



# Kendal College

## Simplification of governance and emerging partnerships

This project has considered how the board of a very small general FE college (£9.3m turnover) can become more efficient, dynamic and streamlined and yet continue to meet its legal requirements. Kendal College is a grade 1 college though governance was graded as 'good' at the last inspection (January 2011). Figure 1 shows the board structure that included 5 committees and a total meeting schedule of at least 22 meetings per year. Aware of too much duplication of both papers and debate through its existing committee structure, the board agreed to explore and implement a new model to ensure efficiency of time for both members and senior managers, as well as to re-engage with its strategic lead role. The new structure (figure 2) will commence in January 2013 with full implementation in place by September 2013.

The second part of the project is to look at our relationship with other local boards to see where closer links can be made, again to improve efficiency and time as well as identifying duplication of processes or policies that could be shared across different boards. The two boards in question were the South Lakes Federation of Secondary Schools Board

and One South Lakeland, a consortium of key stakeholders within South Lakes including the district council, local enterprise partnership, employers, secondary schools and the college.

### **What was the catalyst / driver for reviewing the governance structure?**

The key driver to change has been the corporation itself. There was a developing view from members (evidenced through performance review) that board meetings had become a mere rubbing-stamping meeting for issues that had already been debated at committee and that the key responsibilities of strategic leadership were being eroded through engagement with too much operational detail. Those members who were not part of the relevant committee did not feel able to support a recommendation without full sight of the paper presented at committees and therefore there was an increasing tendency for papers to be provided to and debated by the full board.

In a similar vein, debate at full board meetings did not involve all participants. It

was suggested that this could be because of the numbers attending board meetings (17 members plus four college directors). The fact that all meetings of the corporation plus the large majority of committee meetings were attended by directors (senior management team), each of whom produced papers against the agenda, was also part of the consideration. As a small college, with a very lean management structure, this meant that a disproportionate amount of available management time was being used on governance. The fifth member of the SMT is also the clerk.

The Search and Governance Committee of the corporation requested a review of the structure of the board and its committees with the aim of providing a more dynamic structure that would lead the strategic direction of the college, as well as considering where reductions in time commitment by both members and managers could be achieved. It was agreed to set up a task and finish group chaired by the vice-chair of the corporation with a membership comprising the corporation chair, one other member and supported by the clerk.

## **What process is being used to carry out the review?**

The task and finish group, set up at the behest of the Search and Governance Committee and approved by the board, met twice in all and worked through the proposals contained in the paper prepared by the clerk following desktop research into models of governance such as policy governance, reading about corporate governance and talking to other clerks about how their boards function. This last action was very effectively supported by the strong network of clerks in the northwest but also facilitated by JISC's Clerks' Email network that provided access to a number of clerks in

other parts of the country who were looking at or had already adopted other models. A final proposal was drawn up to adopt a 'Carver-esque' model<sup>1</sup> and a special meeting of the board was held in late September with a single item agenda to consider the recommendation.

There was very constructive debate over the idea of removing two of the committees and moving towards a new structure of fewer members and strictly time-limited monthly meetings. Current board meetings started with lunch at 12:30 and continued through to around 4pm, timed to allow student members to attend more easily and to reduce the number of evenings that senior managers needed to spend in meetings on top of their other duties. The proposed new timings for the meetings are 5-7pm.

The timescale for implementation was to coincide with the new meeting structure commencing in January 2013, with the new board structure in place by September 2013.

Every member of the corporation attending the meeting was asked to express their views and the views of those unable to attend were provided. The majority of members were in favour of the proposed reforms. A vote was taken but was not unanimous. Of interest, those who were opposed to restructuring the committees were members who had a school background or had formerly been on a school board where committees are embedded into the structure. Members with a business background were very clear that the committee structure had only been put in place to provide more rigorous scrutiny of the college's performance based on historic concerns over quality, finance and resources.

<sup>1</sup> John Carver's model for 'Policy Governance' involves streamlining governance structure and responsibilities to allow the board to focus primarily on writing policy, strategic decision making and scrutiny. [www.policygovernance.com](http://www.policygovernance.com)

## How have stakeholders been involved in this process?

Stakeholder involvement has mostly involved the governors themselves, contributing towards the development of the new structure, plus the full involvement of the college principal and senior management team who have been briefed and consulted on the changes. Staff governors have also taken the idea to other staff; one of the staff governors is on the Search and Governance committee.

Phase 2 of the review is looking at opportunities for the newly-structured board to link more closely with other boards across the local community, including South Lakeland District Council and Kendal Town Council as well as the South Lakes Federation of Secondary schools. The review will look at any shared practice that can specifically add a flavour of localism to how the boards operate. We have already looked at how strategic planning and mandatory policies such as equality can be shared. Meetings have been set up with officers of those boards to look at how this early approach can be extended.

## What questions have arisen for you throughout this process?

The process to date has been quite straightforward with a clear appetite for change that is evidenced through the performance review of individual members and through comments made in committee meetings. Questions have certainly arisen about the legal requirements arising from the new flexibilities and these have been addressed through attendance at a number of briefings such as through the LSIS Governance Conference (March 2012), an AoC master-class (October 2012) delivered by Eversheds on the legal changes, as well as at a breakout session at the 2012 AoC conference on the role of governors in teaching and learning.

Some concern has been raised over the possibility that scrutiny of data, reports and activities carried out within committees may be reduced and that there is a risk posed on the corporation about whether it receives the assurance it needs to perform its duties. This has been addressed through ensuring that all key documentation is allocated to the meetings schedule.

## What conclusions or decisions have you come to so far?

The conclusion is that the change in the model of governance adopted by the college is welcomed and will go ahead with board approval. Fine detail of processes to support the changes are still be worked on, such as the reporting methods to be adopted and the timetable of meetings. The impact of the decision will not be felt until the new structure is settled and board membership going forward has been determined.

## How has 'New Challenges, New Changes' impacted on this review?

The catalyst for change came from 'New Challenges, New Chances' (BIS, 2011) through the identification of the new freedoms that would be afforded to colleges to ensure their structures meet the needs of the college and its wider community. Members of the corporation were provided with the report as part of their strategic planning in 2012 and recognised that the identified changes could provide them with the opportunity to review their structure.

## What will be the impact on learners?

A more dynamic board with improved strategic decision-making by governors will inevitably impact on learners and the wider community through there being less focus on operational

management. This will enable the board to focus on the future strategic direction of the college as being outward facing, and its position in the wider global marketplace. We are anticipating that the easiest measure of impact on learners will be the increase in time that senior managers can spend on decision-making and operational activities with learners that arises from spending less time in corporation meetings and preparation of papers.

## How will you know the new model is successful?

Success will be measured by the new meetings themselves: the wider engagement by a smaller membership on key issues, the improved teamwork of the principal, chair and clerk in taking forward the new board, timed meetings with concise agendas and well-produced papers and 'dashboard' reporting. Feedback is always sought after each corporation meeting and this feedback will be used to gauge the impact of the changes. Performance review of governors will also be used to check that the new model is successful as well as considering it through management performance review and outstanding self-assessment. Internal audit will examine the success or otherwise of the project and will provide governors with the assurance they need that they are carrying out their duties in full.

## Next steps

Once the new structure has been implemented, the impact of it will be measured following each meeting. Phase 2 will look further at developing closer links between the two identified local boards – One South Lakeland and South Lakes Federation of Secondary Schools – to see if there can be any synergy between them. An initial meeting has been held with a senior officer for South Lakes Federation Board to look at how links can

be developed between the boards. With the changing of most of the South Lakes secondary schools to academy status and the emphasis of Ofsted inspections for both sectors being on teaching and learning, consideration was given to how the college could support the school boards through joint training and sharing of good practice, including attendance at each other's board meetings to facilitate collaborative learning.

Changes to how the board tackles strategic planning have already started, with the setting up of a range of task and finish groups to look at key topics including income generation, higher education, the learner experience, each led by a nominated governor and including senior management input. Outcomes from the groups will support the strategic planning day scheduled for March 2013.

What three lessons learned would you share with other governing bodies considering a similar change process?

1. Generate sufficient evidence of the need for change from governors before embarking on such a review.
2. Set up a working party of people who can really make the changes happen.
3. Make sure the structure meet the needs of your own organisation and community rather than just adopting someone else's structure, as each college is different.

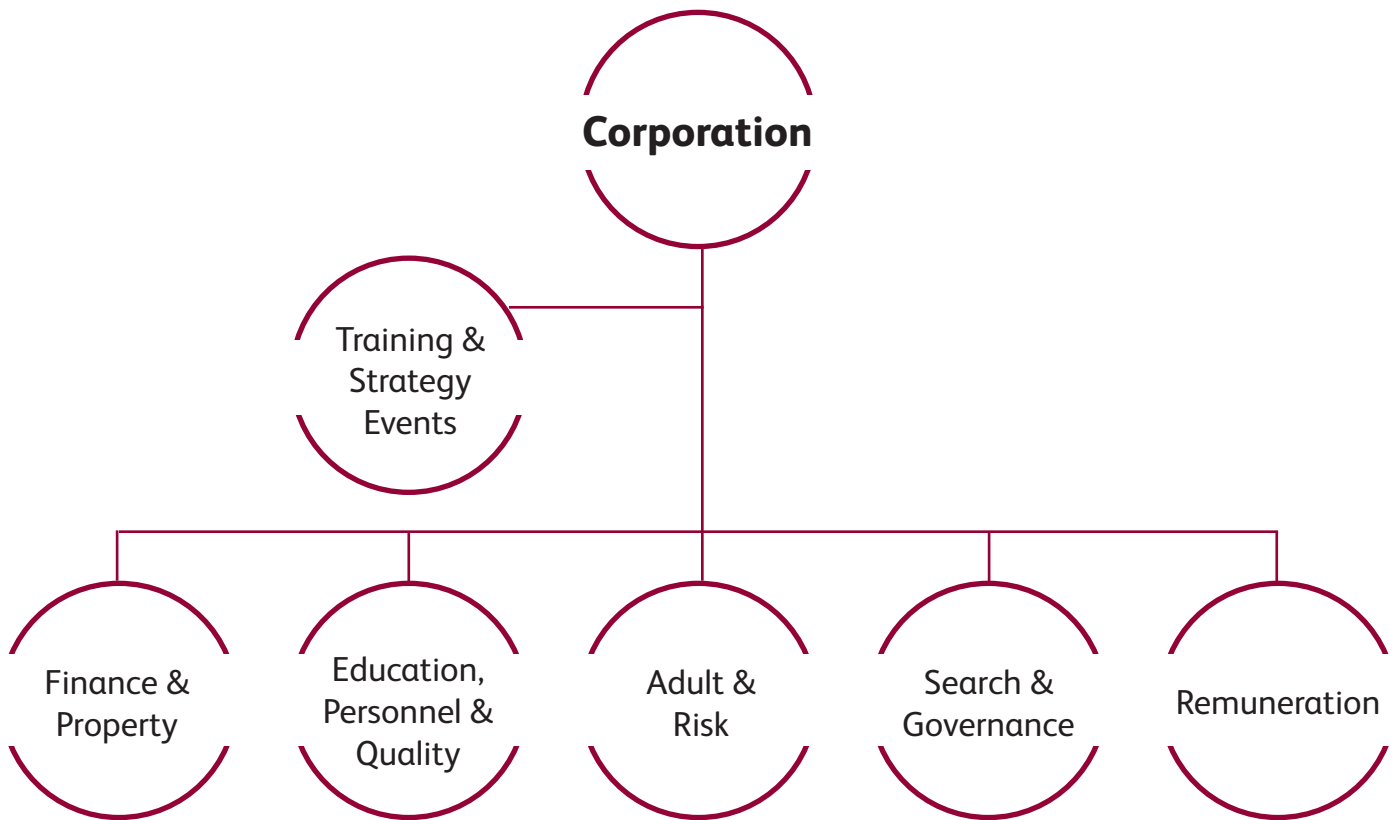


Figure 1: Original governance model consisting of four board meetings per year and termly meetings of the committees.

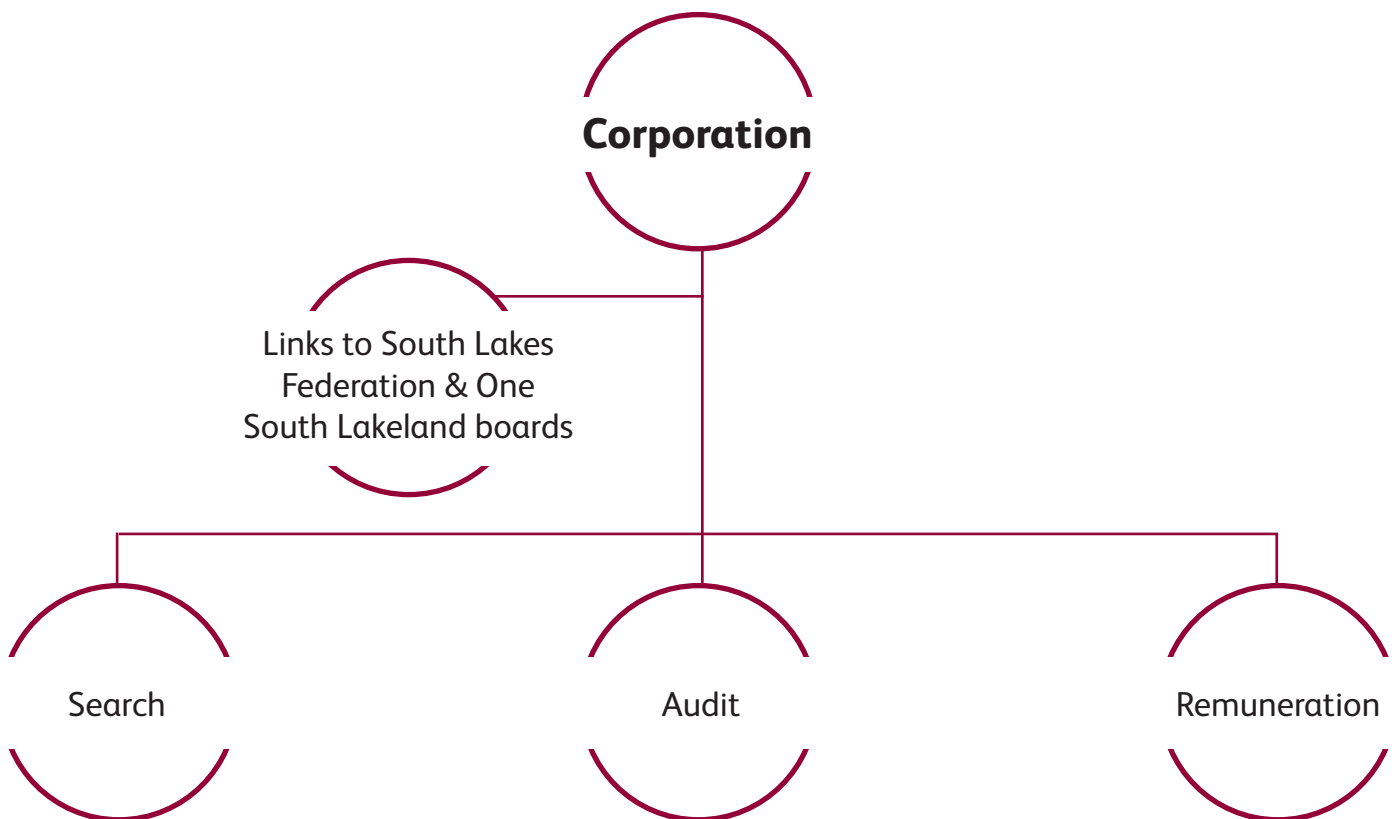


Figure 2: New governance structure with ten board meetings per year plus a minimum of one each of the three remaining committees and showing the link to external board.

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