

External Review of Governance

Skylark Partnership Trust

Consultant: Angela Dunkerley





National Governance Association

The National Governance Association (NGA) is an independent charity representing and supporting governors, trustees and clerks in maintained schools and academies in England. The NGA's goal is to improve the wellbeing of children and young people by increasing the effectiveness of governing boards and promoting high standards. It does this by providing information, guidance, research, advice and training. It also works closely with, and lobbies, UK government and educational bodies, and is the leading campaigning national membership organisation for school governors and trustees.

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Key Contact and Email	Cath Kitchen c.kitchen@skylarkpartnershiptrust.co.uk
Chair	Frances Jones
CEO / Executive Head	Cath Kitchen
Membership Details	Gold Members with Learning Link
Reason for commissioning the review	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Following a prolonged application process, the trust was incorporated in October 2017. This was in reaction to growing frustration within Hospital and Outreach Education (HOE) over the barriers and challenges encountered due to being tied to a failing authority when dealing with the unique demands of aspiring to provide outstanding alternative provision for children who cannot attend mainstream school due to a diagnosed medical and/or mental health condition. The chief executive officer (CEO) indicated that Skylark is the first trust in the country to focus purely on such provision. The trust initially consisted of just the one school but was joined in 2019 by Cherry Tree Learning Centre (CTLC) in Dudley (75 miles away) which had been facing similar constraints. The trust has plans to grow and had been optimistic that a hospital school experiencing difficulties that they had been supporting would join but this did not materialise. Recent minutes now indicate that another school is expressing interest.▪ As outlined in the annual report and financial statement for year ending 31 August 2020, trustees are committed to constant review and reflection on their own effectiveness. As the trust develops its capacity within leadership and governance to achieve its ambition to be outstanding and to create a family of exceptional schools for children and young people with medical needs, this involves using external audit and perspectives. As an external review of governance is recommended good practice, the board has commissioned this review to focus firstly on the trust board itself but with the intention of following this in the future with similar reviews on the local governance arrangements.▪ As relatively new academies neither organisation has yet been inspected and therefore has no designation in Ofsted terms.▪ Everyone involved in governance at the trust is acutely aware of the potential impact of the retirement of the CEO who has been so instrumental in the journey so far. Engaging in this review is part of their commitment to taking all possible steps to ensure the team can maintain improvement momentum as changes take place, checking that the trust team is in a strong position to pursue its growth plans.	
The governance framework	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Since the formation of the trust the CEO has also been head of HOE. Plans to address this once CTLC joined the trust were interrupted by COVID pressures but a new full time headteacher was eventually appointed to HOE in January 2021 and the CEO role temporarily became full time. In the run up to	



retirement she is now contracted to three days a week (with additional days worked as needed) but trustees are working on recruiting to a full-time role when the current CEO retires.

- There has been a significant change in those involved in governance as the trust has developed. This has been carefully planned and successful efforts have been made to ensure that each person fully understands their role within the organisation. It is acknowledged that this is work in progress; one which has been interrupted by COVID pressures diverting energies. There are plans to reinstate these plans, including making more use of the fact that everyone is registered for NGA's Learning Link.
- For various reasons there have been changes in members since the trust was established. There are currently four listed on the website. The chair of trustees has been a member but there is now awareness that this dual role is not good practice and there are plans for her to step down and for another fifth member to be appointed. The members have been very carefully selected for their understanding of alternative provision. The chair is headteacher at Great Ormond Street Hospital School and the other three are a retired ex headteacher at HOE, a human resources specialist and an ex-head of a local authority.
- There are seven carefully appointed trustees, none of whom have dual roles. Only two (the chair and vice chair) were previously governors at the schools. The others were identified by using Academy Ambassadors and approaching various organisations such as the police and universities.
- There are two committees to the trust board. The Finance Committee also covers audit and risk and has been meeting monthly over the last year. The Teaching and Learning Committee has only recently been established. Each has terms of reference.
- The CEO is not a trustee but attends all trustee meetings.
- Each school has a Local Advisory Board (LAB) and the scheme of delegation indicates which responsibilities are delegated to them. Although both chairs and the two headteachers took part in the online self-evaluation exercise and were interviewed during the review, local structures and practice were not examined in any detail at this stage. They did though use involvement in this review to make clear how positively becoming part of the trust has impacted on their ability to fulfil their own roles and enhance pupil experience in the individual schools because they have more time to focus on local needs and can access any support they need. They also all appreciated the fact that the headteacher at CTLC had been involved in the recruitment of the headteacher at HOE and was now providing him with support, and they all expressed a desire to develop closer working at all levels across the two schools.
- The schedule of meetings and their format has been effectively adapted to cope with changed demands and priorities during COVID19. Shorter, more regular virtual meetings have enabled trustees to continue meeting core functions and to support leaders and be fully involved in decision making.

The external review process

- The CEO initiated the review on behalf of the trustees and acted as contact, but it was clear that she had the full support of the trust chair and other trustees.
- Several emails were exchanged which led to a fifty-five-minute telephone call with the CEO followed by a thirty-five-minute call to the chair of trustees.
- Sixteen people participated in the online self-review exercise which had a one hundred percent response with most people making use of the comments section to expand on their ratings.
- Extensive reading of documentation available on the trust and school websites was subsequently followed up by being given access to all documentation and communication available on Governorhub (which was invaluable in keeping abreast of ongoing developments whilst the review was progressing).
- A trust board meeting and a Finance Committee meeting were observed.
- Findings and perceptions were then checked out and expanded upon by conducting interviews either by telephone or Zoom (which lasted between thirty and sixty minutes each) with the chair of members, chair



of finance, trustee with lead responsibility for safeguarding, chairs of each LAB, headteachers of each school, the business manager/chief finance officer and the clerk.

- Although this review focussed on the trust board, it inevitably involved consideration of some aspects of local governance arrangements in terms of establishing clarity of roles, the effectiveness of communications and perspectives on relationships, and how governance arrangements were developing across the trust. However, at this stage there was no detailed examination of practice and processes at local level.

Key message

- This is a strong, effective trust board. There is a remarkable level of commitment and enthusiasm to learn from others and use emerging understanding of best practice to inform discussions and decisions about adapting structures and practice to increase governance and leadership capacity. As the trust grows, recruiting more trustees and planning succession will be necessary but trustees are aware of this. As lockdown eases, they look forward to being able to meet in person and consolidate relationships with others involved in leadership and governance across the trust. The introduction of a skilled dedicated governance professional would aid this activity and would also support the development of the scheme of delegation and local governance.
- Governance practice could be further strengthened by clarifying expectations on growth and the impact on central services, giving more visibility to the trust's vision and ensuring that more detail is included in minutes of board meetings to show discussions and debates. However, no major concerns were identified and there are significant strengths which are enabling trustees to effectively fulfil the three core functions of governance.

Findings

- Ratings in the online self-review process were 94% green, 5.3% amber and only 0.7% red. 25% of the questions received all green ratings. There were 23 amber ratings and only three red. There were 13 ratings in the not applicable column (with an explanation that the person did not feel their current role allowed them to answer). The only real areas highlighted for improvement were clarifying the future potential size of the trust, succession planning and procedures for reviewing trustee contributions. Observations in the comments section were followed up in individual interviews.
- The trust is extremely forward thinking and constantly seeks out opportunities to be involved in new initiatives. For example, it was an active participant in the Ethical Leadership Framework Pathfinder Project and their positive feedback featured as one of the pathfinder stories in the final report. The CEO spoke of how the focus on values and moral standards enabled the development of a shared language across the trust that guided decision making, leading to significant impact on staff and pupil well-being. Alongside the Nolan principles, ethical leadership is mentioned at the start of every trust board meeting and those interviewed were able to talk confidently about the intentions and impact of using this approach. An Evalu8 response stated, 'The Nolan Principles are not only adhered to, they are also explicitly mapped to the work we do as a board. This is one of the reasons I feel so passionately about Skylark. There is an uncompromising focus on the principles of ethical leadership in an intellectual sense and in how values are enacted every day.' It is noted however, that there was also a comment during interviews that adopting the Ethical Leadership Framework had not made too much difference as it simply reflected the way everyone operated anyway.
- Openness to change was also suggested by the fact that the trust won the TES Best Use of Information Technology award in 2020.



- As would be expected in such a small trust, in-house central services currently comprise just a small part-time team. There is clear evidence of the careful processes for securing external services and support. The excellent relationships established with these providers was witnessed in several ways during the review. However, the challenges and time involved in adhering to procurement arrangements was highlighted to trustees by the CEO in the communication sent out in March when it had been identified that professional advice was needed to ensure compliance with health and safety arrangements across the trust. This outlined a proposal to use a DfE recommended procurement service to assist in this process of identifying appropriate reliable, high quality professional providers.
- Further findings are now grouped below under the three core governance functions and NGA's eight elements of effective governance.

The three core governance functions

1. Ensuring clarity of vision, ethos and strategic direction

- The vision is clear 'To create a family of exceptional schools for children and young people with medical needs, where each is unique and distinctive, sharing the same values and ethos.' However, there is no clear understanding yet around what the potential future size of the family might be. Quite rightly, everyone is being extremely cautious in not growing before the infrastructure of governance and leadership is strong enough to support this. Having a clearer picture on size will enable trustees to focus current considerations and decisions about future developments on potential need (also see comments under the 'Right people around the table' section of this report). It is also important to agree **why** the trust wants to grow.
- It was clear that everyone spoken to during the review recognised the risks associated with the impending retirement of the CEO whose commitment, passion, connections, experience and vision have been instrumental and crucial in facilitating the setting up of the trust. Although research activities confirmed that everyone is absolutely committed to the vision, values and ethos, they all acknowledge that it is the CEO who has been the driving force so far, enabling them all to be part of shaping the future of the specialised provision they are all clearly committed to. It will come as no surprise that a key message for ensuring the strength of governance and leadership moving forward is the crucial nature of making the right appointment, someone who most importantly shares the values of the trust but who also brings the insights, experience, connections and leadership style to develop the CEO role that will support everyone's efforts to further develop the trust. Minutes of the board meeting in April record a decision to appoint the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) Recruitment Service to support the entire process.
- Initial concerns were that the vision belonged to the CEO whose energy and drive were unmistakable from the start. However, it soon became clear that others involved in establishing the trust were equally committed to its value, ethos and vision, as were those who have since joined. In responding to the question on strategic priorities driving governance, one responder stated, 'the board feels very dynamic.' As the review progressed it became clear that everyone is fully committed to working together to ensure the future success of the trust.
- The long-term improvement strategy document on the trust's website shows the vision and identifies six strategic priorities as well as outlining the three underlying principles. It states that the Skylark Partnership Trust wants to be 'beyond outstanding' but notes that this will be an ongoing process, recognising that improvement methods will change over time as the trust matures.
- The strategy document is easily accessible on the CTLC website but not on the HOE website which just shows the school's own curriculum intent. This is similar to the trust vision but not the same. The trust's website makes clear that the trust will work with all its settings to achieve its vision. It also states that it values the distinct offer and individuality of each school and the scheme of delegation does state that



responsibility for agreeing the school vision and strategy is delegated to the academy headteacher with support from the local advisory board and CEO. The trust's core values are clearly shown on each of the three websites.

- The trustees and CEO are taking due diligence extremely seriously and are anxious to learn, not only from their experience of welcoming Dudley into the trust, but also from others within their networks. It was clear from discussions with the headteacher and chair at Dudley that they had been similarly diligent in their considerations before committing to joining a trust.
- 2. Holding executive leaders to account for the educational performance of the organisation and its pupils, and the performance management of staff**
- Throughout the review it was clear that trustees were fully aware of their responsibility to ensure an effective and appropriate system of control, financial and otherwise and to have in place reliable processes for monitoring performance, including holding senior leaders to account.
 - There is clear evidence that trustees have access to a range of detailed information, but it was initially unclear as to the extent trustees have influenced what they are given and in what format or whether so far, they have relied on others providing what they thought was appropriate. However, evidence was seen of trustees requesting further evidence, or information being presented in a different way, when they felt this was needed and there was a survey response on trustees being part of conversations about how they would like to see data reported in future. A change in CEO, combined with returning to more normal processes post COVID, is perhaps an ideal opportunity to review this and discuss it with both the current and new CEO. This would link to further developing and strengthening communications between the various tiers of governance and would also help in considering how to ensure that reports continue to provide all necessary elements but are kept at a manageable volume.
 - The trust regularly commissions external specialists to quality assure processes. For example, the audit of safeguarding procedures at both schools by the National Society for the Prevention of Child Cruelty.
 - There is evidence of a clear process for highlighting action points through action logs and ensuring that these are followed through with updates appropriately given.
 - Minutes of committee meetings show trustee awareness of standard performance measures but in reports and during interviews, it was highlighted that trustees are also aware that the usual processes applied within other settings for measuring performance are not always appropriate in alternative provision as many of the pupils will have missed significant amounts of time in education and cohorts will vary considerably from year to year. Minutes record trustees requesting ongoing changes to such measures where they feel this would be helpful. They also appreciate the fact that their CEO is involved at a high level in work being done beyond the trust to review and adapt how data is collected and used in alternative medical provision settings.
 - Responsibilities for holding the CEO and headteachers to account through the performance management system are outlined within the scheme of delegation which records that the trust board will carry out the review of the CEO who will, in turn, lead the process for the academy headteachers with support from the LAB.
 - Work is continuing to ensure maximum benefits are achieved by further developing a meaningful role for the local boards. This is invaluable in helping trustees to develop their understanding of each school.
 - The teaching and learning committee of the board is in the early stages of development.
- 3. Overseeing the financial performance of the organisation and making sure its money is well spent**
- Although it was not within the scope of the review to include detailed examination of budgetary records, there was substantial evidence that processes and practice are such that trustees can have confidence that finances are being well-managed. Details are included in the annual report and financial statements



which for year ending 31 August 2020 record that there is a healthy reserve balance but risks continue to be monitored carefully.

- The chair of the Finance Committee, which is also the audit committee, has an accountancy background as do two of the other trustees on the committee. They maintain oversight of governance, risk management, internal controls and value for money decisions. The chair expressed confidence that they are meeting the requirements of the Academies Financial Handbook and confirmed that he felt much more confident now that they were more in control than when, as a maintained school, they were reliant on local authority systems.
- The current CEO has taken her role as accounting officer extremely seriously, undertaking specific training for this and accessing all possible sources of support and specialist advice.
- The business manager at HOE (three and a half days a week) is also chief finance officer (CFO) for the trust (one and a half days a week). She has been with HOE since 2004 and has undertaken substantial training for a variety of relevant qualifications as the role has developed and responsibilities increased since converting to trust status. She and the CEO are the only two members of staff currently directly employed by the trust.
- The trust accountant from MLG Education Services, who specialise in providing support to trusts, confirms that the trust's financial capability and management systems are robust to ensure compliance with the Academies Financial Handbook, best value for money and deliver the long-term strategy.
- Trustees are fully involved in active risk management.
- Minutes of the board meeting in April 2021 do, however, demonstrate awareness that changes are needed to ensure there are no conflicts of interest and that careful appropriate appointments are made to ensure that there is capacity to deal with increasing needs as the trust grows. Trustees are considering the percentage of the trust budget that potentially needs to be attributed to central services and are looking at the implications of making the CFO role full time. This would reduce the involvement of MLG who currently spend one day a week in school supporting the CFO and the CEO. This includes them undertaking tasks that, if completed by the CFO, could be a potential conflict of interest in light of the dual roles. MLG also attend the Finance Committee meetings.
- Observing a Finance Committee meeting, reading recent minutes of trustee meetings and conducting individual conversations with many of those involved in governance gave more insight into the reassuring level of debate that is taking place to adapt appointments and arrangements to ensure that trustees can continue to have complete confidence that processes continue to be secure and transparent and that they are receiving reliable, detailed reports that enable them to fulfil this core function.
- Trustees are alert to the need to make sure that plans are in place to use the current healthy reserve to enhance pupils' educational experience across the entire trust.
- Minutes also record how trustees are monitoring the impact of spending decisions. For example, the effect of deciding to fund individually selected books for each child in the trust on two occasions. This had not only boosted a love of reading for the young people but also clearly had a significant impact on enhancing staff perceptions of trustee commitment and awareness of the pressures facing pupils and staff, thus supporting the development of relationships between trustees and staff throughout the organisation.
- The trust is looking at the Integrated Curriculum and Financial Planning (ICFP) materials produced by the DfE and considering how these might support and develop current processes for ensuring that money is well spent.
- Key documents can be easily found on the trust's website.
- As well as providing full access to all documentation, Governorhub is used to share information and maintain conversations where appropriate between meetings.



NGA's eight elements of effective governance

Element 1: Right people around the table

- The research report from PrimarySite on Sustainable Growth in Multi Academy Trusts released in the summer of 2020 <https://primarysite.net/sustainablegrowthinmats> which NGA contributed to, emphasises having the right board in place as a critical factor in enabling successful growth in MATs, stressing the importance of having a pro-active growth strategy to guide development of the trust.
- The trust has now established a structure where there is complete separation between the tiers of governance with no cases at all of anyone carrying dual roles.
- The four members have been carefully recruited not only for their professional skills and connections but also for their understanding of, and commitment to, the unique demands of providing education for young people and supporting their families as they deal with the stresses of serious illness.
- As well as demonstrating huge commitment to the values and vision of the trust, the seven trustees bring a wealth of invaluable professional skills, experience and connections and have undertaken training on the role of a trustee. They have used the NGA skills audit to inform recruitment to the board and allocation of roles. As is the case with the CEO and headteachers in each school, most of them have governance and/or trustee involvement or experience in other organisations outside of this trust. For example, the CEO and head of HOE both sit on the National Association of Hospital Education and the CEO also sits on the Northamptonshire Virtual School Advisory Board.
- The analysis of the skills audit is distinctly positive with high levels of confidence about trustee ability to evaluate practice and apply learning. Outcomes show very few areas where at least one trustee does not score the highest rating of five. These relate to awareness of national policy, knowledge and/or experience of the community served by the schools and finally, knowledge of governance structures appropriate to the size and complexity of the trust.
- A telling survey response was 'I feel that my expertise is highly valued' which not only confirmed how the trust is being run to make full use of all available expertise, but it also confirmed the mutual respect amongst all involved.
- Although there seems to be agreement that the current size of the board enables them to fulfil their responsibilities, it is acknowledged that this may not be the case as the trust grows.
- Responsibilities are delegated in such a way that maximum use is made of the individual skills and backgrounds of each trustee, for example, those with an accountancy background linked to finance and another trustee with professional involvement in safeguarding leading on this area.
- Trustee attendance information is included at the end of minutes and records regular attendance by everyone. The declaration of business and pecuniary interest document is also readily accessible on the website.
- Everyone was clear that it was vital when bringing other people into the trust, to consider not only skills and experience but also commitment to the values of the trust.

Element 2: Roles and Responsibilities

- There is clear separation of roles across the trust and there is understanding of these respective roles although survey responses and interviews confirm that everyone is open to continued learning on how each role can be further developed to maximise overall effectiveness across all tiers of governance. The trust is already involved in peer reviews with other hospital schools.
- The trust has NGA membership and trustees have full access to the resources this provides. Learning Link has also been purchased for the board and each academy but COVID pressures have interrupted plans for co-ordinating and promoting training, directing people to appropriate modules to support induction, changes in roles, etc. There are plans in place to reintroduce this focus across the trust.
- Trustees fully understand the strategic nature of their role.
- The trust website states: 'all schools in the trust are valued for their distinct offer and individuality to meet the needs of pupils with medical need in their community'. How responsibilities have been delegated are in the scheme of delegation which is on the trust website although not easily located being included with



policies and procedures rather than on the governance tab. The document could not be found on either of the school websites and interviews revealed uncertainties about this essential document.

- An interview with the chair of the members indicated that they clearly understand their role in maintaining oversight of governance but welcome the fact that, in addition to receiving formal reports at the AGM, they can keep abreast of developments (and clearly do so) by accessing information at any time on Governorhub. This is in addition to informal exchanges when those involved cross paths through their involvement in various other organisations and advisory groups dedicated to provision for young people with specialist needs. Comments during the review confirmed the extent to which such opportunities are used.
- The valuable role played by the LAB's is fully understood and appreciated and there is significant delegation of responsibilities. Within the 'one organisation' ethos, it appears that those involved at school level recognise they have real influence and accept the responsibility that comes with this. Rather than worrying about loss of power, there was recognition by both local chairs of how being part of a trust had freed them up to focus on local provision, including engagement with stakeholders, whilst others led and provided support on issues related to HR, finance, etc. They did agree though that understanding of effective MAT governance amongst those at local level is still a work in progress.
- Communication systems to facilitate this are in the process of development (meetings between the trust chair and LAB chairs). There is recognition that this is vital although not easy to achieve but everyone spoken to clearly felt empowered to contribute ideas or to raise any concerns. The aim is to ensure that LAB members have access to the discussion and decisions at trust board level and have ongoing opportunities to escalate matters to the board as necessary. The intention to continue bringing trustees and LAB members together is noted in section 1.5 of the five-year plan.
- Developing communications with local leads was also discussed at some length with the trustee who has lead responsibility for safeguarding. It should be noted that she brings a wealth of high-profile professional experience, insights and understanding to the role. She has clear plans for developing accountability and support for safeguarding across the trust by strengthening links and support with those leading at local level.
- There was unanimous agreement during interviews that the CEO is playing a crucial role in encouraging openness and the involvement of everyone in developing the strength of governance and leadership across the trust. An area of concern is how to ensure that action is taken to ensure that this continues when the current CEO retires later this year.
- All trustees and governors within the trust sign a code of conduct, adapted from the NGA model.

Element 3: Good chair

- The chair is a retired accountant. Her enthusiasm for the vision and values is clear. Observations and interviews demonstrated her leadership skills and the respect for her style from those working with her. She was a governor and chair at HOE prior to becoming trust chair and is fully committed to the task of supporting the development of governance across the trust. She is clearly passionate about alternative provision and recognises the role of the chair in ensuring the effective functioning of the board and setting professional standards of governance and accountability.
- She is now meeting virtually on a regular basis with the LAB chairs. This, as the trust grows, may be an area to review so that effective communication between trust board and local governance does not put undue workload pressure on the chair.
- The vice chair of trustees is a chartered accountant. He chairs the finance committee.
- In both observed meetings excellent chairing allowed the board to explore a full agenda in detail and finish the meetings on time.



Element 4: Professional clerk

- The review raised questions about current clerking arrangements and how they could be developed to provide the support and consistency needed as the trust develops further.
- An externally appointed person clerks the trust board and its committees with separate arrangements for clerking at local level. There is little, if any, communication or collaboration between them and hence Interviews confirmed that there was little understanding of clerking arrangements in each part of the trust by those in the separate settings.
- There is absolutely no implied criticism of those currently providing clerking and indeed, the commitment, enthusiasm and openness of the trust board clerk in contributing to this review was extremely helpful and much appreciated. The suggestions in this report simply relate to how considerations on clerking could have significant impact on the future strength of governance throughout the trust by supporting others as they strive to fulfil their respective roles.
- Although she clerks in many primaries, this is the only trust that the clerk works with. However, she is part of a team who between them have considerable trust governance experience and she regularly uses NGA resources for research and advice. She is also part of a clerking forum. Having been with the trust since 2018, she has witnessed the conversion from maintained to trust governance and commented that she would welcome any training to help further develop her understanding of trust governance.
- The clerk prepares draft agendas which are then sent to the chair and CEO to finalise before being placed on Governorhub by the clerk. Supporting papers are then added by either the clerk or CEO. The clerk feels that the decision to use Governorhub has had significant benefits in supporting governance.
- Trust board minutes are accurate and well presented, using emboldening and colour to highlight decision making and questioning.
- The appointment of a governance professional to oversee, co-ordinate and support all aspects of governance throughout the trust would have multiple benefits in supporting the trust board, LABs, CEO and senior leaders to enable them to conduct their business efficiently. At present a significant amount of senior leader time is taken up by tasks that could probably be delegated to a person who took responsibility for all aspects of governance across the trust (for example, in acting as contact and facilitating all aspects of this review). Such a move could open many positive options when working with the new CEO to develop their role as the trust moves forward.
- In addition to meeting administrative and procedural requirements, an effective, well supported governance professional can also facilitate debate, support decision making processes and provide the experience and connections to ensure awareness of changing statutory and regulatory requirements, providing expert advice on procedures and compliance. This could include monitoring and maintaining the websites so that the trust is following changing guidance on what should be published.
- This person could also lead on organising and recording training for everyone involved in governance.
- When all factors are considered there could also be potential cost savings in employing a governance professional as part of central services as well as having all these potential influences on increasing efficiency and everyone's capacity to effectively fulfil their respective roles.
- Accessing networking opportunities provided by for example NGA's clerking conferences, a person dedicated to supporting governance across the trust can keep abreast of changing expectations and emerging understanding of what constitutes effective governance and best practice.
- In-house performance management could also then ensure that those providing clerking (as the trust grows there may still be others providing some of the services at local level due to geographical considerations but overseen by the governance professional) receive support themselves.



Element 5: Good relationships

- All activities during the review indicated excellent relationships at all levels throughout the organisation which stemmed from a shared passion and commitment to the goal of providing outstanding provision for young people with medical needs and supporting their families. There was a definite impression that everyone felt that they had a part to play in shaping the future of the trust and felt supported and empowered. The principles of The Ethical Leadership Framework are very much in evidence and relationships are based on mutual respect and acknowledgment of the skills, expertise, experience, insight and connections that every individual contributes to the combined strength of the organisation. Difficult decisions are handled professionally but with kindness and integrity (this was evident in minutes and in observed meetings). The atmosphere in the observed meetings was professional but relaxed and friendly, encouraging open discussion and questioning.
- The quality of relationships across the trust and the mutual respect, and commitment to providing everyone involved in the trust with maximum support, is further evidenced by the pooled efforts to react to the challenging and ever-changing implications of dealing with the COVID situation. Minutes of the AGM in January 2021 record appreciation of this commitment. Trustees have been meeting monthly and the local advisory boards have also met regularly to monitor the local situation and report back to trustees. Advice and support from NGA and the Confederation of Schools Trusts has been used to develop detailed risk assessment and decision making.

Element 6: Knowing the trust's schools

- Two of the trustees were governors at HOE prior to it becoming a trust and so know this school well but other people commented during interview that they would like to get to know both schools better. This also links with comments elsewhere in the report about developing communications.
- Trustees receive clear information that enables them to monitor all aspects of provision in both schools. Obviously, it has not been possible for trustees to visit any of the sites over the last year.

Element 7: Question and Challenge

- Although minutes were detailed and well presented, they do not immediately make clear the level of understanding, involvement, questioning and challenge evident from other activities conducted as part of this review. This could well be because of the high quality of information that trustees receive meaning that fewer questions need to be asked. It certainly appeared during all interactions with trustees that they study documentation and are in a well-informed position to question if they feel the need to do so. This was evident in both observed meetings when the level of engagement was clear.
- The way in which questioning took place at the observed meetings, combined with the openness and willingness to comment, and express opinions during the review, demonstrated that everyone felt they had a part to play in shaping the future effectiveness and success of the whole trust. This was not only in the meetings but also in individual engagement with the review during the Evalu8 exercise and the telephone conversations.
- There were several comments that although there is reliance on the CEO bringing ideas and proposals based on her insights from her involvement in other networks, the trustees definitely have no hesitation in questioning and challenging her when then they feel the need to do so. There was actually a light-hearted comment that despite clearly welcoming the passion of the CEO, trustees sometimes feel that they need to 'curb any impulsiveness' by asking searching questions to ensure that all aspects of proposals are fully considered before moving forward.
- Trustees also demonstrated compassion and commitment to the wellbeing of everyone in the trust including the CEO.

Element 8: Courageous Conversations

- There is absolutely no doubt that all the positive factors identified during this review, including the excellent relationships, understanding of respective roles and level of skills, experience and confidence of



trustees, means that difficult but constructive conversations can take place as required. This was witnessed in various aspects of the review process. Trustees are confident in challenging procedures or proposals where they feel there is a need to do so.

Summary recommendations

Governance structure and practice

- Ensure absolute clarity on the job description for the new CEO. Trustees will need to be clear on the future division of responsibility and accountability, especially between themselves and the CEO and between the CEO, headteachers and other senior leaders. With the planned retirement of the extremely experienced and well-connected CEO who has been the driving force in establishing and developing the trust but with a dual role for much of her time as CEO, this will be an ideal time to define future expectations.
- Further develop communications and cross trust networks eg by organising a programme of visits to schools by trustees (once restrictions allow) and considering the possibility of organising an annual governance event, not only to focus on specific topics but equally importantly, to encourage everyone to get to know each other.
- Consider succession planning taking into account that new trustees may not have the capacity to commit as much time as the current retired chairs do.
- Raise the profile of governance by developing information on both the trust and school websites. This could include brief biographies and/or statements from individual members, trustees and governors together with a summary of the impact of governance in the early years of the trust and the intentions for future developments.
- Explore the possibility of employing a governance professional to facilitate the work of members, trustees, local committee members and staff, overseeing governance as a whole across the trust to ensure effectiveness and compliance with all statutory and regulatory requirements. This would include providing consistent support and advice as well as ensuring the efficiency and consistency of administrative processes.

Vision, ethos and strategic direction

- Be more specific about what the trust will look like in five years' time eg revisiting discussions about potential size. This will probably be best done once the new CEO is appointed so that they and the headteachers are fully involved in the process. Strategic priorities linked to this will then give a clear basis for trust board discussions, decision making, monitoring and holding to account.
- Include the trust vision on all websites.

Monitoring and holding to account

- Ensure monitoring activities are explicitly linked to summarising progress against the strategic priorities.
- Ensure that the level of engagement at meetings, and the number of occasions when trustees initiate further discussion by asking for more information, is apparent in the minutes.
- Consider how those on local boards can be involved in sending feedback and questions to the trust board and receiving a prompt response.
- Raise awareness and understanding of the scheme of delegation so delegation and lines of communication are clear.



Ongoing support	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ The trust is already an avid user of its NGA membership and has Learning Link for both academies.▪ A clear intention was expressed to focus this review on the trust board (although inevitably it has touched on the work at local level) but then to follow this next year with a more detailed review in each of the schools. NGA would be delighted to be involved in this work if requested to do so.▪ Once this review is finalised the school will have free access to the NGA advice lines for three months. The membership team, membership@nga.org.uk, will be in touch with you shortly to arrange this.▪ NGA can provide training for schools and academies. There are sessions for new governors and trustees, for chairs, for clerks, and for the governing board. Details can be found on the NGA website https://www.nga.org.uk or contact trainingadmin@nga.org.uk for more details.▪ For further consultancy support, including external advisors for performance management, contact consultancy@nga.org.uk	
Acknowledgments	
<p>It has been a pleasure to conduct this review and thanks must go to everyone at the trust for their time, enthusiasm and commitment to the process. It is hoped that the outcomes contribute to decision making and planning related to further strengthening and future proofing governance structures and processes to allow the trust to achieve its ambition to provide outstanding personalised provision for all those young people and their families who are experiencing difficult times.</p>	
NGA sign off	17/05/2021