



**OXFORDSHIRE  
COUNTY COUNCIL**

# **External Governance Review**

**Oxfordshire Hospital School**

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**Date: 17 April 2023  
Conducted by: Rachel Caseby**

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**Purpose of the Review**

To identify whether and how the Governing Board could more effectively:

1. Promote school improvement, by holding the school to account for
  - The quality of education;
  - Behaviour and attitudes of pupils;
  - Personal development of pupils and
  - Leadership & management.
2. Carry out its statutory governance duties.
3. Use its own organisation and processes to help governors focus on the right strategic priorities.

**Review method:**

**Pre-visit desktop analysis of:**

- Minutes and papers of the governing board and its committees for the past year. These included minutes from the full governing board (FGB) meetings, as well as the committee minutes for:
  - Finance, Premises and Personnel (FPP)
  - Personal Development (PD)
  - Quality of Education (QE)
- Organisational details including board membership; delegated responsibilities; training record and website information
- Ofsted and other external reports

**Interviews and discussions**

***Friday 03 March 2023 (face to face)***

- Andrew Rattue- Chair of Governors and Chair of the FPP and QE committees
- Steve Lowe- Headteacher

***Friday 17 March 2023 (online)***

- Tom Aubrey-Fletcher- Vice Chair and Chair of the PD committee

### **Wednesday 29 March 2023 (online)**

- Bev Martin- Governance Professional/ Clerk

Anonymous questionnaire responses were also received from **nine governors**.

**Reflection and report writing**, considering the DfE Competency Framework for Governance (2017) and the Governance Handbook (2020) as a frame of reference for the review.

**The report will be shared with the Full Governing Board** and actions will be agreed (where possible).

#### **Reasons for the review:**

Oxfordshire Hospital School (OHS) is a community special school providing in-patient and outreach personalised teaching to pupils with medical needs from across Oxfordshire and beyond. OHS works across several sites, within family homes and in the local community, providing interim and longer-term support to pupils who meet the criteria for attendance. The school also works with the Children's Psychological Medicine team at Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust to provide training and support for schools across Oxfordshire in managing medical needs within the educational environment with the aim of bridging the gap between health and education in partner schools.

Following an Ofsted inspection and review of governance in 2016 that found the school to be inadequate, the Board resigned, and an Interim Executive Board (IEB) was appointed. At the last Ofsted inspection between 06-07 July 2017 the school was rated outstanding in all areas, and outstanding overall.

The IEB was in place for the 2017 inspection and Ofsted determined they had 'made a huge contribution to the school's rapid improvement'. The report also noted that *'Members of the IEB focus on the progress, welfare and safety of all pupils, and are particularly aware of their responsibility for those pupils whose circumstances make them vulnerable, including those who are disadvantaged'*. The report also recorded that *'IEB members have overseen the changes to the school with precise attention to detail. They are impressed with the reports they receive from the headteacher, but do not take these at face value. They challenge, question and check for themselves whether improvements are sufficient and sustainable'*.

The current headteacher started in September 2018 and normal governance was re-established in March 2019.

This review was requested by the Board to provide an external perspective of the current effectiveness of the board and to support the identification of next steps to ensure governance is, and remains, robust.

## The Review:

### 1. Strategic leadership

This is a governing board that is passionate about their unique Oxfordshire school. Every governor interviewed or responding to the questionnaire demonstrated a commitment to the school, with one saying, '*I am proud to say that I am a Governor at OHS*'. The board recognises the distinct nature of their school and the importance of ensuring that the school leadership team has the capacity needed to:

- make changes that benefit their pupils
- support their staff, who often work in challenging circumstances.

All governors reported that they understood the roles and responsibilities of a governor to:

- Ensure clarity of vision, ethos and strategic direction;
- Hold executive leaders to account for the educational performance of the school and its pupils, and the effective and efficient performance management of staff; and
- Oversee the financial performance of the organisation and make sure its money is well spent.

The board is well informed and has a realistic view of the position of the school. The leadership team provides a wide range of internal and external evidence, and governors undertake monitoring visits; together these allow the board to triangulate the school's position and to benchmark. Benchmarking is particularly difficult for OHS as the school is unique within Oxfordshire: pupils may only be at the school for a number of days; the school population is both mobile and growing, and COVID-19 restrictions severely reduced the ability of governors to undertake visits to inform their overview due to the unique settings of the school. Nevertheless, there is evidence in minutes of the school continuing to look outward and to plan for and monitor improvement. There is also evidence provided by the senior leadership team of personalised information, such as case studies, that aim to inform the board further of the personalised quality of education across the school.

The headteacher's reports provide valuable information for governors and reflect the ethos of the school to *make the routine exceptional*. These reports include information about the distributed leadership model in the school, the reflective learning events for staff and the regular review points across the school year to assess the impact of the school's improvement work.

The current headteacher has a very clear, ambitious vision for the school closely aligned to the unique pupil cohort, developed with the senior leadership team during an annual planning day. This is shared with the board, and governors responding to the questionnaire indicated that they knew and supported the vision for the school and could explain their involvement in determining and agreeing this.

While minutes over the past 12 months did not formally record agreement of the Self-evaluation Form (SEF) or School Improvement Plan (SIP), all governors had the opportunity to question and challenge these documents at the FGB meetings on

04.10.2022 and 29.11.2022, and these documents are regularly reviewed to allow the board to hold the school to account for the impact of actions taken by senior leaders.

Committee minutes record the board's awareness of risk. A risk register, agreed and overseen by the board is now recommended; the school has a distinct set of risks, and this would ensure oversight of key risks and mitigating actions and so better inform the board when making strategic decisions.

The board minutes record awareness of the wider educational context, specifically the education white paper of March 2022; they record information seeking about academisation in the light of this document.

## **2. Accountability for educational standards and financial performance**

The Quality of Education (QE) committee receives a range of reports, both verbal and written, concerning the curriculum provision across the school. The majority of governors responding to the questionnaire recognised the usefulness of these reports in helping the board to identify strengths and weaknesses around the quality of education provided.

The reports seen come from senior and middle leaders and provide the opportunity for governors to challenge the senior leadership on the progress towards the school vision. This includes questioning around the quality of the bespoke provision, how the holistic journey is used to support pupils' education, barriers to quality provision such as staffing vacancies and changes to delivery models (such as higher-level teaching assistants supporting GCSE students when subject specialists are not available).

More recent minutes (including 08.03.2023) demonstrate effective challenge, including: the identification of science leadership as a potential risk; confirming the quality of the curriculum for a new school location; the links between the budget spend and the impact of the curriculum on pupils, and the rigour of the senior leadership team's monitoring processes to inform their quality of provision judgements. This challenge will ensure the committee has an accurate overview of their areas of responsibility and can advise the board on appropriate actions. This was effectively demonstrated by the decision to discuss the financial costs for a new teaching and learning responsibility point for a science lead with the Finance, Premises and Personnel (FPP) committee before making any recommendation to the board.

Governors are provided with summative assessment outcomes for GCSEs and A levels where pupils are involved in these; there is less information about the statutory assessment outcomes for EYFS, primary aged children or those in Key Stage 3. While the pupils may only be at the school for a short time, progress information, personalised to the school, would now be useful to governance. It would also allow the board to consider whether the impact seen is due to the quality of teaching or to the health needs of the young person. This additional evidence would thus support the board's determination of the quality of provision at each phase and ensure that the board is able to hold the school to account for the educational performance of all pupils.

The FPP committee receives useful budget monitoring information from the school, with a narrative included to explain variances from the agreed budget. In addition, the School Business Manager attends committee meetings to provide information to governors as required. Committee minutes demonstrate awareness of potential risks, such as reliance on more costly agency staff due to the inability to recruit quickly to posts and an in-year deficit which, while reducing the large carry forward over the next three years, will need to be reviewed to ensure the school remains affordable and has revenue to support the school improvement plans.

As with all aspects of this school, there is evidence of external perspectives such as the health and safety audit, Challenge Partners review and the Information Commissioner's Office response to a near miss, allowing governors to understand the wider view of their school.

Questionnaire responses from governors indicated that there is a good awareness of the budget position on the board and that governors understand the current risks and the areas where spending has had a positive impact on pupils' outcomes.

The Pay committee is currently a subcommittee of the FPP committee however there is not yet enough clarity around the role of this statutory committee. Membership is unclear and minutes related to pay recommendations are recorded in both the FPP (11.10.2022) and FGB (29.11.2022) minutes. The board is aware of this and is acting to ensure that the appraisal process is compliant and that pay recommendations are discussed, agreed and minuted by the Pay subcommittee.

### **3. People**

More than half of the governors have taken up post since March 2019 and many were new to governance at their appointment or election. Six governors of the eleven-strong board are within their first term of office, so this is a relatively new board.

Three governors remain in post from the IEB; two of these governors lead the board as Chair and Vice-Chair as well as holding roles as Chairs of the three committees. The aim of the Chair to distribute governance further has not yet been realised despite minutes recording efforts to do so. Succession planning for these key roles would support the board, so that distributed governance was achieved and the knowledge and understanding of the roles and the school situation was not diluted or lost.

Currently there are no vacancies on the board, and this is in part due to the board's proactive approach to recruitment. The website contains some useful information about the governor role and how to contact the school for more information. In addition, the board has established a practice of undertaking skills audits when a vacancy arises and advertising for new governors with the relevant skills to fill any identified gaps (FGB 17.05.2022). This has been a successful strategy.

Several governors have undertaken a range of training useful to governance, and new governors have attended induction training. The questionnaire records that most governors agree that they are proactive in seeking training to fill any skills and knowledge gaps. There is, however, no one system to record the training of the board. Currently, some members record training on their personal sections of GovernorHub

(allowing a downloaded overview of the training the board has attended) and others record evidence in the folder *Governor Training and Induction*. As the school uses external and internal training from a range of sources, a single recording system would support an accurate overview of the training of the board and allow identification of any gaps to ensure best practice.

Governors who responded to the questionnaire agreed that the board did regularly consider views and opinions of stakeholders. The minutes and board paperwork confirm that the board considers the opinions and feedback from staff, pupils, parents and enrolled schools and the website has a dedicated page requesting feedback from stakeholders. Anonymised information is shared with the PD committee following the review of information, however, there was no overall record in the minutes of the key findings of the most recent parent, pupil and school feedback (which were very positive) or of any actions that resulted because of this work.

The website has a dedicated page for governors. It has a link to the document recording names, terms of office and pecuniary and business interests of governors. The board now need to ensure that their attendance record for the past year is also published, that details of any governor in position within the past 12 months are included, and that their committee structure is recorded clearly, including the name of the Chairs of each committee.

Relationships both within the board and between the board and the school leadership are professional and supportive of governance.

#### **4. Structures**

The Instrument of Government for the school was last updated in 2019 when the school returned to normal governance. There are eleven governor positions, with six of these being co-opted positions; currently there are no vacancies. Both Parent governor positions are filled, despite the fact that the school has a transient population and pupils remain registered at their home schools. This is reflective of this board, where the personal experiences of the young people and their families are at the heart of their work.

The board uses a three-committee structure, focusing on quality of education (QE), resources (finances, personnel and premises) and personal development of the pupils. In addition, the Pay committee is a subcommittee of the FPP committee. The committees have different meeting schedules across the year. Governors are allocated to committees according to their skills and experience and agreement is recorded in the FGB minutes (04.11.2022).

The terms of reference, while not formally recorded as agreed in minutes, were shared in the paperwork for the FGB meeting 29.11.2022 where they form part of the OHS Governor Handbook. This useful document (or the delegated terms of reference within it) should now be reviewed and agreed annually by the board. The terms of reference would benefit from further review as they do not always reflect the delegated work of the committees and, when accurate for this board, will provide a system for the committees to ensure all of their work is considered and recorded in their minutes.

There is evidence in minutes that policies are reviewed across the year and updated in a timely manner; the required policies are available on the school website.

The FGB uses *GovernorHub* for the storage and circulation of the majority of its documentation and this has worked well for the board. One questionnaire response reported that 'Gov hub is an amazing resource'. Some documents were not available to the reviewer as they were stored on a different system. All information considered by the board should now be available for review unless deemed confidential, where it should be stored separately within the board paperwork.

The board has moved successfully from an IEB to normal governance, but there are some legacy practices that should now be reviewed. The agenda setting process needs to be revisited so that the governance professional/ clerk produces a draft for the head and chair to review and amend in the weeks before a meeting. Using the annual schedule of work, and the board's own work schedule, this will ensure the school is considering any statutory and non-statutory requirements at the correct meeting, that matters arising are followed up and that the key focus remains on school improvement, the safety and wellbeing of the young people and staff and the statutory requirements, without overburdening the head.

It would also be timely to review the use of the governance professional/ clerk at the committee meetings too. While there would be an additional cost to cover the FPP committee too, all governors would be able to engage fully in the discussions and work of the committee while having on-hand governance advice. Governors would also be able to review the minutes promptly to ensure they accurately reflect the challenge from each meeting. Several governors reported that minutes did not always reflect the challenge shown, and the reviewer could see that some minutes recorded challenge effectively whilst others provided less evident of the board holding the school to account as required by the second core function.

## **5. Compliance**

There is evidence from the meeting minutes and the website that the board and its committees regularly consider key statutory areas of compliance including safeguarding, health and safety, financial monitoring and the review of statutory policies.

Safeguarding is a golden thread running through the work of the school and the board. All governors responding to the questionnaire reported that they were involved in the oversight of safeguarding across the school and understood the board's responsibilities here. There is evidence of external quality assurance (PD committee papers, 15.06.2022) and governor monitoring of safeguarding across the school year despite the challenges of the pandemic restrictions. The governor visits involved reviewing risk assessments, ensuring compliant designated safeguarding lead (DSL) cover, collecting pupil voice, considering the safeguarding curriculum, visiting sites, reviewing the single central record and discussions and questioning with key staff members including the headteacher and the DSL. While there has been a recent change of safeguarding lead governor, there was evidence of continued monitoring of this aspect of the school's work.



The leadership also provides a retrospective safeguarding report to governors annually, detailing, amongst other information, the identified focus areas of the past year and associated actions; the contacts with external agencies; behaviour and safeguarding overview information; staff safeguarding training and details of the head's monitoring of the single central record (including issues and actions).

There is further evidence within the Governor Monitoring Plan of the safeguarding focus at each of the sites and safeguarding is a standing item on the FGB agenda. The Governor Monitoring Plan would now benefit from greater clarity around what was to be monitored at each visit and where these reports would be discussed, and any action agreed. If every governor is clear about the purpose of their visit or meeting, linked to either the SIP or the statutory responsibilities, this will ensure that reports are relevant to the work of the board and use governor time effectively.

The board now needs to record its discussion and agreement of the s175 safeguarding audit return within its minutes. This will record compliance and allow any identified actions to be tracked to the detailed safeguarding action plan for the school.

There was evidence of the monitoring of the budget on a regular basis and the Schools Financial Values Standard was discussed by the FPP committee (17.01.0223). No record of the formal agreement of this document was recorded before its submission to the local authority. The board would now benefit from an annual work schedule to ensure that all areas governors need to assure themselves about are scheduled into their work for the year, and their discussions and agreement are recorded in their minutes

## **6. Evaluation**

While the board has not undertaken a formal evaluation of its effectiveness using resources such as the NGA *Twenty Questions* or the GovernorHub *evaluation tool*, the Chair's request for an external review demonstrates that the effectiveness of the board is a key consideration. This is a board that is ambitious for its pupils and determined to support the school to be the best it can be.

The board has undertaken a recent skills audit to identify any skills gaps and to inform their recruitment process, so there is an awareness of the strengths of the board and areas to further develop. While governors access a range of training, it would now be useful to plan for the training needs of identified governors and consider the impact of this training on the work of the board. Together with an effective system for recording training, this will allow the chair to have oversight of current training and will provide assurance that gaps are being filled and succession planning is supported.

The Chair is aware that succession planning is a priority for the board. With all positions filled, ensuring that governors are equipped and ready to take on positions within the board will be important for consistency and for delegated governance, with all of the board members actively involved in the work of the board.

## **Summary of conclusions**

This board has capable, committed, experienced governors who are dedicated to supporting the school so that vulnerable pupils can maintain a quality, personalised education during a period of illness. The areas for further development within this report are primarily around processes:

- to remove some of the headteacher led aspects of the board's work to the governance professional/ clerk and the board; and
- to record fully all the discussions, challenge and agreements of the board within the minutes around areas of compliance and the school improvement priorities.

It is the reviewer's opinion that this will further strengthen and support the work of this board.

## **Strengths**

- The board is made up of committed individuals who understand the unique nature of this school and are all focused on school improvement and outcomes for pupils.
- The school's vision reflects the unique nature of this school, and the personalised curriculum is reflective of the school's ethos.
- Safeguarding is a focus for the board.
- Governor monitoring of both safeguarding and the school budget are evident across the past year.
- The board has a range of external and internal perspectives that support the triangulation of evidence and ensure an accurate view of the school.
- The board has undertaken a recent skills audit and has recruited successfully to vacancies; the board is currently full.

## **Areas for development**

- 1) Review the working practices of the board to support board compliance and reduce the workload of the headteacher. This should include:
  - Agreeing the role of the governance professional/ clerk.
  - Ensure terms of reference are accurate for all committees and agreed annually.
  - Develop the governor monitoring plan: ensure governors know what they are monitoring, how they are monitoring and what they will do with this information.
- 2) Ensure the board is sustainable:
  - Discuss and agree the succession plans for the board after reviewing the board's skills, competencies and training record.
  - Agree a process for recording governor training, and for identifying specific training needs.
- 3) Ensure minutes reflect that the board is holding the school to account for the educational performance of the school and its pupils:

- Support board awareness by requesting progress information personalised to the school and based on the professional judgements of the staff.
- Record in minutes any trends, patterns or lines of enquiry and any agreed actions. This information can then be used to inform the school SEF and SIP.

Rachel Caseby

**On behalf of Oxfordshire County Council Governor Services**

**Date: 17.04.2023**

*Governor Services welcomes feedback on the usefulness of the external governance review process in helping your governing board to become more effective. Please send any feedback to [GovernorServices@Oxfordshire.gov.uk](mailto:GovernorServices@Oxfordshire.gov.uk).*