

Walsall College is an outstanding College – what can the governance community learn from their experience?

In February 2013 Ofsted published the report of its inspection of Walsall College and judged the College to be outstanding. The College is justifiably proud of this achievement:

Historic grading makes Walsall College the first Outstanding General Further Education College under new inspection framework in the UK, and the first ever to receive a grade one in the Black Country! The Ofsted inspection team heaped great praise on the College, recognising outstanding strengths across the board that included:

- *Outstanding success rates achieved by students, which put the College in the country's top 10% of colleges;*
- *Outstanding teaching and learning;*
- *Outstanding promotion of equality and diversity;*
- *Outstanding outcomes for learners through the development of modern vocational courses and partnerships with employers;*
- *Outstanding leadership and management.*

This case study summarises interviews with the Chair of the Corporation, the Chair of the Learning and Quality Committee, the Deputy Principal, the Head of Quality Development, and the Head of Professional Development. These interviews asked them to share their views on what role the Corporation has played in achieving outstanding and what advice they would give to other Governors on their journey to outstanding.

Some background

The College serves the communities of Walsall and offers a wide range of vocational courses, including Apprenticeship and HE programmes. Walsall is an area of high economic deprivation and is ranked as the 30th most deprived of the 326 local authorities in England.

In 2012/13 the College budget is £33m and there are approximately 4,200 full time and 10,700 part-time students. Four years ago the College moved into impressive new college buildings in the centre of Walsall.

The Corporation operates a traditional structure with six Committees and also holds regular training workshops for Governors on current issues and policies of importance to the Corporation. These workshops, which last for around two hours, are seen as a key element of the Governor role.

The six Committees are Learning & Quality, Student Voice, Finance & Resources, Audit, Search & Standards and Remuneration.

These Committees have been established to examine the detail of the key areas of quality of teaching, learning and assessment, student voice, finance and resources. The minutes of meetings are reported back to Corporation. The Corporation meets six times a year. Each Governor is both a member of the Corporation and a member of one or more of the Committees.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment is afforded a high priority on the Corporation agenda, being a key element of the Principal's Report as well as a separate report from the Deputy Principal on topics of strategic interest at particular times within the academic year. Student Voice is also regularly considered, with a termly report to Corporation from the Student Union President. However, the business and finance elements of the College are also seen as critical to success and reported at every meeting of Corporation.

What is distinctive about Governance at Walsall College?

The structures and processes of governance are similar to many other colleges but Walsall has succeeded in travelling on a journey over the past few years that has led them to be outstanding.

The Corporation emphasises the culture and values of the College and partnership working based on mutual trust between the senior management team and Governors.

A clear focus on teaching and learning, on the experiences of learners, and on constant quality improvement are seen as essential features of the College's success.

Openness and transparency about how the College is performing have become the norm. Managers believe that Governors want to know the good and the bad so there are no shocks and are very supportive of Managers. Governors ask the right questions and are always focused on the impact of their decisions on learners.

For a number of years, Corporation has had a Student Voice Committee that ensures that learners' experiences are an important part of its work. Governors sit on this Committee and are able to influence and understand how learner experiences are developed and enhanced, making excellent use of the range of student voice activities within the College. The College holds an Annual Student Conference, to which Governors are invited. Governors visit classrooms to experience first hand what students experience (but Governors are not assessing the classroom situation). The result of these and other activities such as student celebration events is that 'Governors are very close to learners'.

The College operates a Governor Link scheme, which enables Governors to be linked with a curriculum or a support area. There is a role description of what this means. This link scheme is valued in enabling contact with a curriculum area throughout the year, in participating in termly quality summits and self-assessment, getting better grass roots knowledge of the College, reminding Governors that many students come from very difficult backgrounds, seeing the dedication of the staff at first hand, and feeling part of the self-assessment processes.

The Learning and Quality Committee is also a key Committee in ensuring that Governors are well informed and influential in supporting the College on its journey to outstanding; the focus now of course is sustaining this and becoming even better, there is no easing off! Staff and Student Governors are members of the Committee as well as Governors with a range of business and professional experience. The Chair of this Committee indicated that there are several key elements for this essential journey of quality improvement:

- Level of scrutiny of detailed data and being prepared to question everything, whilst being

conscious of not creating more work for busy managers. The Chair needs the ability to stop it being too forensic and operational and to keep it at a governance strategic level, whilst being 'relentless' on issues that are seen as important.

- Using a dashboard of key performance indicators that are RAG rated and focus on essential identified targets.
- Very good relationships between Governors and senior team: extremely open and frank, with both Governors and Managers able to raise concerns.
- Knowing what questions to ask and overcoming the fear of asking a 'naïve' question. Governors need to know the yearly cycle of quality information since different questions are needed at different times in the year.
- Governors need to keep up to date with the local area and national issues and changes, for example the increasing 'competitive free for all' between autonomous education providers and concerns about independent advice and guidance for young people and parents.
- The importance of a very professional and supportive clerk who needs to maintain a position that is both independent and part of the College.

It is clear that Governors at the College are passionate about teaching and learning and the quality of the student experience. But Governors and Managers also recognise the importance of having the right balance of Governors with a range of experience and skills, including business and financial as well as educational and community expertise.

Managers perceive Governors as totally committed to the success of learners and to the success of the community of Walsall, summed up as 'Governors have Walsall in their DNA'. Governors are seen as 'external validators of the College on behalf of the community'. The Chair of the Corporation summed this up as the College being 'a beacon of hope for the town' enabling students to have increased prosperity for themselves and in turn for the community.

Significantly, staff in the College are also committed to learners and community success and a majority of the staff live close to the College. The College has achieved the gold standard for Investors in People. Many staff in addition to being in the community were themselves students at the College and feel a 'culture of pride' in the College. There is determination to ensure that the learner is on the right programme with the right level of support to put aside any previous baggage that might hamper progress.

The College has been on a journey of development and this has been reflected in the Corporation. The Chair of the Corporation became a College Governor in 2008 and then Chair in 2011. His ambition has been to create an inclusive Corporation that works as whole team, avoiding the idea of a small group of Governors who do most of the work. The whole Corporation has to be fit to do the job and to take ownership of the issues facing the College.

The Chair was born in Walsall, has lived there his whole life and established his own successful business there. He is clear that the College sells education, it is a business, and that financial stability is essential. Its purpose is to provide excellent education that enables individuals and the community to prosper. Being Chair of the Corporation requires time at meetings and reading

papers, engaging with Governors and Managers and staff, and being involved in College life. There is also a role in presenting the College to the local community and businesses.

Achieving an outstanding Ofsted inspection has come from the dedication of the Governors, Managers and staff. The Chair paid tribute to the Principal and his team who are 'a team for 2013 – dealing with the issues of now and the future, and not looking back to the past'.

Both the Chair and Principal consider that their relationship, built on partnership and mutual trust, is critical to success. They also consider that the role of Clerk is key in 'keeping the Board on the straight and narrow' to ensure that it complies with statutory requirements and concentrates on issues that matter.

What would be your advice to any Governor or Board of Governors aspiring to be outstanding?

- **Inclusiveness** of all board members with a balanced range of talents and skills, with all members contributing and using their experience so the board works together as a team, a team that works in partnership the senior leadership team.
- **Enjoyable Board and Committee meetings** which are not seen as rubber stamping of items: real engagement and questioning of things that matter.
- Setting out a clear **strategic direction and outcomes for learners**.
- Establishing **the ethos and culture of the College**: what do we expect from people?
- **Appointing a Principal and senior team who give Governors all the information they need to know, which is linked to agreed KPIs**.
- **The relationship between the Principal and the Chair is critical**. It has to be a **partnership** that is open and honest and works seamlessly for the good of the College.
- **Accepting change, accepting challenge and looking to the future with optimism**.
- **Encouraging enterprise, innovation and opportunity**.
- Now asking '**what do we do to go beyond outstanding?**' and ensuring that all staff are committed to be even better.

In relation to your recent inspection, what role did Governors play, before, during and after?

There were several sessions arranged for the Governors by the College Nominee and the Clerk to update them on the new inspection framework and it was agreed that Chair, Vice Chair, Chair of the Learning and Quality Committee and two members of the Learning and Quality Committee would

meet the Inspector.

The Inspector met the Chair of the Corporation separately and focused on 'How does the Corporation challenge and act as critical friend?' In response the Chair indicated that it was about asking the right questions at the right time, less about challenge and more about partnership between the Governors, senior Managers, staff and students. The inspector then met the Chair of the Corporation, Vice Chair, Chair of the Learning and Quality Committee and two other Committee members to discuss how the Corporation operates, examples of scrutiny, and relationships between Governors and the College.

Conclusion and critical success

What came across clearly from all interviews was the open, honest environment that has been created for Governor debate and challenge.

The Principal and Chair have consciously developed their working relationship recognising the importance to the governance process and the success of the College. There is a real sense of partnership between Governors and senior team.

The culture of the College including Governors is focused on teaching and learning and learner success. The Corporation is committed to ensuring that the College serves its communities.

What Ofsted said in their report published in February 2013:

The Principal, senior leaders and Governors set a very clear strategic direction and have an ambitious vision for the College and its students. They are clearly focused on attaining very high standards of teaching to ensure that students achieve as well as they can. The successful strategy enables students to become skilled, professional and enterprising, and places the College at the heart of the local community.

The College's assiduous determination to improve the quality of teaching and learning and students' experience is captured in five strategic ambitions and values. These permeate all the College's activities and place students at the heart of the College's work. Ambitious targets are set for continuous improvement and the College is meticulous in monitoring and evaluating progress towards achieving these targets.

Governors are very well informed and provide excellent support to senior leaders. They ask the right questions to ensure Managers are sufficiently held to account and their skills and experience are very well matched to the developing needs of the College. Governors meticulously monitor outcomes for learners and the quality of teaching, learning and assessment across the College.

Reflective questions for readers of this case study:

How much of your Board meeting is spent on strategic discussions?

How much of your Board meeting is spent on teaching and learning and learner outcomes?

Would you describe the relationship between your Governors and senior Managers as a partnership?

What time is spent on continuously building and developing the team and relationships?

Would you say that your Board is inclusive, with everyone contributing as a team member?

Would you say that your Board and Committee meetings are enjoyable?

How would you describe the ethos and culture of your College?

Compiled by Richard Dimpleby, AoC Governance Consultant, June 2013 with thanks to governors and senior managers at Walsall College for their willingness to share their experience.