# External Board Review

*Middlesbrough College*

**Reviewer:** *Shirley Collier MBE*

*22 April 2026*

# Executive Summary

The process set up for the Association of Colleges (AoC) External Board Review is based on statutory requirements set out in relevant Government legislation and as part of Department for Education (DfE) conditions of funding. AoC has developed and updated the framework following completion of the first round of Reviews that was based on the Education and Training Foundation (ETF)/AoC pilot Review Framework. The Framework considers, but is not limited to, principles from Codes of Governance, the Ofsted 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. 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 | • Current skills and experience mix<br>• Analysis of skills matrix | • Develop skills profile for each committee to aid succession planning |
| BOARD STRUCTURE | • Use of presentations<br>• Link governors scheme<br>• Approach to strategic risk management<br>• Interface between committees and board | • Timed agendas; shorter meetings<br>• Context in papers<br>• Collective Strategic Risk Appetite<br>• Chair's Appraisal |
| BOARD INTERACTION | • Inclusivity and flexibility<br>• Collaboration between governors and staff for shared ownership<br>• Relationship between Chair, Principal and Head of Governance | • More purposeful facilitation of members' contributions, and occasional use of more formal protocols to ensure balance of contributions<br>• Develop governors' questioning skills |

**Fig. 1**

The overall conclusion on Board effectiveness is that there is strong evidence that the Board is highly proficient and consistently impacts positively on college strategy, effectiveness, and outcomes.

Thanks and appreciation is recorded to all those who have engaged in this Review and especially to Zeta Foster, Head of Governance, for her support.

## Our Approach

This External Board Review was undertaken by Shirley Collier over the period February to May 2026. The Review process used with the Board of Middlesbrough College followed a ten-stage approach.


An initial planning and scoping meeting was held in October 2025 with the Chair, Vice Chair, Principal and Head of Governance to agree the approach and set the timeframe for Review activities.

It was agreed that the standard review and report would fulfil the needs of the college. As the Chair is in her first year in that role, the outcomes of this review will inform her mandate. The Principal was particularly interested in the deployment of link governors.

**Fig. 2**

An online survey was issued to all Board members on 9 February 2026. The survey produced a return rate of 90%. A desktop review of selected board and key college documentation and the governance section of the College website was undertaken, including Instrument and Articles, Minutes, governor profiles and reports of interest to stakeholders such as the Annual Accountability Statement. Interviews took place with nine members of the governing body and the Head of Governance. The Reviewer attended the College's Board meeting on 31 March 2026 in person, and also attended two committees in person and viewed one as a recording.

Following completion of the evidence gathering phase, the first draft of the report was written and findings shared at an initial meeting where factual accuracy was checked and agreed amendments made. The report was subject to AoC moderation and the final report including recommendations will be presented to the Board on 7 May 2026.

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

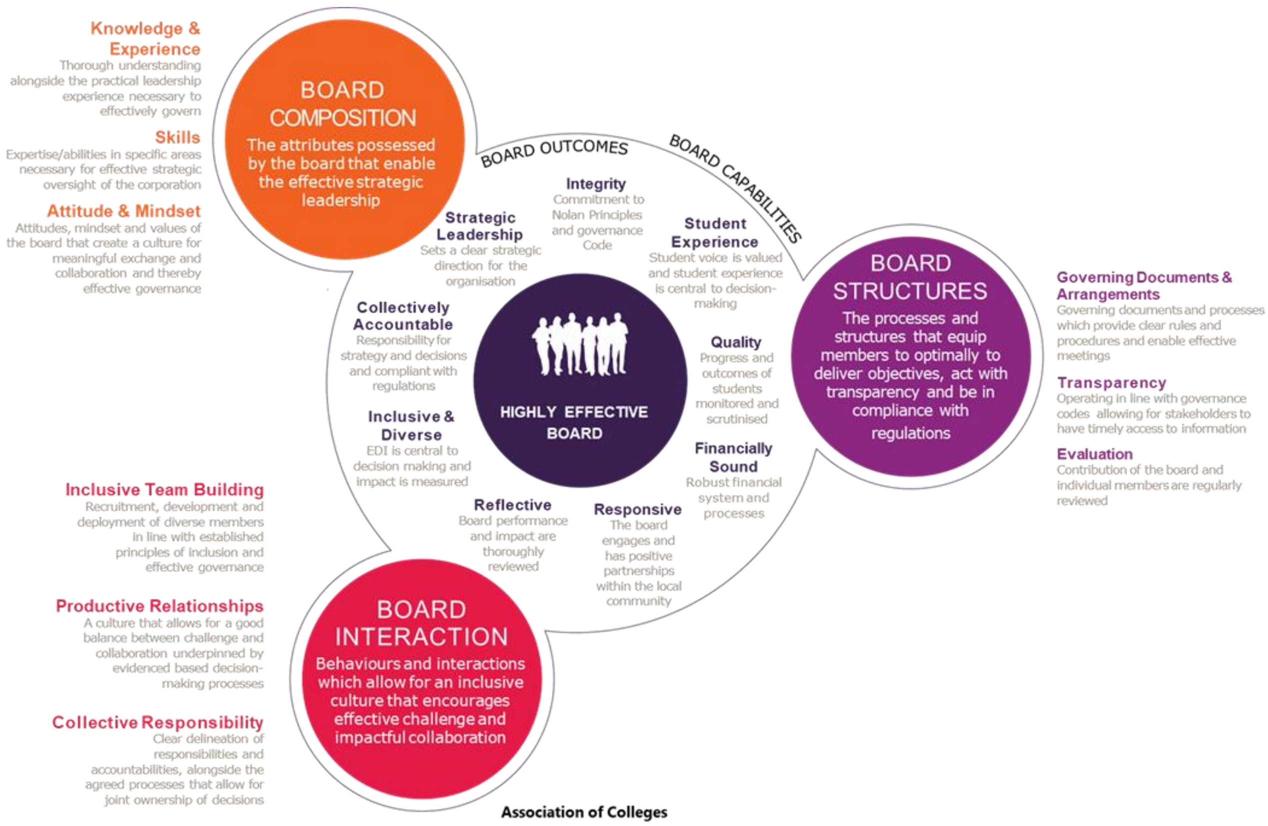



**Fig. 3**

# Background to the Organisation

The main site in Middlesbrough includes a sixth form centre, a science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) centre, TTE Technical (a specialist engineering training provider), Northern Skills (apprenticeship centre), a Higher Education (HE) centre and an adult learning centre. The College is located in Middlehaven, Middlesbrough – a brownfield, ex-industrial site in the heart of the Tees Valley. Middlesbrough is one of the most deprived local authorities in England with high unemployment and significant economic challenges. The area has a Mayoral Strategic Authority and a local growth plan which aims to increase jobs across a range of sectors including green energy, digital and creative and advanced manufacturing.

The college has 12,500 students including 5,250 young people on study programmes, 1,700 apprentices, 169 High Needs students and 530 studying on Higher Education programmes. At its Ofsted inspection in 2024 the college was graded Good with Outstanding in many areas, and was deemed to be making a strong contribution to skills needs. The college has never been in Further Education Commissioner (FEC) intervention and is currently forecasting Outstanding financial health at the end of the academic year. At the time of the review, the Senior Leadership Team was undergoing a small restructure and the CFO was relatively new in post (September 2025).

Middlesbrough's resident population is 82% White British, 10.5% Asian/Asian British; this profile is mirrored by that of staff though the student body is more ethnically diverse with 22% coming from Black and minority ethnic groups. 29.1% of students consider themselves to have a learning difficulty or disability and just under 39.7% live in a deprived area (Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, Annual Report 2024/25).

The previous external board review was undertaken in 2023 and found that governance was strong in all three dimensions – board composition, structure and interactions – and the board's approach to risk management was exemplary. Recommendations were made to improve report writing and presentation skills of some managers, increase the opportunities for governors to meet students and implement a succession plan for the Chair. The majority of these have been progressed and completed. A new Chair has been appointed, additional members have joined the Audit & Risk Committee, and governors have increased their engagement with students through walkthroughs, Teams attendance at Student Council meetings and in person attendance at key events such as Student Awards ceremonies. Papers and reports have been refined for structure and brevity and, more recently, for alignment with the new Ofsted inspection framework. Governors are getting to know each other better (though as last time, some said during this review that they don't know each other well). Attendance continues to be monitored closely.

# Board Composition

**Background**

At the time of the review the college had 22 governors comprising 17 ‘college governors'[1] (Instrument and Articles provide for up to 18), the Principal, two staff governors and two student governors, as well as six ‘coopted governors’ who are members of committees but not of the Board itself. The college uses the committee model of governance and has adopted the AoC’s Code of Governance. The Search & Governance Committee has strategic and operational oversight of board composition and meets three times a year.

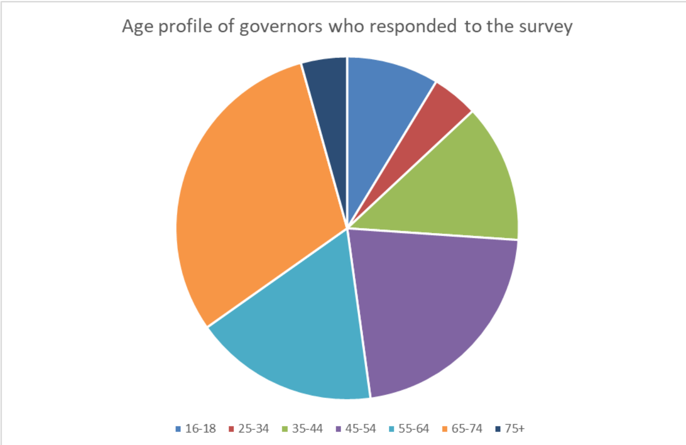
**Findings**

**What attributes (skills, knowledge, mindset/attitude) does the Board possess currently and what additional attributes would it need to meet its objectives?**

The board has a strong mix of public and private sector skills, knowledge and other attributes relevant to the operation of the college, is inclusive and diverse. The board’s Skills Audit is informed by its current strategy and tracks a greater number of factors than in many colleges (for example detailed employment status, community links and public profile). Analysis is robust and is monitored every term by the Search and Governance Committee for balance, and to inform recruitment and selection.

Several board members have held senior roles in education with responsibility for oversight, strategy-building and execution (from secondary through to Higher Education). Three members are qualified accountants and auditors and they, and others, have had oversight and control of finances in their professional lives. Many governors have considerable knowledge of local skills needs through their day jobs and their professional networks. This foundational bedrock of board knowledge is enhanced by governors with specialist sector knowledge and experience which is directly relevant to the skills needs of the locality, for example in healthcare, immersive technologies, engineering, innovation and (international) workforce development. The great majority of college governors have operated at a strategic level. Through their employment, community and other non-executive roles governors are well-informed on a wide range of societal issues which affect the college’s operation and students’ experience of college life.

[1] These are board members who are neither employees of nor students at the College – often referred to in other institutions as ‘external’ or ‘independent’ governors.




The majority (70%) of college governors are working; the age profile of governors shows a healthy distribution (Fig 4).

Over 80% of governors either work or live in the Tees area.

There is a gender balance though most board *leadership* positions (Chair, Vice Chair, and six of the seven Committee Chairs) are currently filled by women.

**Fig. 4**

The ethnic composition of the board - 85% white, 15% Asian - is broadly reflective of staff and Middlesbrough's resident population though the student body is significantly more diverse (22% coming from Black and minority ethnic groups).

This combination of attributes results in a cognitively diverse (and strategically skilled) board which brings many different perspectives to board discussion and exercises independent thought.  This is particularly beneficial in terms of responsiveness, financial soundness, monitoring of quality and the student experience.  This was evidenced at the March 2026 board meeting where governors drew on their knowledge to challenge and inform the college's responsiveness to emerging risks due to the Iran conflict (shortage of materials, rising cost of fuel and microchips, the likelihood of bans on travel), apprenticeship under-recruitment, monitoring of students by various characteristics of disadvantage, and proposed pension contributions.  Similarly, governors draw on their professional networks to provide useful contacts for staff (at Corporate Services Committee Meeting March 2026, the Chair offered to introduce staff to a business which has achieved IIP Platinum level).

In the survey conducted for this review governors identified some emerging skills needs: knowledge of neurodiversity (because of its impact on resources and safeguarding); and Human Resources knowledge and experience.  With neurodiversity prevalence rising and given the predicted increase in AI-generated complaints leading to complex resolution, and ongoing challenges with staff recruitment and sickness absence, expertise in both areas would stand the board in good stead.  Several governors also noted the current search for another financially qualified governor to ensure ongoing quality of scrutiny and challenge as current members retire.

Governors indicated in the survey for this review a firm understanding of and commitment to the Principles of Public Life.  These are managed formally, for example through habitual declarations of potential conflicts of interest at meetings, and the Chair's responsibility to ensure that they are observed in all the Governing Body's business which is set out in the Chair's role description.  The board is actively working to ensure that the college's values are well known by governors.  In observed meetings and in the survey, several governors referenced these, in particular "Do the Right Thing", with one newer governor commenting "*it seems that every substantive discussion is underpinned by the college's values*".

**Conclusions**

The Review has identified that Composition is currently a great strength of the board.  It is carefully thought through and managed; it is an art *and* a science and both are in evidence! Efficiency could be enhanced by documenting and profiling committee skills needs.  The following table summarises headlines:

| BOARD COMPOSITION | |
|---|---|
| **STRENGTH** | **AREA FOR DEVELOPMENT** |
| 1. The current balance of knowledge, skills, sectors, specialisms, community, local context, and relevant appropriate demographic profile. | 1. Develop a skills profile for each committee to further support recruitment. |
| 2. Experience of governors at a strategic level within their own professions | |
| 3. Detailed skills analysis and frequent monitoring by committee | |

**Fig. 5**

# Board Structures

**Background**

Middlesbrough College is a single entity, its Instrument and Articles augmented by Standing Orders, last amended October 2025. The college uses the committee model and has seven committees: Audit & Risk (A&R), Corporate Services (CS), Curriculum & Standards (C&S), Remuneration, and Search & Governance (S&G), Employer Voice & Engagement (EV), and Higher Education (HE), the last two being introduced within the last two years. Key governance documents are published on the Governance pages of the college website, including the Instrument and Articles, committee Terms of Reference, and Minutes from the last twelve months of board and committee meetings.

Corporation board meetings are held four times a year with two additional governor strategy events (the most recent of which, held in February 2026, was, for the first time, residential). Committees meet between two and four times a year. Governors are encouraged to attend the college Self-Assessment Report (SAR) validation and Curriculum Planning meetings.

The Board approves a comprehensive annual Schedule of Business for board and committees. Arrangements are in place for decisions to be taken outside meetings when necessary, through Written Resolution. These are reported and minuted at the next board meeting.

Both the Strategic Plan and the Accountability Statement are available on the college's website. Progress against the Strategic Plan (including budget) and the Accountability Statement is monitored through committees and the board. All board papers are held securely and distributed via a Governance hub on SharePoint.

The college has 22 Link Governor roles undertaken by twelve college and coopted governors (in effect six curriculum-related areas are shared by two governors).

Annual self-assessment encompasses governors' individual assessment of contribution and performance, collective assessment of governance and committee self-assessment. That process will be further strengthened this year through introduction of 180/360 degree feedback from members of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT). There is currently no formal Chair's appraisal process though some governors gave feedback on the previous Chair and contributed to informal objectives for the Chair this year. The Chair, Vice Chair, Principal and Head of Governance meet formally every half term and weekly informal discussions are also held between the Chair and Principal, and Chair and Head of Governance.

## Findings

**Do current Board structures equip Governors to optimally engage with each other to deliver the College objectives effectively, with transparency and in compliance with Regulations?**

<u>The governance cycle</u>

The meetings schedule gives governors the appropriate opportunity to fulfil their strategic leadership role, ie to develop, approve and monitor strategy and budgets. Information is shared in a timely and transparent way with governors and in accordance with Regulations.

At the recent strategy development session a combination of external speakers (from AoC and Tees Valley Combined Authority), governors, staff and consultants made presentations on financial benchmarking, national and local policy, economic and employment context, space analysis, external perception by stakeholders, specific provision type challenges (HE), and financial planning investment options. Armed with this information, and utilising their skills in strategic thinking, analysis and synthesis of information governors had the opportunity to shape priorities. 85% of governors attended one or both days of the session, including staff, student and coopted governors.

Ongoing development of the new strategic plan was referenced frequently in subsequent observed committee and board meetings. Governors demonstrated their strategic leadership of the college, as well as their stewardship of its financial health when they discussed the planning assumptions in the Financial Plan including the risks and opportunities associated with different investment options, balancing short- and medium-term gains.

<u>The information provided to governors</u>

From its strategy, the college has identified comprehensive Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and improvement plans. RAG-rated KPI reports produced by staff enable governors to monitor strategic progress effectively and to challenge progress. For example in the C&S Committee they asked about specific action taken for learners with higher starting points who were not progressing as well as those with lower starting points, including teacher pedagogy and whether targets were aspirational enough. In a separate discussion they questioned how well qualifications developed with large employers were working for SMEs.

Agendas are regularly reviewed with the aim of streamlining and freeing up time for strategic debate. The college is on an improvement journey regarding both the content and format of information shared with governors. Key to this has been the introduction of presentations at the start of meetings, both for the purpose of general updating and to enable effective monitoring of improvement plans. For example, at the A&R Committee meeting an excellent presentation was given on AI plagiarism following a low level recommendation in an internal audit report, the C&S Committee received an extensive presentation on the development of the new Inclusion Strategy, and one on Social Care following a Curriculum Performance Review, and the board also received an update from SLT in the form of a presentation. A great deal of work has also been done to streamline and shorten board and committee papers which are now, by sector standards, moderate in length. Most include an executive summary with data held in the main report or appendices.

Where information is not yet presented as clearly as possible, governors will ask for this, for example in the EV Committee meetings in 2025 governors asked for KPIs to be developed to assist monitoring, and in the observed CS Committee meeting a governor requested a live dashboard in order to track savings in line with plan.

Papers and reports could be further strengthened by specific links to the risk register; by more clearly and consistently highlighting areas which will be of interest/concern to governors, particularly for update papers; and by including an impact assessment for disadvantaged groups of students signalling alignment with the new Ofsted framework. Wherever possible, 3 year trend data should also be included so that the *relative* position can be understood; this is particularly important as the size of the student cohort changes each year.

Governors, especially newer ones, would benefit from a short paragraph in some papers giving relevant sector and college-specific context, for example at the A&R Committee, one governor asked for background information regarding the Health and Safety re-audit and another asked for information about previous audits in order to understand the implications of a current one. Some colleges do this effectively through hypertext links to background information, hence keeping the length of papers to a minimum whilst providing access to essential context.

In addition to information shared formally through papers, governors have access to informal sources for example, they receive the staff weekly newsletter as well as a weekly governance bulletin.

Governors – and committees - have a developed understanding of strategic risk; the Principal presents on risk at the start of each meeting and all committees review emerging risks at the end of each meeting. Members of the A&R Committee attend SLT Risk Management meetings and have attended trial sessions of new risk management software. The Strategic Risk Register, which details 21 such risks (26 in 2024/25), is reported on at each governing body meeting and each committee is clear which strategic risks it has oversight of. The risk management approach could be consolidated by collectively developing and documenting the college's (ie the board's) Risk Appetite, and annotating the Strategic Risk Register with this information (as well as cascading this down through the operational risk registers). In a fast-changing environment, and with continual changes in board membership, it is important for governors to understand the *collective* appetite, to be able to challenge this and to then hold the Executive to account. A well developed Risk Appetite statement is another tool for governors to help them strategically balance the ambition and resilience of the college. There is often also a secondary benefit for governors in developing Risk Appetite in terms of getting to know each other better and becoming more confident more quickly in the college's operation.

The interface between board and committee meetings is strong. This is due primarily to committee chairs' verbal reports at board meetings. These highlight the significance of key areas discussed, and make clear the committees' recommendations. These underpin governors' collective accountability. Whilst governors *may* use board meetings to challenge recommendations from committees, in practice this happens rarely. To further embed this good practice, more context may need to be given when making recommendations, for example current pension contribution rates were requested by a governor at the March 2026 board meeting before approving recommendations from Corporate Services Committee.

Compliance and regulation

From a desktop review of key documents and regulatory responsiveness the board is fully compliant. The S&G Committee's annual review of performance against the AoC Code provides the backbone for this, augmented by the Schedule of Business which details the decisions required ahead of agency returns and statutory reporting. Staff, including the Head of Governance, regularly update governors on changes to policy and regulatory frameworks, through written board briefings and in meetings. Governors themselves also proactively seek assurance, for example the A&R Committee recently requested a new compliance tracker, which is currently being piloted. Several governors have had responsibility for governance in their own professions; the impact of this in terms of their expectations is felt, positively, throughout the board's activities.

Given the current focus in the sector on Senior Postholder performance review and remuneration, and following publication of FEC guidance on senior postholder and chairs appraisal, this area was reviewed in detail. The college has three designated Senior Postholders. This does not include the Head of Governance (though her performance and remuneration are considered by the Remuneration Committee) nor the Chief Finance Officer. The board's approach to senior postholder appraisal and objective-setting is compliant and was further strengthened in 2025 with all college governors being sighted on documentation ahead of approval. Going forwards and as best practice, senior staff remuneration should always consider sector pay benchmarking and Minutes record that this has been undertaken, as well as the recommendation. The board should also consider whether increasing the number of Senior Postholders would be advisable in line with the board's responsibilities for oversight.

Work to shorten agendas and increase the time for strategic debate is having some success. However, committee meetings are long, most taking three hours. In some observed meetings, monitoring items coming later on the agenda received little scrutiny or challenge due to lengthy presentations and/or long discussion of earlier items, for example, the HR and Workforce report at CS Committee. Despite chairs indicating that they will take papers as read, not all staff observe this when introducing their paper. An action from the 2025/26 Governance Quality Improvement Plan states "*Chairs to ensure presenters stick to time*". Timed agendas would help ensure a better balance between presentations, monitoring and strategic discussion.

Link governors adding value

The link governor scheme provides individual governors an opportunity for deeper understanding in key areas. Most link governors attend relevant college meetings, engage in walkthroughs of relevant departments and liaise with individual staff on key aspects of performance. Some governors surface this information at meetings in a way which helps the board to discharge its duties of oversight and hold the Executive accountable in key areas, providing a further line of assurance to committees and board through triangulation. In some cases link governors do not sit on the committee which has oversight of their link area. Addressing this would increase the impact of the link governor scheme as would more consistent reporting in meetings.

Self-assessment and evaluation

Great attention is paid by the board to self-assessment and continuous improvement signalling members' reflectiveness and responsiveness. This is evidenced by the level of engagement with this review (90% of governors responded to the survey, and 10 governors took part in confidential discussions). Most of the recommendations of the last external board review have been completed or are in progress.

The board's various self-assessment activities inform the annual Governance Quality Improvement Plan which is monitored by the S&G Committee. In line with FEC guidance following the Weston College investigation, the college should put in place a process for regular appraisal of the performance of the Chair, ideally externally facilitated. The appraisal should link to the Chair's responsibilities and competencies, take into account the views of all governors (including the Principal/CEO) and SLT, and be action oriented.

Impact of the 3-way relationship between Chair, Principal and Head of Governance

The transition from the previous to the current Chair has been smooth. Regular meetings and clear communication between the Chair, Principal and Head of Governance ensure that governance is responsive to both college and individual governors' needs. The careful planning and execution of the ambitious residential strategy event is testament to this.

### Conclusions

The Review has identified that Board Structure currently has a mix of strengths and areas for further development. The following table summarises headlines:

| BOARD STRUCTURES | |
|---|---|
| **STRENGTH** | **AREA FOR DEVELOPMENT** |
| 1. Use of presentations to update governors on key developments including progress against improvement plans | 1. Timed agendas and better balance between presentations and discussion |
| 2. Link governors who provide triangulation and assurance | 2. More context required in some papers |
| 3. Developed approach to strategic risk management | 3. Shorter committee meetings and minimal introduction to papers |
| 4. Strong interface between committees and board | 4. Development of collective risk appetite and annotation of the risk register |
| | 5. Externally facilitated Chair's appraisal |

**Fig. 6**

# Board Interaction

### Background

Both board and committee meetings take place in person. Hybrid arrangements are only used by exception, for example if a governor is unwell or not able, at short notice, to attend in person. The Chair served as a governor for two years prior to becoming Chair in July 2025. Governors' planned end dates are spread evenly with two due to retire each year going forwards. Four college governors have served for less than one year, and 11 are in their first term of governance. Governors are allocated to both committees and link roles according to their skills and background.

The governor role description is set out in a *Background Information for Governors* document and is shared either in advance of or on appointment to the governing body. Role descriptions for coopted governors, the Chair and Vice Chair are also in place.

There is a good balance between formal and informal communication and considerable flexibility which allows governors to contribute according to their capacity. The board takes an inclusive approach with governors who are struggling to make the full attendance commitment (see below). Regular meetings are scheduled between the Chair, Vice Chairs, Principal and Head of Governance as well as between committee chairs and the relevant executive lead ahead of meetings.  These contribute to high levels of awareness of factors impacting the college and contribute to board agility.

From induction onwards, the Head of Governance provides all governors with opportunities to develop their understanding of the sector as well as familiarity with the college, through walkthroughs and attending events.  The governor training plan is well thought-through; levels of engagement are recorded for monitoring and the Head of Governance is responsive to governors' needs.

**Findings**

**Are interactions between Board members organised to allow for the most effective deployment of individual and collective skills to meet College goals?**

Middlesbrough College board has a strong culture which reflects the values of the college; it is ambitious and inclusive, and seeks continuously to improve.  This is evident in the recruitment, induction and development of governors as well as in the collaborative way governors work with staff and develop joint ownership.

The induction process is comprehensive in terms of content, and has been made as responsive as possible, for example including a "pick and mix" of activities which *must* and those which *might* be undertaken, a glossary of acronyms and a Governance Handbook.  One governor described the shift during the 5 years they had been on the board as "*from didactic to participative*".  New governors are offered access to sector resources but sometimes those who do not have an education background find that these assume a level of knowledge that they don't – yet – have.  All governors who commented on induction highlighted the value of human interaction – meetings with the Chair (both previous and current) and with staff.  Induction at committee level, including meeting with the Committee Chair (who normally acts as the board buddy) is currently being strengthened and will further contribute to team-building.

The Chair, as leader of the board, set out her vision for governance at the recent strategy residential, identifying strong, self-aware governance and leadership as "must haves" and fairness, respect and collaboration as the board's operating principles.  Relationships between governors and the Executive observed in committee and board meetings were positive. Despite their cognitive diversity governors show no sign of friction arising from opposing viewpoints, varied working styles, or clashing perspectives.

Governor training covers both mandatory elements and emerging ones, for example governors have had several briefings on the new Ofsted framework which has enabled them to contribute appropriately to debate.  This was illustrated at the C&S Committee meeting when governors both challenged and supported the development and approval of the new Inclusion Strategy, through questions such as "what does good look like?" (against this new and as yet largely untested framework) and "how do we know?".

Governors work collaboratively with staff, through the link governor relationships and committees. Examples include the link governor for digital whose work behind the scenes supporting and critiquing both policy and practice was referenced several times by staff at different meetings. Link governors for Health and Safety, Safeguarding and provision types also demonstrated through their comments that they were actively involved in wider discussions.

All committee chairs summarised business effectively and were assiduous in checking collective agreement before moving to the next agenda item. Some chairs invited contributions from quieter governors, but even so not all governors contributed. Staff and student governors were particularly quiet and those attending online during hybrid meetings were not always included in discussion. One chair set out expectations of how the meeting would run but this was not observed by other governors, which made it hard to facilitate balanced discussion.

Generally governors ask insightful questions though it is not always clear what question they are asking (ie whether for clarification or assurance), and sometimes they ask two questions in one! On occasion in the meetings observed, the Principal bridged the gap between questions and responses. Some work in this area on the part of governors would help the Executive to understand the purpose behind a question and respond accordingly, including taking an action away to report to the next meeting.

Many times in the observed meetings governors demonstrated integrity, inclusivity and strategic leadership, for example they consistently asked detailed questions about the impact of the closure of Hope Foundation on the learners who had studied there, about persistent absence (C&S Committee meeting) and about the impact of emerging risks on vulnerable and disadvantaged learners (Board, March 2026).

Examples of constructive challenge in observed meetings include a governor at the A&R Committee meeting asking whether 6 monthly review for the new Generative AI Policy was sufficiently frequent, given its fast-moving nature, in the CS Committee meeting governors asked about timings and outcomes of the Finance department's quality improvement plan, and at the C&S Committee meeting they probed the retention of new teachers and reasons for turnover. Both the nature of challenge and any resulting actions are clearly recorded in Minutes and recommendations to the board.

Due to their busy professional lives, governor attendance has been an issue (72% against a target of 80% in 2024/25) though all meetings remained quorate and governors are engaged. An inclusive approach has been taken to address attendance; governors who cannot make the full time commitment may be offered cooptee roles or a sabbatical (time away from the board but retaining membership) instead. This ensures that their expertise remains available to the board whilst recognising the other demands on their time. Attendance so far in 2025/26 has been stronger. 12 governors attended the SAR moderation meeting in November 2025, over half of them not members of C&S Committee, and 93% of governors attended at least part of the October 2025 and/or February 2026 strategic planning events.  All meetings continued to be quorate.

**Conclusions**

The Review has identified that Board Interaction currently has a mix of strengths and areas for development (to note, there are no weaknesses). The following table summarises headlines:

| **BOARD INTERACTION** | |
|---|---|
| **STRENGTH** | **AREA FOR DEVELOPMENT** |
| 1. Inclusivity and flexibility regarding governors' roles and availability | 1. Chairs to facilitate contributions from all members and governors to observe slightly more formal protocols *when requested*, eg comments to the chair, no side conversations, as these ensure more balanced contributions |
| 2. Extent and quality of collaboration between governors and staff outside meetings | 2. Develop governors' questioning skills (GGI paper on questioning may help) |
| 3. Relationship between Chair, Principal and Head of Governance | |

**Fig. 7**

## Overall Board Effectiveness

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. The review has found that in all areas and against all outcomes the board of Middlesbrough College is highly effective. Key Board outcomes are shown below:


Responsibility for good governance is shared by the Head of Governance, the Chair, the Vice Chair and the Principal and filters down to all governors creating a sense of collective accountability.

Governors exercise strategic leadership to ensure financial soundness as well as quality of teaching and learning.

They consistently focus on the student experience and outcomes in decision-making.

In their dealings they demonstrate integrity, responsiveness, reflectiveness and inclusivity.

**Fig. 8**

The overall conclusion on Board effectiveness is that there is strong evidence that the Board is highly proficient and consistently impacts positively on college strategy, effectiveness, and outcomes. The composition of the board and the culture that has been established are its key strengths.

The board's Skills Audit and its tracking of factors such as governors' detailed employment status, community links and public profile is an area that other colleges could learn from.

**Recommendations**

This Review has drawn a number of conclusions about the strengths of the College and areas for development. The following is a summary of our recommendations:

| |
|---|
| 1. By Summer 2026, put in place a Chair's appraisal process, preferably externally facilitated, which meets current FEC guidance. This will strengthen board culture, enhance leadership, drive performance and build stakeholder confidence. |
| 2. Develop the board's Strategic Risk Appetite to further strengthen the college's approach and ensure alignment from top to bottom on where the college is hungry for risk and where it has no appetite.<br><br>The *process* will build confidence between governors and SLT, and should also iron out the implications of individual governors' appetite for risk which otherwise may be informed primarily by their own personal and professional experience.<br><br>The resulting *outcome* - Risk Appetite statements - will help new governors to understand the operating environment and can be used as a measure of management's control of risks – are we within or beyond our stated Risk Appetite/tolerance? |
| 3. Make committee meetings shorter with more purposeful presentations to free up more time for strategic debate. Governors will need to work with staff before meetings to clarify expectations and hold them to account for time management in meetings. Timed agendas will help as all members of a meeting then become jointly accountable. |
| 4. Train governors in asking better questions. Good questions (by governors) should result in actionable intelligence. A clearer approach to questioning by governors with a focus on outcome and impact will help staff respond in an evidence-based way which builds assurance. Good questions may reveal blind spots, which in turn help the college better understand potential failures and prepare for them. |

These recommendations have been discussed with the Chair, Principal and Head of Governance. The report will be considered by the S&G Committee and presented to the governing body at its meeting on 7 May 2026. The S&G Committee will have oversight of whatever recommendations the board decides to take forward.