Governors (which is considered good practice), and the Principal & CEO. Independent Governors can serve up to a maximum of two four year terms, staff and student Governors for two years. There are currently 5 Governor vacancies, but the Board is in the process of recruiting 2 new staff and student Governors. The College's Standing Orders state:

'The first term of office of an independent Governor shall be for a period of up to 4 years The Corporation has determined that independent Governors shall not serve for more than 8 years unless exceptional circumstances are considered applicable, and the extension is approved by the Corporation having received the advice of the Governance & Search Committee and the Head of Governance. Any additional appointment will be for a maximum of 1 year. Any subsequent appointments should again only be made in exceptional circumstances and will also be limited to a 1-year period with a maximum term of office of no longer than 10 years in total. (6,7)'

And for Co-Opted Governors the College's Standing Orders state:

'The term of office for a Co-opted member is 1 year. They shall be entitled to apply for appointment for a subsequent term under the process set out in Appendix 1. The Corporation has determined that Co-opted members shall not serve for more than 8 years. (11)'

All Governors are in their first or second 4 year term of office, and none have exceeded 8 years, which is recommended as the maximum tenure for a FE Governor. The mixture of new and longer standing Governors is helpful in enhancing diversity of thought and maintaining some continuity on the Board.

Skills and Expertise

One of the key strengths of the Governing Board is the impressive breath of skills, expertise and backgrounds Governors and Co-Opted Governors bring to the Board. This includes a former GFE

Principal, a former CEO of an Awarding Body, a number of qualified management accountants, a range of strategic professionals with experience at Director level in finance, insurance, and audit and risk, an Executive Director for UK Quantum, Directors of a local farm and a Wildlife Park, legal expertise, the Head of People and Skills at Sizewell C, a former CEO of Dance East, the Director of Children's Services and System Leader at Suffolk Council, a former CEO of a local and successful charity, the Chief Executive of Suffolk Chamber of Commerce and Managing Director for FE at Jisc. This was evidenced in the Governor profiles on the College website and came through strongly in the Governor interviews as part of this review. Every Governor interviewed identified the composition of the Board as a key strength. As one respondent quoted in the survey '*The strength comes from members with a range of skills. The Board comprises a committed groups of Governors drawn from staff, students and community representing different skills that complement the Board's needs.*'

This level of finance, education and strategic leadership experience from the both the private and public sectors, well equips the Board with the necessary skills and confidence to provide robust challenge to the Executive Team as observed during Board and committee meetings as well as during Governor link visits to the College. Their collective expertise also ensures that the Board remains well informed about the local and national skills landscape.

Moreover, the Board deploys this expertise effectively. For example, the Academic Standards & Quality Committee is Chaired by the former CEO of an Awarding Body, and the former FE Principal also attends this committee. The Chair of the local Chamber of Commerce serves on the Governance & Search Committee. The Finance & Employment Committee is chaired by a Finance Director with senior financial and HR experience whilst Audit & Risk Committee is Chaired by a Risk, Audit and Assurance Consultant with senior experience. The impact of these professional backgrounds was particularly evident at both Finance and Audit & Risk committee level where the Governors observed, provided insightful, relevant and knowledgeable challenge that was well received by the Principal & CEO and the Executive Team.

The Board, as noted by many Governors, is an '*ambitious and collaborative Board*'. It has a thoughtful and ambitious Chair who has been in this role since July 2024 and is highly regarded by Board members and the College Executive Team. He brings substantial experience from chairing Boards in other sectors, contributing a depth of governance knowledge and an informed understanding of how effective Boards operate. Board members rightly value his work and the responsible way in which the role is carried out and was commented upon by those Governors interviewed who mentioned that the Board today feels different to the one of the last EBR. To evidence this change and its impact on governance, as part of the annual governance SAR process, specific questions on the role and impact of the Chair would be useful to collate as this would formally record this information annually and assist the governance self- assessment process. The 4 Board meetings observed were confidently and efficiently Chaired. Meetings were conducted at pace, on time and with committee meetings having well structured agendas which allowed for discussion and appropriate challenge from Governors.

Board members were confident in and fully understood the importance of their role and their collective responsibility to ensure that they have the right skills across the board structure to fulfil their strategic

role with 14 governors strongly agreeing and 7 agreeing with this statement. The survey scores were very high with responses showing that 100% of Governors agreed that they have robust financial management making value for money decisions in the College, that they understand and scrutinise finance reports, make financial plans and set budgets. The Governors interviewed during the review spoke with confidence about their knowledge and understanding of the College's financial position and how reporting from the Finance Team in the College is now clear and transparent. Observed meetings were also consistent with this self-assessment.

Co-Opted Governors

Co-Opted Governors currently serve on all committees (with exception to Remuneration) and hold full voting rights on those committees. 2 of the 4 Co-Opted Governors are also Link Governors but do not attend the Corporation meeting. It is clear that they bring a valuable range of experience and specialist expertise that strengthens committee work, for example, the Jisc representative on Audit & Risk, where AI has been identified as a key strategic risk where their input is of value. Recent Governance & Search Committee minutes show that the Board has, for some time, discussed the overall Board size to improve effectiveness and ensure that all Governors can contribute fully at Corporation meetings. Several Governors highlighted this as a priority area for development in both the survey and the 1:1 interviews conducted. In the survey a Governor noted *'the Board wants to be more future focused and strategic. A smaller Board may help with this, with more Co-Opted Governors to really strengthen the focus'*.

At the Corporation meeting on 16th April, it was agreed to phase in this reduction while increasing the number of Co-Opted Governors on the Board. The Standing Orders were amended accordingly, and a dedicated role description for Co-Opted Governors has now been incorporated into this document. It is considered good governance practice to define Co-Opted Governor arrangements in the governing body's Standing Orders. At present, Co-Opted Governors serve 1 year term of office.

While the addition of more Co-Opted Governors brings clear benefits, it also requires careful consideration of overall Board composition to maintain the right balance of skills, diversity, and workload, particularly as the College continues to grow. I recommend that the Board review this annually as part of their self-assessment process and monitors the effectiveness of this model through Governance & Search to ensure that Co-Opted Governors make up no more than 30–40% of total Board membership, that independence at Board level is therefore retained and review the impact of this approach on the governance workload of independent Governors. In addition, a more tailored programme of induction, support, and ongoing training would help Co-Opted Governors quickly understand their role and contribute fully to governance and committee decision-making. Strengthening the new Co-Opted role description further by adding explicit expectations around safeguarding and training would also be beneficial.

Governor Recruitment and Diversity

The College's approach to the recruitment and selection of Board members is overseen by the Governance & Search Committee and provides for recruitment in a variety of ways and through personal referrals. In previous years, the Board has engaged a recruiting company to support

successful Governor appointments. More recently, however, the College's strategic positioning as an anchor institution within the community has led to increased interest from local stakeholders wishing to join the Board. As a result, the Board has been able to appoint Governors on a case-by-case basis through a structured interview process. Interviews conducted as part of this review, along with an examination of Search & Governance Committee minutes and supporting documents, demonstrate that the Committee consistently and thoughtfully evaluates its skills gaps, particularly in relation to the College's strategic priorities as a basis for new Governor selection. To strengthen the whole process further it would be useful for the Board to put in place an interview process with agreed questions, response to set scenarios and scoring in order to ensure that potential candidates are treated equally at interview, and that they meet the appropriate standard, College values and high expectation that the Board adheres to.

At the time of the survey, the Board has 7 (33%) female and 14 (67%) male members. Minutes from the Governance & Search meeting held in February 2026 show that the Board has a strong commitment to equality, diversity, and inclusion. In that meeting they discussed Governor responses to the DfE Data Workforce Survey for 2024/25, as well as 2023/24 for comparison. This data was considered alongside data from the 2023/24 sector survey. It was noted that the number of female Governors was slightly lower than the sector and this may need to be addressed in any future appointments as either independent or Co-Opted Governors. In addition, 86% of respondents identified as being White/British meaning 14% of the Board are non-white. This compares with wider Suffolk ethnic minorities making up 12.7% (2021 census data) so the Board reflects the makeup of the staff and student body providing a wider range of lived experiences and perspectives. It was also evident from the meetings observed and through interviews that the Board is diverse in relation to their roles, backgrounds, ages and experiences with a good level of diversity of thought and no examples of group think were observed. As a Governor reflected in the survey:

'There is a good representation of equality and diversity on the Board itself and in the 5 years I have been a Governor there is always a desire to have the best outcome for the wider College in all the decision making in a completely neutral and open way without any preconceived ideas influencing judgements and decisions.'

'The composition of the Board is diverse, each person brings their way of thinking, identity and personal experience to the Board'

Skills Audit and Succession planning.

A skills audit is completed annually within the Skills and Experience questionnaire. At the September 2025 Governance & Search meeting the questionnaire summary was reviewed and used to identify any gaps and training needs and to compare outcomes to scores from the previous year. All Governors including student Governors completed the questionnaire in 2025. Governors were asked to rank their knowledge/experience in a wide range of areas between 1-4. This comprehensive document captures the depth of experience and knowledge in such areas as developing strategies, risk management, finance quality assurance, law, Cyber and IT and in skills such as empathy teamwork and decision making. At the meeting in September 2025 there was agreement that there

was a good spread of knowledge and skills across the committees. From the interviews held in April 2026 and the completed surveys earlier in the spring term, it is evident that the Board collectively has the necessary skills and knowledge to govern the College. 100% of Governors agreed/strongly agreed with this statement quoting *'We are regularly assessing the skills around the Board table to ensure appropriate expertise' and 'we have member from a risk perspective, an accounting perspective, a legal perspective, a technology perspective and many from an academic and educational background. It is a good, experienced and diverse ground. Different walks of life are also represented.'* Feedback from the summary report was shared at the Corporation meeting in October 2025. This summary audit is also used as a succession planning tool and has helped the Board to reflect on how to strengthen the number of Co-Opted Governors in particular areas where scores were lower.

Safeguarding and Prevent

Safeguarding and Prevent is a well embedded strength of the Board. All Governors complete mandatory safeguarding and Prevent training on appointment, with updates every 2 years and an annual refresher for Safeguarding and Keeping Children Safe in Education is delivered by the Director of Student Services, Safeguarding and Support annually at the first Corporation meeting of each academic year and with regular updates as observed at the Corporation meeting held in April 2026. Governors are also challenged if this training is not complete (as observed in the Corporation meeting). A dedicated Link Governor provides focused oversight through termly meetings and participation in the College's Strategic Safeguarding Committee. 100% of Governors agreed and strongly agreed in the survey that they understand their responsibility as a Corporation for Safeguarding and Prevent. As a Governor noted: *'We have excellent frequent training for Governors, evidence of a strong concern for student welfare and on-going alertness and commitment demonstrated at Board and Committee meetings.'*

Community Links

The Board is well networked and knows the locality well and values the opportunity provided to visit the different College sites across Suffolk. Through the survey when asked if the Board understood the local and regional economic skills landscape, 16 members strongly agreed, and 5 agreed with this statement. Asked if the Board collaborates effectively with external stakeholders including employers 100% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed. During interviews, Governors spoke warmly of the successful Industry Partnership Programme in the College *'The Executive Team at SNC, senior staff and Chair have extensive dealings with numerous bodies in the local community'*. Another Governor quoted *'we have excellent connections with business and a through business partner programme'*, Several Governors suggested that they could support the College more in its development of the new Civic and Community Partnerships Programme (which has been introduced during the spring term). In the light of this, it would be helpful for Governors to complete a Governor professional and personal contact mapping exercise in which Governor networks are overlaid on to the Executive's networks and any gaps/target areas identified, and appropriate introductions made.

Attitude and Mindset

Through the survey 100% of Governors agreed and strongly agreed that they uphold the College values and observe the Nolan Principles. They are made explicit in the Governor's Code of Conduct and referenced in Governor role descriptions. In the survey Governors noted:

'There is openness and transparency in all Board and committee business. We always make sure there are a quorum of members in each meeting, and each member has the opportunity to speak and challenge where appropriate. I've observed this on numerous occasions, and this had often led to robust and challenging conversations which ultimately lead to decisions being made to the benefit of the College and students alike.'

'The Board has a mix of expertise including people like myself who bring outside current business expertise and knowledge, all reports and decisions are debated with integrity and ultimately objectivity. Open and honest conversations are encouraged and, as a Board member, I have free access to the College and the College staff to view lessons and address any concerns / questions. Everything is underscored by detailed policy documents which are subject to regular review and update.'

'The values which I hold close to my heart (trust, honesty, integrity) I have seen demonstrated by all.'

In addition, through the survey, 100% of Governors who responded said they agreed and strongly agreed that they demonstrated compliance with the updated AoC Code of Good Governance, which was adopted in July 2024. This was consistent with observed behaviour. Of the meetings observed, it was clear that Governors were well prepared, had read the papers available online and noted questions and points of clarification to ask and listened to each other respectfully. The overall Governor attendance performance for Corporation meetings by January 2026 was 82.5% exceeding the 80% target with 4 out of 5 committee attendance exceeding this target. Attendance at meetings is regularly monitored at Search & Governance and followed up if concerns are raised. As one Governor noted:

'The Code of Good Governance, together with relevant supporting documentation is regularly reviewed and discussed. Actions from these discussions are monitored. The documents are available in our shared resources area.'

Conclusions

Suffolk New College has a highly capable and committed Governing Board with a strong mix of professional expertise, effective oversight, and a clear understanding of its strategic role. Governors bring *"an impressive breadth of skills, expertise and backgrounds"* and provide robust, well informed challenge across all committees. Safeguarding is well embedded, training is comprehensive (see Interaction section for more detail on training in general), and survey feedback shows high levels of confidence in financial oversight, adherence to the Nolan Principles and understanding of the local skills landscape. The Board is ambitious, collaborative and well connected to its communities, with Governors actively engaged.

Looking ahead, the shift toward a smaller Corporation with increased use of Co-Opted Governors will require careful monitoring to maintain the right balance of independence, diversity and workload. Induction and ongoing development for Co-Opted Governors could be strengthened further, alongside clearer expectations in role descriptions. Recruitment processes would benefit from a more structured and consistent interview approach, and gender balance remains an area to monitor in future appointments. Governors also identified value in mapping their professional networks to support civic and community partnerships, and in embedding more formal mechanisms for gathering feedback on the Chair’s impact as part of the annual governance self-assessment.

The following table summarises headlines:

BOARD COMPOSITION	
STRENGTH	AREA FOR DEVELOPMENT
1.Experienced Governors with a broad and diverse range of skills and expertise, enabling strong oversight, constructive challenge, and effective support for the College.	1.Review the Co-Opted Governor model to: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ensure Co-Opted members make up no more than 30–40% of the overall Board. 2. Introduce bespoke induction sessions tailored specifically for Co-Opted Governors. 3. Strengthen safeguarding and training expectations within the Co-Opted Governor role description. 4. Review and update Standing Orders regularly to reflect any changes
2. The Board benefits from a wide range of perspectives, promoting meaningful discussion, constructive challenge and open sharing of different viewpoints.	2. Strengthen the formal interview process to enhance the recruitment and interview process for new Governors and Co-Opted Governors to ensure rigour, transparency and alignment with Board needs.
3.Effective and confident Chairs across the governance structure ensuring meetings are well-run, focused and contribute to strong triangulation and assurance.	3. Develop a structured approach to mapping Governors’ external networks and contacts to maximise opportunities for partnership, influence and stakeholder engagement.
4.Positive attitude and mindset among Corporation members demonstrating a healthy governance culture and a shared commitment to the College’s success.	4. As part of the self-assessment process gather feedback on the role and impact of the Chair.
5.Collective ambition and drive to work collaboratively with a clear sense of purpose, and ambition to support the College and deliver the best outcomes for learners.	

Fig. 4

Board Structures

The processes and structures that equip members to optimally delivery objectives, act with transparency and be in compliance with regulations.

Background

Suffolk New College operates a more traditional FE committee model. The Board meets 4 times per year in person with 2 additional Governor Strategy Days. There are 6 committees: Finance & Employment which meets 5 times a year with 1 meeting in person; Audit & Risk who meets 4 times a year with 1 face to face meeting; Governance & Search who meet online 3 times per year; Remuneration meeting take place twice per year in person; Academic Standards & Quality meet 4 times per year in person and Chairs Briefing which take place 4 times per year online. In addition, timetabled meetings are organised for the Strategic Safeguarding & Prevent and for Strategic Health & Safety Committees.

Governance arrangements are well thought through and managed effectively by the Head of Governance. Processes are well documented and regularly updated providing Corporation with a significant amount of information relating to College performance, both financial and academic as well as updates to national and legal requirements. These are made available to all Governors online via the DecisionTime portal. Corporation has in place an annual cycle of business for Corporation and all committee meetings which is aligned to the College business calendar supporting forward planning. The calendar of meetings is scheduled well in advance with all committee meetings scheduled to feed into Board meetings. The close working relationship of the Chair, the Principal & CEO and Head of Governance who meet monthly, ensures effective communication at all stages of preparation for a meeting. The Head of Governance also meets with the wider Executive Team to prepare for committee meetings. Although meeting agendas follow a standard format, these meetings allow for flexibility in the agenda which may be needed to accommodate any unforeseen developments or changes which may need to be addressed and allow Governors ample opportunities for scrutiny and challenge.

Governance Arrangements - Board and Committee meetings

Each committee meeting has an agreed and detailed Term of Reference (ToR) which are reviewed annually and approved by the Board to ensure they remain fit for purpose and aligned with any changes to the Standing Orders. If changes are made in year, as noted at the Corporation meeting observed in April 2026, the ToR are updated accordingly, with a clear front cover sheet provided to all Governors to outline the amendments and the rationale. This supports informed discussion and decision making at the meeting. The ToR also helpfully set out the committees' overall business, key items for discussion and a reference section lining to relevant documents and procedures.

The timeliness of meeting papers and accompanying governance documentation is good. All papers are made available on the portal 7 days in advance of each meeting giving Governors sufficient time to read and assimilate them. All Governors interviewed consistently commented that the papers

produced and presented at meetings are comprehensive, transparent and relevant. They also noted however that the volume of papers for meetings can be overwhelming at times, but they acknowledged that they provide them with the right information to support discussion and any decision making and importantly provides them with the reassurance that they may need.

Agendas are well structured, identifying presenters, timings, and paper numbers. They are colour coded to distinguish between routine committee business, substantial decisions, and updates on strategic processes, policies, or initiatives. Each item also states its purpose, indicating whether it is for assurance or decision. All agendas and associated papers are easily accessible on Decision Time and Governors interviewed found this approach clear and helpful. 100% of Governors in the survey agreed that they have sufficient opportunities and time to thoroughly scrutinise proposals and ask questions in advance of any Corporation or committee meetings.

An action tracker accompanies each Board and committee agenda. It records agreed actions, progress updates, and closure dates, and identifies the strategic objective, KPI, or strategic risk to which each action relates. This provides a clear and efficient tool for Governors and Chairs to maintain oversight of progress and ensure actions are not lost.

Executive summary sheets accompany each agenda item, providing a short description of the paper's purpose; the report type (strategic, monitoring, administrative, or for information); author, required actions (approval, recommendation, discussion, or noting); links to strategic priorities; space for Governors to record how they can validate the information; and any relevant risk management or regulatory considerations. Board and committee agendas and papers contain a wide range of data and information. While the executive summary sheets are helpful and welcomed by Governors, many expressed a desire for a more focused summary that clearly highlights the specific KPIs being reported, ideally presented in a simple table or dashboard format. Several Governors and SMT members interviewed noted that this would be particularly valuable, as would a consistent section outlining the key issues the author wishes to draw to Governors' attention. This would support Governors in identifying the 'so what' factors and ensure that the most important questions and implications are fully considered. It is also recommended that the executive summary include a section noting whether the item has previously been discussed or scrutinised at a committee meeting. As a Governor quoted in the survey *'the paperwork is excellent, although sometimes overwhelming, possibly some clearer summary with more detailed appendices might be helpful. Having said that I am always impressed with the quality of information'*.

The College has an established governance structure that clearly defines and separates the functions and responsibilities of each committee, ensuring there is no duplication of work. As a full meeting cycle was observed, it was evident that an effective feedback loop operates between committees and Corporation. Minutes from each committee are made available to all Corporation members, and the executive summary accompanying the Corporation agenda highlights the key messages and issues that need to be fed back and shared.

Finance & Employment Committee

The Finance & Employment Committee (F&E) is Chaired effectively by an experienced former Finance Director and supported by a skilled membership that provides strong oversight of the college's financial management. As the Chair noted in the interview *'The committee has the right strengths around the table'*. The committee holds the Executive Team to account, ensuring that financial decisions, investments and remuneration proposals are well considered, scrutinised and aligned with strategic priorities before being recommended to the Corporation. Financial reports are presented and scrutinised by Governors first at the F&E Committee and then at Corporation, where further discussion often takes place. These conversations can be challenging but Governors interviewed noted that discussions are constructive and welcomed by the Executive Team. In the survey Governors describe themselves as acting as 'a critical friend to the Deputy CEO and will challenge when required on the College's finances' and that *'there are regular discussions around the student offer, and the balance between running a successful organisation financially.'*

'From the meetings I've attended I've seen the financial reports and the basis of discussion has assured me that value for money is balanced with learners need '

From the meeting observed, during the review, financial information was provided in a timely manner, allowing Governors full visibility of the management accounts and key performance indicators. The agenda covered risk management, management accounts, capital expenditure, the impact of growth, the gender pay gap and a range of policy updates. Challenge was observed particularly around the potential impact on the College of changes to local sixth-form provision and around capital expenditure, where Governors sought clarity on how funding decisions align with the College strategic priorities and the Operational Development Plan. In both instances the challenge was well received by the College.

The committee uses a transparent action tracker, which enables Governors to monitor progress and follow up actions effectively. The relationship between the committee and the Principal & CEO and Executive Team was positive. An example of this in action was cited by the Chair where she has worked closely with the College to improve the presentation and accessibility of management accounts.

A notable example of good governance practice was the committee's decision to share a paper on strategic growth and site development presented at the meeting with both the Audit & Risk Committee and at Corporation, recognising its strategic importance. While this created some duplication, it did provide the appropriate opportunity to gain different perspectives on it from each committee. The committee also discussed a potential Co-Opted Governor interested in joining them, supporting this recommendation as a positive step for succession planning.

Overall, the observed meeting demonstrated a clear strategic focus with strong challenge, effective risk management, clear action tracking and good succession planning.

Audit & Risk

The Audit & Risk Committee is effectively chaired by an experienced Governor now in his fourth year whose professional background includes extensive work as a Financial Auditor and more recently as a Consultant in Audit and Risk. The committee also benefits from 2 Co-Opted Governors who bring additional specialist expertise, including in areas directly linked to one of the College's key strategic risks.

The committee's agenda at the meeting observed was well structured and relevant, covering the Principal & CEO's risk focused report, internal audit updates, the audit plan, College growth, fraud and whistleblowing, website compliance and other core assurance items. A detailed action tracker, complete with RAG ratings, is routinely reviewed, with new actions identified as needed.

A notable strength is the College's dynamic risk management tool, which provides real time visibility of risks made available to both staff and governors. The Chair uses this tool actively, challenging the College to ensure information is current and sufficiently detailed. This challenge is well received and acted upon. During the observed meeting, effective scrutiny was applied to strategic risk 36 relating to Curriculum Review and Reform, particularly around the adequacy of controls being implemented.

Governors described the committee as well balanced, with a strong mix of experience and a constructive working relationship with the College Executive Team. They noted that risk plans are updated promptly when challenged, and that meetings are discussion rich, purposeful and aligned with strategic priorities which was evidenced as part of this review. The committee also demonstrated a proactive approach to emerging issues, including governance and oversight of AI, which is now a standing agenda item.

The committee engaged in thoughtful discussion about external factors such as the global energy crisis and stakeholder engagement, offering suggestions for how the College might respond. Members also reflected on internal audit culture, showing a willingness to challenge themselves as well as the College.

In discussion with the Chair, it was clear that risk management is a key strength of the Board and is deeply embedded across the organisation, a strength consistently observed in committee and Board meetings. Clear reference to and scrutiny of the internal audit was made and reassurance on behalf of the Board sought. The value of formalising the Board's risk appetite was acknowledged by the Committee Chair. Currently the risk appetite is understood but undocumented, it is recommended that producing a written statement to validate the risk appetite is undertaken.

Academic Standards & Quality Meeting

The Academic & Standards Quality Committee (ASQ) was well chaired again by a newly appointed Governor with strong experience in education supported by an equally experienced Vice-Chair. The meeting had 14 people in attendance including 2 student and 2 staff governors. The agenda was appropriate for the time of year and covered all key areas of academic performance and quality assurance including approval of an Inclusion Strategy, update on progress of the Quality

Improvement Plan, attendance and progress, apprenticeships, English and Maths, and wider quality processes. Papers were provided in good time, senior leaders presented the papers clearly and all Governors came well prepared. This committee regularly reviews and monitors the College Quality Improvement Plan and the overall SAR process before Corporation agrees the final SAR.

Governors offered reflective and constructive challenge, asking thoughtful questions about strategy alignment and suggesting improvements such as adding executive summaries to the Inclusion Strategy. Student and staff Governors contributed actively, and their voices were listened to and valued. The action tracker was used effectively to monitor progress.

The meeting was well balanced, with contributions from all members with chairing that encouraged participation. Link Governor visits were noted, though the committee recognised the need to consider their impact more explicitly. Challenge around English and Maths was particularly strong, with the Chair asking how the committee could support the College in addressing barriers. Through Governor and SMT interviews it was felt that some papers can be lengthy and that the executive summary accompanying the papers could be more explicit in identifying the key points and KPIs the author wanted the Governors to focus on and be aware of.

Remuneration Committee

The Remuneration Committee meets twice a year and is chaired by the Vice-Chair of the Corporation. The committee is responsible for reviewing the pay and performance of the college's 3 Senior Post Holders. Although the Head of Governance is not a Senior Post Holder, her remuneration and performance is also considered in line with the Remuneration Code. The Committee's Terms of Reference comply with the AoC Senior Staff Remuneration Code and Managing Public Money. It is recommended to reference managing Public Money in the Term of Reference.

The annual appraisal process is well established. The Chair of the Corporation appraises the Principal & CEO and Head of Governance each year, agreeing targets that are then presented to the Remuneration Committee for approval. This committee also sees the final appraisal outcome as part of the basis for any salary decision. Governors reported that this process has been strengthened in recent years, with this year's cycle including a 360-degree appraisal for the Senior Post Holders. The Principal & CEO appraises the other Senior Post Holders, with their targets also reviewed and confirmed by the committee.

All recommendations from the Remuneration Committee are taken to Corporation for approval, in line with the Remuneration Code and sector good practice. Governors noted that the most recent Board discussion on senior pay, linked to clear evidence of performance via the appraisal was robust, with members challenging each other and the recommendations before reaching a final decision. This was viewed as evidence of a transparent and well governed process.

Although the meeting was not observed directly, discussions with the Committee Chair confirmed confidence in the strengthened appraisal and target setting arrangements. The committee's second

annual meeting focuses on reviewing progress against agreed targets, which is considered strong practice and supports ongoing accountability.

The review acknowledges that the College has robust procedures in place on this committee. The committee meets regularly, challenge is welcomed, and decisions are openly scrutinised at Board level.

Corporation

Corporation is fully aware of and fulfils its statutory duties in a timely manner evidenced through the resources available online, meetings observed and through interviews with the Head of Governance and Committee Chairs.

The Corporation meeting observed was well planned, with a focused agenda and clear accompanying papers. 14 governors were present, with 4 apologies. The meeting opened with a safeguarding update on *Keeping Children Safe in Education*, focusing on recent legislative changes and their implications for compliance. Although this item overran, it was well received and prompted several questions. A reflection for future practice is that such updates may benefit from additional time or be delivered as a pre-meeting briefing or recorded update, to avoid reducing time for other agenda items.

The meeting was chaired effectively, and the agenda followed the established structure of receiving executive summaries from each committee, highlighting items requiring approval, decision or further discussion. It was evident that Governors had read the papers in advance and were using the online portal effectively. Discussions allowed Governors to scrutinise how proposals aligned with the Strategic Vision, and strong triangulation was demonstrated through the range of questions and perspectives offered.

A significant discussion arose from the Governance & Search Committee's recommendation regarding completion of mandatory training. An internal audit had identified an amber risk relating to 3 Governors who had not completed required modules. The Chair of Audit & Risk emphasised that this was unacceptable and reminded the Board of the need to uphold high standards. Following a robust debate, the Board agreed that Governors who do not complete their training within a 3 month window would be asked to step down. These Governors could be reappointed once their mandatory training had been completed. This demonstrated strong accountability and the Nolan Principles in action.

The Board also reviewed its Standing Orders and agreed to gradually reduce the Board size while increasing the use of Co-Opted Governors to maintain a balanced and skilled membership.

There was some discussion and questioning of the Finance & Employment and Audit & Risk committee reports, but less than planned for. Despite this, the meeting maintained good pace, constructive challenge and positive engagement. The tone was professional, reflective and purposeful, with clear actions identified. Time pressures on the agendas were not observed in any of the other meetings nor evident through previous minutes reviewed as part of this EBR.

Learner Voice and Staff Voice Engagement with Students

Corporation places significant importance on both the student and staff voice. Survey results show unanimous agreement that Governors listen to students and that learner interests inform decision-making: 71% strongly agreed and 29% agreed. One student Governor summarised this well, noting that Governors *'immediately act upon anything brought up by myself and the other student governor and actively ask for our opinions on issues that could affect students'*. Another Governor noted *'we consider value for money, but this is balanced with student need'*.

Evidence from observed meetings, surveys and interviews demonstrates a deeply embedded commitment to student centred governance. Learner success is a core strategic priority within the Board's Vision to 2030, and student needs clearly shape long term planning and operational oversight. 2 student Governors sit on the Corporation and are described as *'highly engaged,' 'confident contributors'* whose voices are actively sought and valued. Several Governors highlighted a recent example where Student Governors challenged the Executive Team about parking and the impact on the student experience; the College responded swiftly and constructively as noted by the Student Governor during interview. Student Governors have also taken part in AoC Unlock events. As quoted in the survey:

'The Student Governors are some of the most powerful voices on our Board and between the Chair, Vice Chair and others regularly encourage their feedback in meeting topics in order to ensure their voices continue to be heard.'

Their involvement is supported through mentoring from the Head of Governance, helping them participate fully and challenge appropriately. Additional learner insight is gathered through the Academic Standards & Quality Committee, student surveys, the Youth Leadership Forum and regular forums and questionnaires. At the March 2026 ASQ meeting, it was noted that Student Governors helped write the questions for the latest Heatmap survey and supported SMT in carrying out the survey, an example cited by both staff and students in interviews as evidence of genuine partnership.

Governors gain direct understanding of the learner experience through Link Governor visits, safeguarding reports and performance updates. Student Governors are encouraged to question, challenge and influence discussions, and their feedback is consistently acted upon.

Staff voice is also recognised through committee structures, Staff Governors and regular engagement with Senior Leaders. 2 Staff Governors sit on the Board and Governors report that they contribute fully to discussions and decisions, bringing forward views from colleagues and the Staff Representative Group. In the Academic Standards & Quality meeting, Staff Governors were given the opportunity to have their voice in relation to the discussion on inclusion. Staff Governors are provided with the opportunity to access the online AoC training for Staff Governors and to observe meetings before they started the role which the Governor interviewed reported they found useful and strengthened their confidence and understanding of governance.

Staff play an active and valued role in the governance of the College and are regularly invited to contribute to Corporation and committee meetings. Staff Governors interviewed described feeling

confident to challenge the Executive Team appropriately and view the Board as approachable and open to staff perspectives. This is reflected in the Governor survey, where 53% strongly agreed and 43% agreed that Governors listen to staff feedback to inform decisions.

Staff engagement extends beyond formal governance roles. Link Governors maintain strong connections with curriculum areas with these interactions and visits being tracked, review and monitor actions following staff surveys, Middle Leaders and wider staff groups contribute to strategic events such as the Annual Strategy Day, where their ideas are integrated with those of Governors and Senior Leaders. Governors also interact regularly with the College Executive Team, members of the Senior Management Team and wider staff helping to maintain strong relationships and a clear understanding of staff experience.

Overall, student and staff centred decision making is firmly embedded in governance. The Board demonstrates a clear commitment to ensuring that learner and staff perspectives shape strategic planning, quality assurance and continuous improvement. As one Governor put it, student success is *“at the heart of what drives the college.”*

Strategy

The College has recently developed a new Strategic Vision to 2030, shaped through engagement with a wide range of stakeholders, including governors. Governors interviewed felt fully involved in setting this new strategic direction and several noted that the Strategic Vision has an “active life” at the Board and is regularly referenced in discussions and in papers presented at meetings. During interviews, Governors also recognised that the Board has become increasingly strategic in recent years, and comments from the survey highlight that there is a clear appetite to build on this further.

Governors consistently emphasised the importance of maintaining a clear distinction between governance and management. In the survey 33% strongly agreed that they maintain a strategic focus and 67% agreed. From observation of the committee meeting cycle, it is clear that Corporation meetings are more strategically focused with more operational matters largely dealt with at committee level or through Link Governor activity, with only high level summaries brought to Corporation.

The 2 Annual Strategy Days also provide valuable opportunities for deeper discussion, reflection and forward planning for the Board. The most recent was held in January 2026 with a follow up planned in June 2026. At the recent Strategy Day, there was collective recognition by Governors of the need to embed a clear mechanism for measuring progress against the agreed strategic priorities over the life of the plan. As quoted in the survey:

‘The College Senior Management Team have developed a detailed strategy document. As discussed in the Strategy Day, we need to embed a mechanism to measure the deliverables across the period of the strategy document across and allow the board and committee members to see progress and challenge when necessary.’

Governors expressed interest in a more systematic approach and tool be developed to enable them to track outcomes, monitor progress and challenge effectively where necessary. It is recommended that the Board and Executive Team work collaboratively to develop such a tool to aid monitoring of the vision and allow for deeper engagement with long term priorities.

Transparency

From observation, interviews and scrutiny of documents, including agendas and papers for Corporation and committee meetings there is clear evidence of transparency in governance. Board members demonstrate openness in their discussions, and the College Leadership Team responds in the same spirit as observed in all committee meetings. Governors receive detailed information and data that enable effective scrutiny and triangulation, with all documents accessible via the Governors' online portal. Both Governors and College leaders described an *'open and transparent'* culture. As one Governor noted, there is *'clear scrutiny of accountability on decisions, including the reasoning behind them, as exemplified through minutes, strategy away days and the publication of meeting minutes.'*

Agendas clearly state the purpose of each item (for discussion, information or approval etc), and minutes record explicit actions supported by an action tracker that keeps Governors focused on progress. Papers have become more evaluative, aided by a reporting template that highlights risks, impact and key points through an executive summary. Governors also draw on their in person visits through the Link Governor scheme and attendance at meetings such as SAR and celebratory events where Governors are able to triangulate what they are told. As one Governor commented, they see *'evidence of delegated and distributed leadership, hearing from the wider Leadership and Management community beyond the Executive,'* and another *'There is a robust, and resilient relationship between the Board and the Senior Leaders. It is an open and honest working relationship built on trust. The Executive Team are well regarded. Their reports and communications have improved over the last 2 years, and the Executive Team have become more strategic in their reporting to the Board.'*

The Governance and Leadership section of Suffolk New College's website is comprehensive, well organised and easy to navigate. Photographs and short biographies of all independent and Co-Opted Governors are clearly presented, outlining their experience and the roles they hold on the Board. This provides helpful context and transparency for stakeholders. Non-confidential Corporation minutes from the past year are available under the Public Minutes section, and a wide range of other governance documents can be accessed through the Corporation pages. These include the summary of the latest EBR report, Annual Reports and Financial Statements, Corporation's Standing Orders, the Instrument and Articles of Government, and the Accountability Agreement.

Importantly, this area is fully up to date and all links were working. The breadth of information available, and the fact that it is current and easily accessible, demonstrates a strong commitment to openness and transparency in governance.

Evaluation/Self-assessment

The Board undertakes a full governance self-assessment annually. Documentation shows that the Corporation recognises the importance of evaluating its own performance and produces an annual Self-Assessment Report with clear targets and actions for further development. As part of this process, each committee completes an annual self-evaluation, reviewing its effectiveness and contribution to the wider governance framework. The review also includes assessment of progress against the previous year's Governance Development Plan, evaluation against the AoC Code of Good Governance, completion of a Corporation self-assessment questionnaire, a review of Governor attendance and training records, reflection on internal and external governance reviews, and analysis of the annual skills and experience audit. This thorough process results in an agreed Governance Development Plan, which is regularly monitored and RAG-rated by the Governance & Search Committee and reported to Corporation.

As stated before, to strengthen the process further, the Corporation may wish to consider gathering more firsthand feedback from Governors, the Senior Management Team and Executive Team, on the Chair's performance and on the overall impact of governance. Introducing a brief "review of meeting" item at the end of each meeting, or issuing an anonymised post meeting feedback form, could also enhance reflective practice, particularly supporting Staff and Student Governors to contribute freely.

The Principal & CEO and the Head of Governance are appraised annually by the Chair, in line with the Chair's role description. Appraisal targets are set and reviewed by the Remuneration Committee, aligned to the College's strategic objectives and based on both qualitative and quantitative measures.

Conclusions

Governance at Suffolk New College is well structured, transparent and supported by clear processes, strong clerking, and an effective committee cycle. Meetings are well planned, papers are timely and thorough, and Governors demonstrating high levels of preparation, scrutiny and challenge. Student and staff voice are firmly embedded in governance, with active Student and Staff Governor representation. The Board maintains a strong strategic focus, reinforced by Annual Strategy Days, a clear Vision to 2030, and robust financial, risk and quality oversight across committees.

Across interviews and survey feedback, Governors identified opportunities to strengthen strategic monitoring further, particularly through the development of a clearer mechanism or dashboard to track progress against strategic priorities. Some papers were described as lengthy, with Governors requesting more focused executive summaries and clearer KPIs. The Board may also wish to build in more structured feedback mechanisms, such as post meeting reviews or anonymised surveys to support continuous improvement and gather wider perspectives, including feedback on the Chair's performance.

BOARD STRUCTURES	
STRENGTH	AREA FOR DEVELOPMENT
1. Robust and effective governance processes and structures.	1. Strengthen the executive summary in all papers to highlight key KPIs and decisions required, improving clarity and strategic focus.
2. Strong Committees with effective feedback loops to Corporation.	2. Formalise and document the Boards risk appetite statement and review annually
3. Embedded risk management culture across the College with active discussion at Board and committee level.	3. As part of the self-assessment process gather wider feedback on the impact of governance from the Executive and wider Senior Management Teams.
4. The Board maintains a clear focus on long term strategy and strategic direction, ensuring alignment with the College's vision and priorities.	4. Strengthen monitoring of long term vision and strategy by developing a monitoring tool to track progress against long term strategic objectives more systematically.

Fig. 5

Board Interaction

Behaviours and interactions which allow for an inclusive culture that encourages effective challenge and impact collaboration

Background

The Corporation has worked hard to develop a collective and consensual Board culture built on openness, transparency and mutual support and many governors during the interviews noted this change since the last EBR. Attendance at meetings is good with Governors demonstrating a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities. They actively support a wide range of College activities and events beyond formal meetings, and many expressed how proud they feel to serve as governors. Overall, governance at the College is strong, underpinned by trust, openness, professionalism and a sustained commitment to continuous improvement.

Triumvirate

The working relationship between the Chair, Principal & CEO and the Head of Governance is central to effective governance and is clearly well established at the College. This group meets formally each month, with frequent communication between meetings; the Head of Governance meets the Chair every two weeks where possible, and the Principal & CEO weekly. In addition, the Chair and Principal & CEO meet regularly to discuss strategic and operational matters. The impact of this consistent communication is that each member of the triumvirate remains well informed about emerging issues, shared priorities and upcoming decisions, and can work collaboratively to shape agendas and ensure the Board is appropriately sighted. All 3 members described these meetings as highly valuable, both individually and collectively.

The Chair, who took up the role in July 2024 after joining the Board in 2023, has brought a clear and strategic approach to governance. Since the last EBR, the College has a new Chair and a new Head of Governance, with the Principal & CEO also relatively new in post at that time. Governors and staff interviewed spoke positively about the Chair's leadership, noting his strong visibility across the College and his clear understanding of the Board's strategic role. The effectiveness of Chairs, both Corporation and of committees, has a significant influence on governance culture, and at the College this is supported through regular informal meetings of Committee Chairs. These sessions sit outside the formal structure but provide a useful forum to share issues, reflect on committee business and ensure alignment with any follow-up actions taken forward by the Board.

The Head of Governance, in post since January 2024, is an experienced Governance Professional with several years' experience across the education sector. She works three days a week in governance, with an additional day supporting data functions, in the College and is highly regarded by Governors and the Leadership Team alike. She engages actively in local and regional governance networks, attended 'Just One Thing' sessions and has also attended many AoC and ETF training and briefing sessions. The College and Corporation are committed to supporting her ongoing professional development, and this investment is already having a positive impact on governance practice. Interviews with staff and Governors highlighted the high value placed on the support, administration and guidance she provides. As one survey respondent commented, she *'has been a great addition. It all runs very well.'*

Culture

Through the observation, survey and feedback from interviews the Board has a mature and highly effective working relationship between themselves and the Executive Team. The Board and committee meetings observed were purposeful, well-paced and conducted in a relaxed but professional manner. Governors appeared to work well together and were clearly supportive of one another. Members of the Executive Team and senior staff interviewed also described an open, accessible culture, noting that they are happy to meet Governors outside formal meetings to provide briefings, updates or additional information. This collaborative approach enables the Board to offer constructive challenge and support while maintaining appropriate boundaries and avoiding

operational involvement. Governors consistently described a friendly yet professional atmosphere, underpinned by an open-door culture that allows them to liaise freely with the Executive Team.

Survey responses reinforced this picture, with governors repeatedly describing an environment that is open, positive, respectful and highly collaborative. There is a strong sense of shared purpose, with members united by a commitment to achieving the best outcomes for learners, staff and the wider community. Across the survey responses words such as 'honest', 'supportive', 'inclusive', 'collegiate' and 'enthusiastic' appeared frequently, reflecting a culture where individuals feel able to contribute, challenge constructively and work together effectively. Informal interactions outside the boardroom were also valued by many Governors (attendance at College events and award ceremonies for example) as noted in the survey, helping to build trust, deepen understanding and strengthen cohesion.

Governors also identified opportunities to further enhance this positive culture through reducing the overall Board size which has been raised earlier in this report. Some Governors expressed interest in having more opportunities for relationship building and development outside formal meetings, including social events and in person training. Overall, the culture is a significant asset characterised by trust, openness and shared ambition opportunities for further strengthening being evolutionary rather than corrective. As quoted:

'A positive Board culture exists with a group of highly dedicated people who want the best outcomes for SNC and its learners.'

The Governor Journey - Training and Development

A well thought through induction is a vital foundation for governor effectiveness and in this survey 33% felt that they had received a good induction process with 52% somewhat agreeing that they had. From documentation seen, new Governors benefit from a structured induction process, supported by a clear training offer and early access to committees. They describe the induction as thorough and welcoming, with open access to Senior Leaders, the Principal & CEO and the Chair helping them quickly understand their responsibilities. Co-Opted members report feeling treated as full members from the outset, and the Head of Governance plays a central role in guiding new governors and providing clarity.

Similarly, training and development are an essential element of being an effective governor. Opportunities are signposted to and provided for Governors through a mix of internal sessions and externally resourced sessions mainly through the AoC and ETF. All Governors complete a comprehensive suite of mandatory training modules, including safeguarding, Prevent, data protection, cybersecurity, EDI and anti-fraud/bribery/corruption. As noted in the review, records are maintained and regularly reviewed at Search & Governance, and the Head of Governance ensures modules are refreshed to maintain compliance and awareness with Governors challenged when training has not been completed as observed at the Corporation meeting.

Training is delivered through a blend of online modules, Board development events and in person safeguarding sessions. In the survey 100% of Governors agreed and strongly agreed that the training

and development opportunities offered enhances their skills and knowledge and supports them to be more effective. In addition, the Head of Governance communicates opportunities clearly, enabling Governors to select training most relevant to their needs. Governors also access a wide range of external development opportunities, including AoC and ETF events, attendance at the AoC Conference and sector specific sessions.

While online options offer flexibility for volunteers, some Governors expressed interest in accessing more face-to-face group training over the academic year. The Governor Handbook has rightly been recognised by the Board as requiring updating and as part of this process it is recommended that the College refresh the induction programme too. In the survey some Governors usefully identified several opportunities they felt would strengthen the induction offer such as being offered buddy or mentoring scheme for informal support, more structured sector specific orientation for those new to the FE sector with campus visits as part of induction to deepen understanding of the College's environment.

Challenge

Challenge and scrutiny are well-established strengths of the Board. Chairs consistently create relaxed, inclusive, and welcoming meetings where governors feel confident to question and challenge. Across all observed meetings, challenge was respectful, well informed, and supported by a positive and professional relationship between the Board and the SMT.

The Principal & CEO described the Board's ability to hold the Executive Team to account as one of its greatest strengths. They highlighted an example where an Extraordinary Audit & Risk Committee meeting was called at very short notice (with 7 days notice) and every Governor attended, demonstrating strong commitment and accountability.

Governors provided several examples of effective challenge. The Chair of Finance & Employment noted that Governors had challenged the presentation and accessibility of the management accounts, leading to collaborative work with the College to improve how financial information is reported. Another frequently cited example related to Student Governors, who raised concerns about car-parking costs and the accessibility of Student Services. The College responded quickly, demonstrating that student voice is valued and acted upon.

The Chair of Audit & Risk explained that when Governor's request updates, clarification, or further detail on actions recorded in the Risk Management Plan, the Executive responds promptly and comprehensively, an important feature of maintaining a dynamic risk management document. At the observed Audit & Risk Committee meeting, Governors also questioned whether the College's size and complexity required additional resource to support the audit workload.

Challenge also occurs among Governors themselves. At the April 2026 Corporation meeting, the recommendation from the Governance & Search Committee regarding the completion and updating of Governor training led to a robust discussion and clear actions being agreed.

At the ASQ meeting, Governors challenged the Executive on the impact of the Curriculum Review, retention rates, and variations in outcomes, particularly in land-based subjects. They also questioned how the Inclusion Strategy aligned with other College strategies and requested an executive summary, which the Executive agreed to provide.

Across all meetings, Leaders responded openly to challenge and acted on requests appropriately. Governors also described a “no surprises” culture built on trust and openness, where challenge is followed up either immediately or at the next meeting. As Governors quoted there is an:

‘environment as ‘collaborative, where challenge and debate are seen as constructive, supporting more informed and effective decision-making. Governors also noted that ‘questioning and challenge were actively encouraged, rather than treated as a box-ticking exercise.

Triangulation / Link Governor Visits Programme

At Suffolk New College the Link Governor Visits Programme is a purposeful and well established feature of governance, providing Governors with valuable assurance on key developments and enabling them to gather meaningful student and staff voice. Clear protocols, guidance and reporting processes are in place, and the Programme is reviewed annually by the Governance & Search Committee, where deployment of Governors and link areas are agreed ahead of each academic year. A Link Governor log is maintained and reviewed at Academic Standards & Quality, with any gaps identified and addressed. This structured approach ensures good oversight of activity and coverage across the College.

All link visits are formally reported to the Academic Standards and Quality Committee. At the March 2026 meeting observed, these reports and the Link Governor Dashboard were discussed, and the Head of Governance is now developing a tracking document to capture any actions resulting from the visits. Governors interviewed felt that link visits gave them a stronger understanding of day-to-day issues and valuable opportunities to meet students and staff. As one Governor in their interview noted *‘it’s important for us to hear firsthand from the learners and learn how it feels for them’.*

However, there is limited information available on the impact of this Governor engagement or how visits contribute to individual Governor development. To strengthen the process, it would be beneficial to add an explicit ‘impact’ section to the reporting template. This would support clearer evaluation of the difference visits make and help build stronger evidence base for the impact of governance across the College.

Conclusions

The College benefits from a highly effective governance culture characterised by strong relationships, open communication and a well functioning triumvirate between the Chair, Principal & CEO and Head of Governance. Board and committee meetings are purposeful, well-paced and conducted in a professional yet supportive atmosphere, enabling Governors to offer constructive, well informed challenge. Governors demonstrate strong commitment, high levels of engagement and a shared

sense of purpose, with challenge evident across financial oversight, risk management, curriculum quality and strategic alignment. The Link Governor Visits Programme is well structured and valued, providing meaningful insight into student and staff experience. Induction, training and development are well established, with governors reporting that opportunities offered enhance their skills and effectiveness.

Areas for further development include strengthening opportunities for relationship building outside formal meetings, enhancing the induction programme (including mentoring/buddying and more sector-specific orientation), and adding an explicit 'impact' section to Link Governor Visit reports to better evidence the difference governance makes.

BOARD INTERACTION	
STRENGTH	AREA FOR DEVELOPMENT
1. A positive and collaborative Board culture The Corporation has established an open, supportive and constructive culture where communication is strong and challenge is welcomed.	1 Review training opportunities and consider the balance between online and face-to-face training to ensure Governors have access to a blended and engaging development offer.
2. A strong and effective triumvirate where the working relationship between the Chair, Principal & CEO and Head of Governance is highly effective and provides stability, clarity and strategic alignment.	2.Refresh induction programme and Governor Handbook to ensure clarity, consistency and strong onboarding for new and Co-Opted Governors.
3.Highly committed and engaged Governors demonstrating a strong commitment, high levels of engagement and a shared sense of purpose in delivering the best outcomes for learners and the College.	3. Strengthen the Link Governor reporting template by including a section that captures the impact of visits, helping to evidence the value of governance activity.
4.Experienced Head of Governance who is well respected, experienced and plays a central role in ensuring high-quality governance support and practice.	

Fig. 6

In assessing overall Board effectiveness, we have focused on the core functions of a Governing Body:

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

We have looked at the way in which you observe the Nolan Principles and your adopted Code of Governance and the extent to which the culture of the Board focusses on outcomes. Key Board outcomes are shown below:



Fig. 7

Concluding Judgment

Suffolk New College has a strong and highly effective Governing Board, characterised by a breadth of expertise, a collaborative and respectful culture, and a constructive working relationship with the Executive Team. The Board benefits from diverse skills and perspectives, enabling informed debate, meaningful challenge and robust oversight across all areas of college performance. Meetings are open, inclusive and well run, with a culture where views are welcomed and respected, and where challenge is both offered and received positively. The Board demonstrates clear commitment and a shared purpose supported by strong leadership from the Chair and high quality guidance from the

Head of Governance. Together, these strengths create a cohesive, skilled and engaged Board that is deeply committed to the success of the College and its learners.

Student Experience - Governors place a strong emphasis on understanding the lived experience of learners and is evident in their decision making supported by a Link Governor Visits Programme that brings authentic student voice into governance. Feedback from these visits provides valuable insight into day-to-day issues and helps ensure decisions remain focused on improving outcomes for students.

Integrity - The Board operates with openness, transparency and a clear commitment to ethical governance, reflected in honest dialogue and a “no surprises” culture. Governors demonstrate integrity through consistent attendance, active engagement and a willingness to hold themselves and others to account. 100% of respondents state that they know and understand the Nolan principles. AoC Code of Good Governance has been adopted.

Quality - Quality assurance is strengthened through purposeful committee structures, effective triangulation and well-informed challenge across curriculum, retention and outcomes. Governors scrutinise performance data closely and seek assurance on the impact of improvement actions.

Reflectiveness - The Board demonstrates strong self-reflection, regularly reviewing its own effectiveness through surveys, feedback and the Governance SAR. Governors are open to evolving their practice, identifying areas such as induction, training and board size for continuous improvement.

Strategic Leadership - Governors maintain a clear focus on long-term strategy and felt actively involved in developing the current College’s strategic direction but wanted more clarity on how to measure and therefore to monitor the impact of the existing plan.

Financial Soundness- Financial oversight is robust, with committees providing strong assurance on financial sustainability, audit processes and resource allocation.

Responsiveness - The Board responds swiftly and constructively to emerging issues, demonstrated by rapid action following Student Governor feedback and timely updates requested through the Risk Management Plan.

Inclusivity and Diversity - Governor’s value an inclusive culture where all members feel able to contribute, supported by open communication and a welcoming meeting environment. The Board recognises the importance of diverse perspectives, including those of Student Governors, and seeks to strengthen induction and development to support all members.

Collective Accountability- The Corporation demonstrates strong collective accountability, with Governors taking shared responsibility for decisions, challenge and continuous improvement and decisions are compliant with regulations. Decisions being made from evidence from reports, data, drawing on knowledge gained from firsthand visits to the College.

Recommendations and Action Plan

This Review has drawn several conclusions about the strengths of the College and areas for development. These recommendations have been discussed with The Chair, Head of Governance and Principal & CEO. We make the following recommendations:

<p>1. 1. Review the co-opted governor model to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Ensure Co-Opted members make up no more than 30–40% of the overall Board. ○ Introduce bespoke induction sessions tailored specifically for Co-Opted Governors. ○ Strengthen safeguarding and training expectations within the Co-Opted Governor role description. ○ Review and update Standing Orders regularly to reflect any changes.
<p>2. Strengthen the formal interview process to enhance the recruitment and interview process for new Governors and Co-Opted Governors to ensure rigour, transparency and alignment with Board needs.</p>
<p>3. Map Governor networks and contacts to develop a structured approach to mapping Governors’ external networks and contacts to maximise opportunities for partnership, influence and stakeholder engagement.</p>
<p>4. As part of the self-assessment process gather feedback on the role and impact of the Chair.</p>
<p>5. Strengthen the Executive Summary in Board papers to highlight key KPIs and decisions required, improving clarity and strategic focus.</p>
<p>6. Formalise and document the Boards risk appetite statement and review annually.</p>
<p>7. As part of the self-assessment process gather wider feedback on the impact of governance from the Executive and wider Senior Leadership Team.</p>
<p>8. Strengthen monitoring of long-term vision and strategy by developing a monitoring tool to track progress against long-term strategic objectives more systematically.</p>
<p>9.</p>
<p>10. Review training opportunities and consider the balance between online and face-to-face training to ensure governors have access to a blended and engaging development offer.</p>
<p>11. Refresh the induction programme and Governor Handbook to ensure clarity, consistency and strong onboarding for new and co-opted governors.</p>
<p>12. Strengthen the Link Governor reporting template by adding a section that captures the impact of visits, helping to evidence the value and impact of governance activity.</p>

Action Plan

Issue	Action	Intended outcome	Named lead	Timescale
1.				
2.				
3.				
4.				
5.				
6.				
7.				
8.				

Fig. 8