

Summary of the external governance review
undertaken at Blackpool and The Fylde College

Summer 2026

Introduction

Blackpool and The Fylde College is a general further education college, headquartered in Blackpool and operating across the Fylde Coast. On 1 August 2026, the college merged with Furness College to form the B&FC Group, under the leadership of a Group Corporation Board. This review was undertaken prior to the merger taking place and therefore the observations relate to Blackpool and The Fylde College rather than the wider Group, however all recommendations will be taken forward by the post-merger board.

It is a requirement of the Department for Education’s Accountability Agreement that boards arrange an external governance review at least once every three years. The completion of this review satisfies that requirement.

That said, undertaking the review is about more than just compliance. Guidance from the Department for Education notes that strong governance is fundamental to delivering high-quality education, safeguarding funds and assets, and fulfilling the six main duties of trustees under charity law. An external governance review brings an independent expert into the boardroom, which enables them to form a view on the effectiveness of the college’s governance as well as the board’s impact and overall culture. It also allows them to bring fresh insight and broader governance perspectives; something that is welcomed by the B&FC Group Corporation Board as part of its commitment to continual improvement. We have published this summary to share the headline findings of the review and to set out how we plan to take the recommendations forward.

Following a competitive procurement exercise, the board selected Rob Lawson OBE to undertake the review. Rob is an experienced reviewer, having carried out over 30 such reviews as well as moderating reviews conducted by others and undertaking audits of reviews on behalf of the Further Education Commissioner. He is the Chair of Hull College and a National Leader of Governance appointed by the Further Education Commissioner’s Office.

Evidence to inform this review was drawn from documents such as minutes and policies; interviews with board members, college management and the Governance Professional; a questionnaire sent to all board members and direct observation of meetings.

The review focused on three key areas:

Board composition
Board structures
Board interaction

In addition, the Corporation Board asked the reviewer to consider three additional questions:

- Is the Board ready for a new world of challenges, including the merger, Multiversity and curriculum reform?
- How will the merger affect governance?
- Is the balance right between governance and management? Does the Board get too operational?

BOARD COMPOSITION



What attributes (skills, knowledge, mindset/attitude) do members of the board possess currently and what additional attributes would allow the board to better meet its objectives?

At the time of the review, the board was made up of the following:

- 10 independent board members, including the Chair
- 2 staff board members
- 1 student board member
- 1 Chief Executive

In addition, the board is supported by two co-opted subject specialists, one on the Audit Committee with specialist audit and accountancy experience, and one on the Quality and Standards Committee with specialist and current senior-level further education experience.

As a rule, we aim to recruit independent board members who are operating at tier 1 or tier 2 level in their organisation, which provides a good mix of managerial skills and expertise. As an employer-focused organisation, we also aim to align our board membership with the key employment sectors across the area we serve, to ensure good representation and diversity of thought.

The review concluded that there is an impressive mix of skills, experience and backgrounds on the board, with plenty of experience in the key areas of education and finance which gives the board and its committees the knowledge needed to scrutinise and challenge. The review highlighted the lack of diversity for some characteristics on our board – something which was already known and which has been an area of focus for some time. We recognise the challenge of ensuring diversity, particularly when operating within a community which itself is not diverse, and we support

the recommendation to make every effort to recruit board members from diverse backgrounds.

The review acknowledged that an audit of board members' skills is undertaken and noted that we had aligned our approach with that of Furness College as part of the merger preparations. It recommended that we update this whenever a new board member joins rather than updating on an annual basis. We support this recommendation and will do so going forward.

The reviewer commented that the inclusion of a former Principal and Chief Executive of a further education college and a senior leader from the Association of Colleges on the board means that there is more further education experience than is normally found on college boards, which is the result of focused work arising from our previous governance review. In terms of wider board composition, we acknowledge the importance of seeking to recruit a board member with an IT or digital background in the next round of recruitment, given the growing importance of this to the sector and wider society. We will also take forward the recommendation to develop a written succession planning policy for board members.

The review commended the way that board and committee meetings are chaired, noting that meetings were conducted at a steady pace with time given for in-depth discussions on important issues. Meetings were described as inclusive, and chairs were observed to actively bring colleagues into discussions.

The review noted that we were an outlier in terms of our governing documents, in that they allow for board members to serve up to 16 years in specific circumstances. This arrangement had been in place for several years, but no longer reflects best practice as set out within Principle 6 of the Further Education Code of Good Governance published by the Association of Colleges, nor broader corporate governance principles. Whilst no board member has in fact served more than 5 years, we

support the need to update our core governance documents to reflect best practice and will do so as soon as possible. As part of the merger process, we also took the decision to continue to count board members' service from before the merger, without resetting their length of service because of the merger, which the review recognised was good practice.

The review noted that board members felt the board demonstrates a commitment to the seven principles of public life but highlighted the fact that they were not actively included in any documentation. We will therefore ensure that these are revisited on an annual basis through a focused discussion, alongside written confirmation of our ongoing commitment to them within board minutes.

Attendance of board members was noted to be good overall, with most board members exceeding the target set within our governing documents. The review noted that our attendance target was slightly lower than the sector norm of 80% and suggested that we amend our governing documents to reflect this target. We support that recommendation and will do so as soon as possible.

As part of the review, board members said that they felt fully engaged in the process of developing our latest strategic plan and that they had had plenty of opportunities to contribute, including at two dedicated away days. Board members also fed back that they felt they had appropriate opportunities to monitor and scrutinise key performance indicators.

Summary of recommendations in this section and our response

1. However difficult it may be, and recognising the lack of local diversity, it is recommended that the college continues to make every effort to recruit board members from diverse backgrounds

We accept this recommendation. We will specifically include reference to consideration of diversity within our succession planning policy (referenced at recommendation 4, below) and we will convene a meeting of the Search Committee to consider next steps in more detail.

Expected completion date: December 2026 (policy development); January 2027 (Search Committee meeting).

2. It is recommended that a skills audit is updated when a new board member joins, to ensure the skills audit is as effective as possible

We accept this recommendation and will ensure this is completed each time a new board member joins.

Expected completion date: When next new member is appointed

3. It is recommended that the recruitment of a board member with an IT background is a priority when the next round of recruitment begins

We accept this recommendation. The board will be reviewing its composition in the near future, with the support of the skills audit data for 2025/26, and will agree any next steps as part of this discussion.

Expected completion date: December 2026 (agreement of priority areas for recruitment)

4. It is recommended the board develops a succession planning policy, which can help ensure governing bodies remain effective, diverse and capable of meeting their statutory responsibilities

We accept this recommendation and will develop the policy.

Expected completion date: December 2026

5. It is recommended that the board looks again at its terms of service guidance which says board members can serve up to 16 years, as this goes against the AoC Code of Governance, which recommends board members should normally serve a maximum of two terms of four years.

We accept this recommendation. All core governance documents will be reviewed and updated versions presented to the board for approval.

Expected completion date: September 2026

6. It is recommended that the board annually revisits the Nolan Principles through a minuted and focused board discussion, enabling board members to reflect on their application in practice, with the board's ongoing commitment formally noted in the minutes.

We accept this recommendation. This has been added to the board's cycle of business for September 2026 and on an annual basis thereafter.

Expected completion date: September 2026

7. It is recommended that the attendance target in the college's standing orders is updated to reflect the sector target of 80%

We accept this recommendation. This will be incorporated within the review described for recommendation 5, above.

Expected completion date: September 2026

BOARD STRUCTURES



Do the current board processes and structures equip members to optimally engage with each other to deliver the objectives effectively, with transparency and in compliance with regulations?

At B&FC we have five committees reporting to the board, namely:

- Audit Committee, which meets three times per year
- Finance and Resources Committee, which meets four times per year
- Quality and Standards Committee, which meets four times per year
- Remuneration Committee, which meets at least once per year
- Search Committee, which meets when needed

Boards of further education colleges are different from their corporate counterparts, as responsibility for day-to-day management of the college sits with the Chief Executive and wider executive team rather than the board. That said, boards retain accountability as quasi-trustees of the organisation which is also an exempt charity and are responsible for oversight and good governance. For many years, the Carver model of governance, which is a system designed to ensure that governing bodies focus on broad strategic goals rather than daily management, was commonplace in the further education sector but this is no longer the case, with boards moving to a more conventional oversight approach.

The review noted that we had previously been operating a loose Carver model of governance and that we had sought to move away from this by introducing a full suite of committees, which provides a platform for scrutiny and challenge of key issues. The review recognised the fact that the board had not fully moved away from a Carver approach in its practice; particularly in terms of the frequency of meetings. During 2025/26, the board met formally on nine occasions, with this time commitment increasing to eleven sessions once the annual training and

strategy sessions are included. Not only does this place significant demand on board members who are volunteers, it also places a burden on college management in terms of meeting preparation and attendance. The review commented that some of the meeting agendas were lighter than others, which provided a natural opportunity for us to streamline the annual cycle.

We support the recommendation to reduce the number of formal board meetings to a maximum of five per year. We recognise that this provides an opportunity for committees to proactively provide scrutiny of matters prior to consideration by the board, and we will ensure that our cycle of business and our agendas make clear the items that have previously been reviewed.

Our annual cycle of business for the Audit Committee and the Quality and Standards Committee includes an annual review of terms of reference, so that amendments can be recommended to the board for consideration. In some other areas, reviews of committee terms of reference had not been undertaken on an annual basis – either because, in the case of the Finance and Resources Committee, the committee had only met three times since being established, or in the case of the Search and Remuneration Committees, because the committees meet infrequently. In this latter case, some time had passed since the review of terms of reference was undertaken and therefore we accept the recommendation to ensure that terms of reference for all committees are reviewed at least every two years.

We have recently introduced written committee chairs' reports to the board after each committee meeting. These are structured around a 'AAA' format, showing areas to alert the board to, matters on which the board can be assured following committee consideration and things the committee wishes to advise the board of. In addition, the approved minutes of committee meetings are included within board papers for information. The review acknowledged that board members generally felt well briefed on matters considered by committees but nonetheless cautioned of the need to remain alert to this topic as the number of

board meetings reduces. This will naturally form part of our self-assessment exercise during 2026/27.

Whilst we have a suite of governing documents in place, including the Instrument and Articles of Government, Standing Orders, Financial Regulations and committee terms of reference, the review recommended that a Scheme of Delegation be developed. This will allow the board to appropriately delegate items of business to committees or to management, thus ensuring that board time is appropriately focused on key strategic and assurance matters. We support this recommendation and will develop a Scheme of Delegation.

The review acknowledged the quality of our meeting arrangements and our cycle of business in particular, noting that this covers key areas of business and is helpful in agenda setting as well as for report preparation.

During the review, our training programme was examined, and it was found to cover the necessary areas. In response to feedback from board members in previous years, we had adopted a whole board approach to training; delivering training collectively and using this as both an induction tool as well as an opportunity for seasoned board members to further develop their understanding. Whilst the board member survey indicated that board members were generally comfortable with this approach, a suggestion was made for a more specific induction programme, including a digital induction book, to be developed. We support this recommendation and will implement it immediately; piloting it with board members who have recently joined as a result of the merger.

The Chair had previously undertaken 1:1 review meetings with board members, however these had not happened in the previous year because of the significant increases in workload associated with the merger and other key projects. These will be reinstated and will be an opportunity for board members to share their feedback on any additional areas of training and development that might be beneficial. We will also

be introducing a more formalised and development-focused process by which the performance of the Chair is reviewed, based on recent guidance from the Department for Education on effective chair performance reviews.

The review commended our use of lead board member roles for four key areas – apprenticeships, health and safety, independent careers advice and guidance, and safeguarding - as an effective means of triangulation and suggested that consideration be given to formalising the approach to this as well as potentially extending the areas covered by the scheme. We had planned to review the scheme within nine months of the merger taking place and will continue to do so, at which point the board will be invited to consider whether the scope of the lead board member roles should be formalised and expanded.

Our board papers were acknowledged to have improved over recent years and those interviewed felt that the papers contained enough information and data to enable them to challenge, scrutinise and monitor. The review found that cover sheets were well laid out, clear and easy to follow.

The review also noted the positive developments since the last review in creating opportunities for board members to meet students and hear the student voice. Board members attend student focus groups and hear first-hand about students' experiences of college life. Whilst we have two student positions on our board, we have struggled to fill both posts in recent years. Our current student member is from a higher education background, and we are working with the Director for Students and the wider Students' Union to seek to recruit a board member with a further education background. The review recommends that we continue to do so and we accept this recommendation.

The review included commentary around our risk management arrangements and our arrangements for oversight of higher education, given that we are one of the largest providers of college-based higher

education in the country; offering qualifications from Level 4 through to bachelor's degrees as well as higher and degree apprenticeships. Note was made of the fact that we distinguish between academic and corporate governance, with a dedicated Higher Education Academic Board in place as the principal academic authority for higher education, supported by specialist committees including the Academic Standards and Development Committee and formal academic regulations covering admissions, assessment, quality assurance, external examining, student representation and academic standards. Whilst board members (other than the Chief Executive) are not involved with the Higher Education Academic Board, the Quality and Standards Committee receives an annual report on its work to ensure visibility of the business transacted and a link between the two bodies.

The review also recommended that the board considers developing a board assurance framework or compliance register which sets out core regulatory and funding obligations, evidence of compliance and a clear explanation of where requirements are not fully met. We accept this recommendation and note the recent comments of the new Further Education Commissioner on this topic.

Summary of recommendations in this section and our response

8. It is recommended that board meetings are reduced to a maximum of five per year (strategic away days/sessions are not included in this figure)

We accept this recommendation and have implemented it with effect from the start of 2026/27. New cycles of business have been developed to support the new meeting arrangements.

Expected completion date: September 2026

9. It is recommended that each committee's terms of reference are reviewed and updated at least every two years

We accept this recommendation and will ensure a full review of all committee terms of reference is undertaken during the coming year, and update at least every two years.

Expected completion date: March 2027

10. It is recommended that a suitable Scheme of Delegation is developed

We accept this recommendation and will develop a Scheme of Delegation. Once developed, this will form part of the annual review of core governance documents.

Expected completion date: December 2026

11. It is recommended that a more formal approach is taken to the lead board member scheme, with a policy and role descriptions being developed and more clarity about what happens after a visit. It is also recommended that the board explores extending the scheme to include areas such as finance and curriculum

We had planned to undertake a review of the lead board member scheme within nine months of the merger taking place, and feedback from this review will be incorporated into that exercise.

Expected completion date: April 2027

12. It is recommended that an executive summary of this report be published within the governance area of the website, as per Department for Education guidance

This summary satisfies this recommendation and will be published on our website.

Expected completion date: September 2026

13. It is recommended that efforts continue to recruit a further education student board member

We accept this recommendation. We currently working with the Director for Students on this for 2026/27 and will update the board in due course.

Expected completion date: December 2026

14. It is recommended that the chair's 1:1 interviews with individual board members are reinstated and the Chair's performance is also annually evaluated

We accept this recommendation. We will develop documentation to support board members to prepare for their 1:1 interview, including identification of any additional training suggestions, and we will implement a process by which a summary of themes and trends is reported to the board for information.

We will also develop a mechanism for board members to provide feedback on the Chair's performance, which will contribute to his annual 1:1 which will be undertaken by the Vice-Chair.

Expected completion date: December 2026 (documentation); April 2027 (completion of reviews and summary reporting to board)

15. To enable effective board assurance, it is recommended that the board considers developing a board assurance framework or compliance register setting out core regulatory and funding obligations, the evidence confirming compliance and a clear explanation where requirements are not fully met

We accept this recommendation and are keen to develop such a framework.

Expected completion date: January 2027

BOARD INTERACTION



Does the board's culture and interactions between board members allow for the most effective deployment of individuals and collective skills to meet the college's goals?

The review noted that the board is very supportive of the college's leadership team and that relationships between the board and the executive team seem mature and respectful whilst maintaining the right level of scrutiny and challenge. Board members were noted to get on well together.

We work hard to provide opportunities for board members to come together to get to know each other, although we recognise that the pace and scale of business recently has meant that this is not always as effective as it could be. We will continue to provide opportunities for networking and getting to know one another, and we will invite the board to consider other ways of doing so.

Those interviewed felt that there was a strong relationship between the executive and the board, with the right level of respectful challenge and scrutiny. It is particularly noteworthy that every board member responding to the questionnaire strongly agreed that the board works effectively with the Chief Executive and the wider executive, with a relationship built on trust, honesty and transparency; something which the reviewer noted was an unusually positive response for such surveys.

The reviewer noted that the Chair is an experienced non-executive and leads board meetings well and that the Chief Executive is a vastly experienced and respected further education leader. The Governance Professional was described as particularly efficient and was noted to communicate with board members and the executive extremely well. The relationship between the three was noted to be an effective one.

Challenge was observed to be delivered in the right manner, and it was noted that members of the executive receive challenge in meetings without becoming defensive, which is pleasing to note. The reviewer also commented that it was apparent that board members had prepared well for meetings, having read their papers in advance and having identified areas for questioning and challenge.

One observation within the review was that the board can sometimes become a little too operational rather than keeping a strategic focus, although this was noted to be a common observation of further education boards. When this happens, the Chair will intervene to bring discussions back on track.

Summary of recommendations in this section and our response

No recommendations were made in this section of the review.

ADDITIONAL QUESTION 1



Is the board ready for a new world of challenges – including the merger, Multiversity and curriculum reform?

The review noted that the measured and calm approach observed during merger-related discussions bodes well for the merger. The reviewer commented that board members were clearly taking the merger extremely seriously and were not rushing into merger decisions.

From his own experience of mergers, the reviewer recommends that board members are represented on any working groups or task and finish groups that continue post-merger; noting that unexpected issues will undoubtedly arise and that it is important for the board to remain abreast of these.

The Multiversity project was noted to be a significant opportunity for the college, and it was pleasing to note that board members felt that they had been kept well informed throughout the life of the project. No specific governance changes were recommended, although the reviewer did suggest that consideration be given to introducing a lead board member role for the project if that would be helpful to the board.

Curriculum reform was noted to be a significant issue within the sector generally, with a particular challenge around what will come next. The review noted the distinct advantage to the board of having a recently retired further education Principal and Chief Executive within its membership, as this will support the board to understand the issues involved and in challenging the executive around any reforms.

ADDITIONAL QUESTION 2



How will the merger affect governance?

The review commented that post-merger challenges are likely to be around culture and expectations, given that developing a joint culture across two predecessor organisations will take time. There is also a need for board members to learn about the new campuses and populations – for those who were previously members of the stand-alone Blackpool and The Fylde College Corporation Board to understand Furness College and the Sixth-Form College as well as their local communities, and for those joining from Furness College to understand the different campuses and communities across Blackpool and the Fylde Coast.

In addition, all board members will need to understand the emerging issues from Multiversity and the Defence Technical Excellence College. Notwithstanding these observations, the review concluded that there is no need to change current governance arrangements.

ADDITIONAL QUESTION 3



Is the balance right between governance and management? Does the board get too operational?

The reviewer commented that much of the essence of this question had been addressed as part of the section of the review around board interaction. The balance between governance and management was observed to be good during the review, and the reviewer noted that chairs were ready to step in if discussions strayed into operational matters.

The B&FC Group Corporation Board welcomes the findings of this review and the valuable insights it has provided. We would like to extend our sincere thanks to Rob Lawson for the professionalism, independence and integrity with which he conducted the review. Throughout the process, he engaged constructively with Board members and others, creating an open and supportive environment that encouraged thoughtful reflection and candid discussion. His approach was both rigorous and collaborative, and we are grateful for the time, expertise and commitment he brought to the review.

Steve Fogg
Chair of the Corporation Board

September 2026

