



Winstanley College

Responding to the challenge of academy partnership

The College became the lead educational partner in a National Challenge Trust (NCT) initiative with Abraham Guest High School together with the local education authority following Ministerial approval on 25 January 2010. Winstanley College is an outstanding institution. At the time, the School was struggling to meet performance targets in respect of GCSE grades. The Principal and Chair of Governors believed that there were benefits for both institutions in this partnership, with the College providing support for leadership and management and curriculum areas at the School. Meanwhile College staff would benefit from professional development opportunities. In the long term there was also a belief that raising aspiration and achievement at the School would support the College's widening participation agenda and its ability to recruit from local, feeder high schools in a way that it had not been able to do in the past, putting the College at the heart of its local community. At a meeting of the Governing Body in June 2009, these proposals were put to governors who supported and agreed to proceed on the basis of the College becoming the lead educational partner.

College governance is deemed outstanding, whilst the School did not enjoy such a robust structure of governance procedures and processes. A joint decision was taken by the College and the School to take part in the Learning Board Programme to the benefit of both providers.

This case study will look at how college governance could evolve to embrace the academy partnership and the benefits to both institutions in the context of 'new freedoms' and the greater emphasis on local accountability.

Catalyst and drivers for reviewing the governance structure

A catalyst for review has been participation in the Learning Board Programme and the findings, which have enabled a period of reflection, and a crystallising and clarifying of opinions.

The main external driver for reflecting on the governance structure is the continuing partnership with Abraham Guest High School. The School became an academy on 1 January

2012. Winstanley College is the sponsor. The College is the vehicle by which the Department for Education (DfE), in the short- to medium-term expects to secure the additional improvements which will result in the School becoming an outstanding institution. Stakeholders have embraced this idea, seeing this as the way to embed aspiration and achievement.

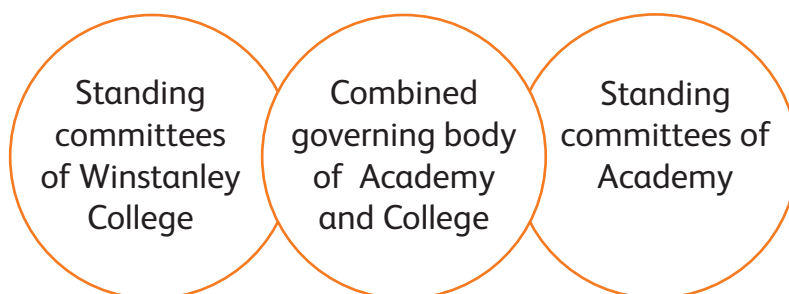
The College is now directly accountable to DfE for the academy's success, a factor that is of critical importance to the College's own governing body. The lines of accountability between the academy governing body, the Academy Trust and the College's governing body must be such that all concerned are aware of the objectives and any risks, which are felt to be largely reputational.

The increasing involvement of the Chair and Principal with management consultants, appointed by DfE during the process of establishing the Academy, led to some tensions within the College's governing body. There was a feeling that too much time and energy was being invested in the process and not enough on the College's core business and governance. These tensions came to a head when the Board was informed that the College's Principal would be required to play a crucial role in the oversight of the fledgling academy.

The governing body is at the stage of accepting its role as a sponsor and the implications of having an increased responsibility with regard to the Academy and the ramifications on the governance of the College.

During the life of the partnership, the School was required to dissolve its governing body and new governors were appointed. The College, as the lead educational partner, was able to appoint some governors to the School's new governing body. Under the new arrangements, the Academy Governing Body is directly accountable to the Academy Trust and has been populated by trustee appointments. There are now governors on both the Academy and the College's governing bodies, which is putting pressure on individuals, such as the Chair and Vice Chair of the College Board who also sit on the Academy governing body. The two governing bodies are running in tandem and being serviced by two clerks from different backgrounds.

The management consultants, in a presentation to the College's governing body in November 2011, offered the view that with governors sitting on both Boards they would be acting in the best interests of both institutions. The significance of this point does not address the central question of time and duplication of some aspects of the role and the governance processes. Whilst the Boards of both institutions have yet to hold or even think about 'change management' conversations, it is possible to imagine a scenario whereby, to maximise time and to avoid duplication, there could be one smaller governing body serviced by standing committees based in each institution (see diagram below). It is this emerging model of governance which, if taken forward, would mean a "new role for college governors, who" would be able "to use the new freedoms to lead their colleges strategically" (source: **'New Challenges, New Chances'**, BIS, 2011 p.19).



What process is being used to carry out the review?

Whilst no decisions have been taken in the context of a review of a future governance model or any clear preferences expressed, the decision to sponsor the Academy, with governors serving on both boards, has raised a number of questions. This, together with themes expressed in 'New Challenges, New Chances' and the Baroness Sharp inquiry ([A dynamic nucleus](#): colleges at the heart of local communities, NIACE/AoC/157 Group, 2011), will underpin any review.

Stakeholder involvement

If the governors at Winstanley College are serious about using the 'new freedoms' and arrive at the conclusion that the interests of both the Academy and the College would be best served by a new model of governance, then all stakeholders will be consulted. This new model could take as its starting point the structure that is being created, almost as a default setting whereby the two governing bodies are populated by governors who hold key positions on both governing bodies. As a first step, the stakeholders of both the Academy governing body and the College's own governing body would need to begin informal discussions and identify areas where there was overlap. The Venn diagram model above could be the model which emerges based on commonality of interest and maximisation of time and commitment.

Questions which have arisen that would underpin any review or re-structuring

The College's experiences of being involved in the Academy partnership, running the two governing bodies and associated ways of working have raised certain questions and provided lessons to be learned. These are outlined below:

Whilst the two governing bodies share governors, at present the governance arrangements are completely separate and there are two clerks overseeing the governing bodies. The Clerk at Winstanley College is independent whilst the Clerk at the Academy has a dual role.

Running two governing bodies in parallel, with the Academy governing body being populated by members of the College's governing body, is putting a pressure on some individuals to the detriment of the College's governing body.

There is a need to carefully consider a risk analysis in any review. There is the risk of reputational damage to the College and the question of accountability by the College. Are there sufficient levels of tolerance and accountability being built into the structure and will College governors get the reassurance that they need?

Placing the College Principal at the heart of the monitoring process of the Academy Principal also raises questions of time commitment. There is also additional pressure on the Chair and other members of the governing body, with the risks of possible fatigue and falling attendance.

Overall any review must ask if the best interests of Winstanley College are being met. Is good communication between all parties involved being facilitated? Finally, will the model enable Winstanley College to act as a

corporate body? The Board cannot continue to rely solely on the Chair and Principal exploring opportunities without keeping members fully informed and engaged with the process of collaboration. This has been a real tension.

Any model needs to ensure that there is clarity about how information will be shared. What is the vision of the model and how will it be delivered? What are the expectations of individual governors?

The future leadership of the Board is an issue that needs to be addressed. There is a need for a dynamic and energetic individual to lead the Board through this next phase.

The risks of not doing anything formal or having a robust policy could mean that college governance is exposed.

Possible ways forward

If an assumption is made that the College's governing body begin to embrace the idea of a change in their governance model, it is likely that succession planning will be a key part of this review. Ensuring that the governing body has a robust and sustainable model of leadership is essential. The current feeling of entitlement for the Chair to continue in the role without challenge and without a clearly defined term of office and exit strategy is an aspect to address. As part of its succession plan there should be a clearly defined exit route, simply expressed as a term of office for the Chair which is not extended, as happens in some colleges to great effect.

Governors are already reflecting on what qualities make for a good Chair and being able to lead and manage governing body meetings is a characteristic of this role.. The ability to keep everyone on side and informed whilst meeting and creating new partnerships is crucial if governance is to remain unscathed. The reality of not keeping everyone on side

is that it can lead to tension and mistrust in extreme situations. Distributing leadership, involving more people, allowing the Vice Chair role to develop and be seen to be developing would also support a good succession plan.

How will the changing external environment for further education and skills influence the review?

Themes expressed in 'New Challenges, New Chances' and the Baroness Sharp inquiry fit with the evolution of the model at Winstanley College. Strategic governance for a dynamic FE sector, working closely with other educational providers, accountability to the College's communities, learners and employers and a responsibility for working with schools, academies and other key partners will be aspects of any review.

It is also important to consider how the changing perceptions of Board members will influence the review. The opportunity to participate in the Learning Board Programme came at a critical point. Governors are gradually realising that, whilst their role as a critical friend remains, they do trust the professionals and the reports that they receive in respect of financial management and now need to turn their attention to a more robust style of governance and challenge in the face of new opportunities and positioning the College at the centre of its community. The importance of relationships and time, the most valuable commodity that a governor brings to meetings, must be managed in such a way that time spent at Board meetings is focused on strategy and the bigger picture. This will leave the committees, the workhorses of this new governance model, dealing with the aspects of Article 3 which underpin governance. The introduction of the Code of Governance can be seen to support this model. Governors will be able to govern and

be strategic in the context of the college's learners, value for money and addressing skills shortages.

Partnerships and positioning within the community will be a consequence of this model. This is the challenge for Winstanley College and its governors to make their model of governance fit for purpose and to be free to enter into more partnerships as a result of the College's reputation and standing as an outstanding institution.

Next steps

The next steps are yet to be decided, but future governors' training and the publication of this case study will inform discussions and planning. The Venn diagram model has been arrived at because it seems to capture the essence of what is already beginning to happen with the two governing bodies being populated by the same individuals. It makes sense to share their expertise to the benefit of both institutions and would ease tensions and conflicts in terms of time and meetings. The biggest challenge will be the will and energy to try something different whilst maintaining outstanding governance.

Three lessons to share with other governing bodies

1. In this type of situation it is necessary to increase the awareness of all governors at an early stage concerning the implications of sponsoring an academy, particularly concerning the role of the Principal and Chair.
2. Other governing bodies need to be aware of the potential issues around individual college governor's accountability to the Academy Board and the pressure placed upon governors who serve on both boards.
3. Other governing bodies need to be aware of the importance of leadership of the Board and succession planning, the need for a formal policy and procedures for succession planning for the Chair of the Board and possibly Vice-chair and Chairs of sub-committees.