External Board Review

St Brendan's Sixth Form College

Reviewer: ***Professor Mary Malcolm***

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Executive Summary

This AoC External Board Review is based on the AoC review framework. The framework considers, but is not limited to, principles from Codes of Governance, the Education Inspection Framework and the DfE's current guidance on external board reviews. The framework comprises three core areas for evaluation known as Board Dimensions – namely: Composition, Structure and Interaction.

This full report sets out the findings made against the three Board dimensions in the Framework with key evidence that informs those findings.

Summary of findings

The Board is formed according to requirements specific to its operation as a Catholic sixth form college. Board members are committed to the institution's mission and purpose and collaborative in acting to further both within 'a welcoming and transformative Sixth Form College where every member of our community flourishes and achieves their full potential.' Governor and Board interactions are consistently informed by the understanding of College's mission and strategy among governors who are knowledgeable and committed. The Board has significant impact in its strategic oversight of the multiple dimensions of the College's mission and role as an inclusive Catholic institution.

The Board's composition reflects the requirements specific to Catholic sixth form colleges, and its members are fully engaged with the College's mission and values. They would welcome additional opportunity for engagement with College life and programmed opportunities to gain greater insight into the lived experience of students and staff. This would also respond to a further finding of this review in relation to the more comprehensive reporting of systematically obtained student perspectives so that the Board is well sighted in all its decisions on the expectations and needs of diverse groups of students aiming progressing to training, apprenticeships, employment, more advanced qualifications or higher education.

This review has recommended that the Board develop an enhanced skills audit (see below) and on that basis consider any requirements to strengthen specific skills within Board membership. In adopting a more granular approach to its regular skills audit, the Board will be in a better position to determine the development requirements of its members (collectively and/or individually), in light of the requirements of the Board as a whole (including specialist areas of skills and knowledge that require coverage) and the requirement for skills and knowledge that all members are expected to contribute in acting with reasonable care and skill. The Board is also recommended to document its standard approach to renewing terms of office (including the operation of any exceptions), in the context of general recognition of Board renewal as good governance practice. As part of its website review (see below) the Board should consider formulating a standing invitation to interested potential governors accompanied by additional information about the role and those who currently undertake it.

There is evidence that the Board reflects on its effectiveness and seeks to improve its impact and its operation at all levels through regular monitoring of the effectiveness of its structures. This review recommends that the Board integrates these sources, and extends them to include appraisal of governors, Chairs and link governors, to produce a single reflective and comprehensive Board self-evaluation and development. As part of this regular review, the Board might conduct the regular website check recommended by this review. Behaviours reflecting the Board's integrity and transparency are evident throughout Board practice. These strengths should be visible to the College's stakeholders, and the provision of full and up to date governance information is an important assurance to regulatory and other stakeholder groups.

The Board operates according to its governance framework and is systematic and organized in its deliberations and decisions. In some areas, the focus on ensuring that all committees participate fully in Board business and are provided with full information to do so may be counterproductive in allowing remits and business conducted by different committees to overlap in ways that militate against clarity of accountability. This review has identified areas in which the more detailed specification of committee remits, particularly where these relate to the same or adjacent areas of College business, would support more streamlined decision making by the Board, and greater clarity of accountable decision making. In relation to one such area – risk management – a documented process that defines the expectations of each group engaged in risk review is also recommended, to ensure that the Board's risk management accountability is exercised and recorded in full. In its tracking of internal audit follow up, the Board should adopt a more systematic approach to documenting recommendations, to ensure that its decisions not to accept any recommendations is fully recorded and that there is a clear line of sight between auditor recommendations and management action.

Board discussions are inclusive and collaborative. The Board is kept fully informed by the executive team. This review has identified a number of developments in the

reporting of information to the Board that will strengthen the impact of the Board's work. In the area of Careers support, a consolidated reporting routine should be combined with a review and rearticulation of committee responsibilities in this area.
To strengthen its impact in financial monitoring, all Board members should receive regular management accounts in a format that allows them to focus on and identify emerging and potential issues and provides support for their oversight of the detailed financial scrutiny of the Audit Committee and Resources Premises and HR Committee, and their engagement with the work of committees at full Board meetings.

As the Board concludes its current strategic planning cycle, it is recommended to review the impact of its strategic planning, and in particular the extent to which its objective setting and its associated target setting have leveraged institutional change and development. In finalizing its next plan, the Board should consider the role of wholecycle targets within which its annual progress can be monitored and which will provide the basis of its post-plan evaluation at the end of the forthcoming cycle.

There are also other areas in which the significance of data and information reported could usefully be highlighted, and/or the purposes of reports more clearly stated at the outset, ensuring both that Board members are enabled to prepare efficiently for meetings, and that those meetings are focused directly on the specified purposes and most important features of reports presented.

The Board has significant strengths and areas of proficiency in relation to a range of areas of College governance and demonstrates an orderly and meticulous approach to governance. The review judgement and recommendations are made to ensure that all Board members are supported to fulfil Board accountabilities in full and to apply their evident commitment and effort efficiently and effectively to all areas of strategy and scrutiny, thereby improving Board impact overall.

The overall conclusion of this review is that the Board is proficient in its impact on the College's mission and educational effectiveness and should develop more consistent levels of proficiency and impact in some other areas of accountability.