

Guidance Notes: Meeting Community Needs

This Guidance Note is aimed largely at first-term Governors. It signposts fuller sources of background material and good practice guidance for more experienced Governors and Clerks.

The guidance was prepared in February 2014. Policy and practice in this area is developing rapidly; the guidance will be regularly reviewed.

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Background

There is no statutory duty on governing bodies to address the needs of communities or to consult them (as is required in the case of staff and students). However the FE funding bodies are required to satisfy themselves that their funding meets the needs of learners and employers; and OFSTED is also concerned to test the relevance of the College's provision to local needs for education and skills. Therefore, in practice the College's Mission will almost invariably have some reference to meeting the needs of the communities which the college serves.

In recent years government policy has been gradually to shift the accountability of governing bodies away from "vertical" accountability (i.e. to funding bodies) towards a more "horizontal" accountability to students, employers, and local communities. In 2011 Baroness Sharp was commissioned to review how colleges could become even more responsive to their communities.

The report of her Commission (**A Dynamic Nucleus: The Final Report of the Independent Commission on Colleges in their Communities**) set out a clear vision for colleges and community engagement.

<http://www.niace.org.uk/news/colleges-inquiry-final-report-published>

Recommendations included:

- an Annex to the FE Code of Governance setting out the expectations on governing bodies for engagement with their communities. This covers the responsibilities of governing bodies for overseeing engagement, the various communities to be

considered, community access to college infrastructure and resources, and how governing bodies should account to their communities for their performance; (see the annex below)

- good practice guidelines, amplifying the Code; (this note is a start, but will be supplemented during 2014 by a Library of case studies)
- benchmarks and performance indicators of engagement (under development).

Defining Communities

A governing body has a statutory duty to determine and periodically review its strategic objectives including the College's educational character and mission. Either in the mission statement, or in a supporting Public Value Statement, the governing body would be expected to define the communities it serves. It is good practice to review the mission at intervals of no more than three years. There is a statutory duty on governing bodies to obtain the views of students and staff on such reviews; and it is good practice also to consult the principal communities served by the College.

It is for the governing body to define the communities it serves, and which are the principal communities among them. Aspects to consider include

- **Geographical:** different parts of your college provision may vary in geographical spread, e.g. some 14 to 16 programs may be very local, some 16 to 19 programs may attract learners more widely, and some specialist all HE programs may attract learners nationally or internationally.
- **Learners:** for what range of ages, needs and interests, and for what level of prior attainment, does the college offer learning programmes?
- **Employers:** successful colleges work very closely with local employers and businesses (or – particularly in the case of SMEs - business groupings) to ensure that skills needs of the local economy are being met, both the immediate needs and the longer-term needs emerging from labour market intelligence.
Close partnerships with employers are important where the college offers apprenticeships or part-time provision for employees. Are employers satisfied with the work-readiness of your learners as well as their skills and qualifications? Apart from the views of current employers, is your college providing transferable skills? Entrepreneurial skills?
- **Community bodies,** such as local authorities (who continue to have a role in economic development and in education of those with learning difficulties and disabilities); public agencies (JobCentrePlus, police, health bodies, prisons and youth offending, etc); and the voluntary sector.
- **Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs)** and City Regions are increasingly important stakeholders at the sub-regional and metropolitan level.
- **International:** does your college actively seek to be part of the international market?
- **Other Providers:** does your College work in partnership with local schools, with other FE providers, or with HE institutions?

The Respective Roles of the Governing Body and the Management Team in Engagement

As with other aspects of the College's business it is for the governing body to devise and articulate strategy, to monitor performance against it, and to be externally accountable for its success. Delivery is primarily for the executive management team, and management's accountability for delivery is to the governing body.

Individual appointed governors do not have a representative role on behalf of individual communities. It can, however, enrich governing body discussions and decisions to have at least some members who have an understanding of, and are able to network effectively with, key communities served by the College.

There is a statutory requirement to make provisions to have staff and student members on the governing body (and a parent in the case of a sixth form College).

How do Colleges Engage with Communities?

As part of the strategy the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) expects governors to take a view of the College's contribution to economic growth, social cohesion and well-being. Some colleges have undertaken independent reviews of their social and economic impact on their community as a starting point for their engagement and reputation strategy. *See below for some links to examples of colleges which publish information on their community impact.*

Colleges have developed many ways of engaging with their learners and their external stakeholders. For learners, these include learners' councils, course committees, regular learner questionnaires, social media, etc. For wider communities, they include liaison groups of employers, a wider range of partnerships, regular meetings with local and national agencies, involvement with local LEPs etc.

Reports on these processes of identifying needs should be presented to the governing body. Often this is part of an annual strategic planning day when future planning will be rooted in and analysis of current provision and emerging needs articulated by local stakeholders.

Questions governing bodies may like to consider in framing their strategies (together with examples of good practice) include:

- how clearly articulated is the governors' strategy for community engagement? What are the indicators of success?
- how well-informed is the College about the needs (including the unmet needs) of the communities it serves, e.g. demographic shifts, labour market intelligence?
- apart from its own provision of education and training, can/should the College do more to make its infrastructure, resources and expertise accessible to others in the communities it serves?
- is the culture at all levels of the College sufficiently responsive and proactive?

- does the College have the resources and systems to engage regularly and effectively with those communities, and if not, has the governing body given a clear steer on priorities?
- how robust are the mechanisms by which the College assesses the satisfaction of those communities with the services provided? How often and in what detail should management report to governors on the feedback from communities and on progress against the strategy?

How do Governing Bodies Account to their Communities?

There is government pressure on colleges to become more transparent in reporting their performance in meeting the needs of the various communities they serve and their plans for the future. Governing bodies are expected to be involved in the communication strategy. They are also, as noted earlier, expected to develop greater “horizontal” accountability for their own performance as governing bodies.

Different colleges have different ways of communicating their performance to local stakeholders. But governing bodies are expected to ensure the publication on the College website of at least yearly reports of the College’s engagement with each of the principal communities it serves, the progress made towards meeting their needs, and how it aims to meet their future needs.

This could be one report or separate tailored reports for each group of stakeholders; the college should discuss with representatives of the communities it serves the coverage and timing of its reporting, and should offer its stakeholders opportunities to discuss reports more fully.

As regards governor accountability, each governing body is expected to set out in its Annual Report how it has fulfilled its statutory duty to obtain students’ and staff views on its oversight of the Colleges activities; its strategic plans for engaging with the communities served by the college, and actual and projected performance against those plans; and a summary of the processes by which it shapes and oversees the College’s engagement with those communities. The college, as an exempt charity, is also required to have a public value statement which sets out the range of benefits the college brings to the public.

Implications for Governor Recruitment and Development

Governing bodies benefit from having members with a diverse mix of knowledge and contacts with the various communities the College serves (this can be different parts of the College’s catchment area, schools/HE, different employment sectors, etc). The government has recently encouraged colleges to develop closer governor links with their LEPs. It is good practice for governing bodies to review and report on the diversity of their membership annually. In some cases they may wish to consider co-opting individuals with the relevant background to committees, or to retain access to past governors for informal advice.

Questions which governing bodies may wish to consider include:

- do governors have sufficient access to up-to-date local economic and social data?
- is there scope for direct briefing from key external stakeholders?
- where governors are linked to particular curriculum areas, are the links fully informing governors about sectoral developments?

References

A dynamic nucleus: colleges at the heart of local communities The final report of the independent commission on colleges in their local communities, Baroness Sharp of Guildford, NIACE, November 2011
http://shop.niace.org.uk/media/catalog/product/d/y/dynamic_nucleus_-_full_-_final.pdf

Thinking Outside the College: Planning and Delivering Local Accountability: An action framework for colleges in the further education sector 2012
http://www.aoc.co.uk/en/college_governors/thinking-outside-the-college/

Examples of college reports on economic and social impact:

Bedford College community scorecard: <http://www.bedford.ac.uk/About/Community-Scorecard.aspx>

Hull College economic impact: <http://www.hull-college.ac.uk/news/vince-cable-visits-hull-college>

Leicester College community scorecard: <http://www.leicestercollege.ac.uk/about-us/community-scorecard/>

Examples of college annual reports

Blackpool and the Fylde College
<http://www.blackpool.ac.uk/about/annualreport>

Exeter College
<http://www.exe-coll.ac.uk/Media/PDF/Reports/AnnualReport2012-13.pdf>

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ANNEX TO THE FOUNDATION CODE: ENGAGEMENT WITH COMMUNITIES

A.1 The governing body should ensure that the College engages regularly, proactively and effectively with the various communities that it serves, in order to identify and prioritise those communities' needs for education and training and to discuss how they can best be met.

A.1.1 'Communities' comprise all those organisations, individuals and groups of individuals that the governing body intends should benefit from the services offered by the College. They will normally include employers (small and medium enterprises as well as larger businesses) and their representative bodies, including local enterprise partnerships; local and city region authorities; voluntary and charitable organisations; and past, present and future learners (and if possible, their families).

A.1.2 'Education and training' comprise all forms of learning and the development of skills, including entrepreneurial skills.

A.1.3 The governing body will, over time, seek to develop strategic partnerships with employers and community bodies, including local public service providers, in which the partners could become co-designers of some college services and programmes.

A.2 The governing body will, so far as the charitable status of the College allows, seek to encourage the communities that it serves and members of those communities to access the College's infrastructure, resources, and expertise, provided that this is not at the expense of the College's educational mission.

A.3 The governing body should publish on the College website at least annually an account of the College's engagement with the principal communities that it serves, and the progress made towards meeting their needs.

A.3.1 The governing body's public value statement should make clear how the College aims to meet the education and training needs of the communities that it serves.

A.3.2 The governing body should ensure that arrangements are in place to assess the extent to which the communities served by the College, and individuals within those communities, are satisfied with the services provided.

A.3.3 Each College should discuss with representatives of the communities that it serves the coverage and timing of its public value reporting, and should offer its stakeholders opportunities to discuss reports more fully.