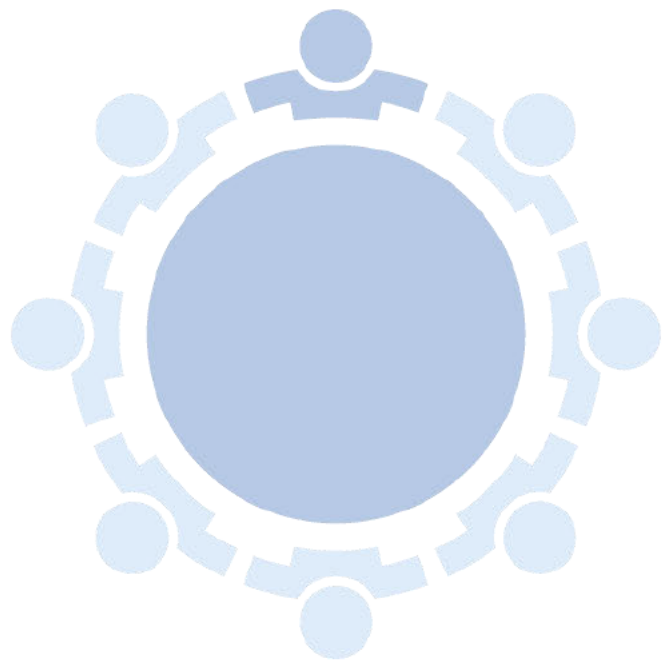


## School name: Wood Green Academy

### External Review of Governance

Author: Peter Thomas

Date: May 2023





### **National Governance Association**

The National Governance Association (NGA) is the membership organisation for governors, trustees and governance professionals of state schools in England.

We are an independent, not-for-profit charity that aims to improve the educational standards and wellbeing of young people by increasing the effectiveness of governing boards and promoting high standards. We are expert leaders in school governance, providing information, advice and guidance, professional development and e-learning.

We represent the views of governors, trustees and governance professionals at a national level and work closely with, and lobby, UK government and educational bodies.

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Date review commissioned	10 <sup>th</sup> January 2023
Consultant	Peter Thomas
School	Wood Green Academy
Key contact and email	Mrs S Dawes: [REDACTED]
Chair and email	Ms Vicky Millward: [REDACTED]
CEO/Headteacher and email	Mr James Topham: [REDACTED]
MAT/Local authority	Sandwell
Membership details	Gold
Reason for commissioning the review	
<p>Following a recent critical incident in school the Chair and GB wish to determine that current governance approaches are fit for purpose in order to fulfil their core governance functions whilst operating strategically and ensuring compliance.</p>	
Background information	
<p>Wood Green Academy is a large secondary stand-alone academy which converted in April 2011 to academy status . On the GIAS website (Gov.UK) last updated in March 2023 WGA has 1546 students on roll (including its sixth form) against a capacity of 1530. It has 308 students eligible for free school meals, 166 SEND students (22 of these have EHCPs) and 453 EAL students. The school was last inspected 26<sup>th</sup>-27<sup>th</sup> February 2020, just prior to the first lockdown. Its overall effectiveness was judged Good with Behaviour and attitudes judged Outstanding. The headteacher was appointed in September 2014 and the chair from September 2021.</p> <p>In both attainment and progress WGA 2022 GCSE examination results were broadly in line with national average and broadly similar to those of neighbouring schools in Sandwell Local Authority. The percentage of students who achieved a Grade 5 or above in English and maths GCSEs exceeded the local authority average by 10%. The number of students entered for English Baccalaureate was below the local authority and national averages. At Post 16, 95 students took mainly academic subjects at A Level and 22 mainly general vocational study. Attainment was above that of the local authority and broadly in line with national.</p> <p>This review was commissioned by the Full Governing Body in January 2023. It was considered that an external review would be timely especially as the school was in the midst of dealing with a critical incident following the 6<sup>th</sup> form Step Up 4 Life day on 15<sup>th</sup> November 2022 and the subsequent issues the school faced with local community organizations. There has been involvement from the DFE and Ofsted and other third-party actors have been commissioned to review aspects of the academy's work. The FGB, led by the chair, have taken this matter very seriously and have prioritised working very closely with community groups.</p>	



The Financial Statements and Audit Reports for the year ended 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022 are clean and demonstrate a healthy reserve. The academy has set a deficit budget for the last 2 years and is reporting to its Financial sub-committee pressures during financial year 2022-2023.

The WGA estate faces some challenges with ageing buildings and requires some significant investment. This has delayed it joining the multi-academy trust it has engaged in close discussions with who are keen for the academy to first address these issues.

### The governance framework

Wood Green Academy Trust has a clear governance structure which was approved at the September 2022 meeting. The FGB and the sub-committees all have clear terms of reference also agreed in September 2022. It comprises of

- Full Governing Body – meets at least 3 times per year
- Achievement and standards sub-committee (up to 10 members including the headteacher as a voting member, 3 voting members to make quorate)
- Finance, Audit, Premises and Safety sub-committee (up to 8 members including the headteacher as a voting member, 3 voting members to make quorate)
- Staffing sub-committee (up to 8 members of which the headteacher has the right to attend in an advisory capacity, other than for appointments when the headteacher will be a member, 3 voting members to make quorate)

Other committees that will meet when necessary include Appeals, Discipline/Complaints, Headteacher's Performance and a selection panel for head and deputies

There are 4 trust members including the chair of the FGB. The auditors have discussed with the FGB the department's strong preference for 5 members, separate from the Board.

There are 14 members of the FGB registered on the academy website, GIAS website and 15 at Companies House. The discrepancy would appear to link to a member of staff listed at Companies House. They have all signed an annual declaration of interests at the beginning of the academic year 2022-2023. The FGB comprises of 3 constituencies (parents, staff, and community). There is currently a staff vacancy and potential for 2 co-opted vacancies. The chair is listed as both a co-opted and community governor. She has been chair since September 2021 and has served on the FGB since February 2018. The chair has a background in the civil service and experience in social enterprise and securing and utilising grant funding. She is confident of her understanding of educational provision and outcomes whilst the chair of Finance is a senior finance professional. They bring valuable experience to the GB.

A review of the academy website reveals extensive documentation covering important school information, pupil premium, curriculum, links to performance data, admissions, careers programme, policies and governance information.

### The external review process

The External Review of Governance was commissioned by WGA on 10<sup>th</sup> January 2023. A preliminary meeting took place with the chair and clerk to FGB on 20<sup>th</sup> January. At this meeting the chair explained the circumstances that had affected the academy during the late Autumn term and that the FGB were supportive of an external review to establish the security, effectiveness and strength of governance arrangements. It was agreed that the academy would send papers for the previous 18 months including FGB, Achievement and Standards as well as Finance, Audit, Premises and Safety. A day's visit to WGA was agreed for 7<sup>th</sup> March and a series of meetings arranged with chair of Finance, chair of Achievement and Standards who is also chair of the FGB, headteacher who is also accounting officer, chair and headteacher and also the



clerk to FGB. On the 24<sup>th</sup> April a FGB meeting was attended replacing the re-scheduled meeting from 27<sup>th</sup> March. At this meeting it was agreed to undertake a session with the FGB in the summer after the completion of the external review.

During late March and April WGA governors and staff who work closely with the FGB undertook the online external review. Of the 16 online *20 self-evaluation questions for the Governing Board* sent out there were 12 completed responses. 8 governors completed the questionnaire and 4 staff.

The findings of this report are based upon WGA governors' online self-evaluation, a review of minutes and agendas of governance meetings over the last 18 months, a series of meetings with chairs of the key committees.

### Key message

The Wood Green Academy Governing Body, and particularly a smaller group of governors, are effective in undertaking its 3 core functions. It is well led by an active chair who is collegiate, supportive and ambitious for the academy both on educational issues and wider academy matters. The GB is engaged in strategic discussions about WGA and its future in the multi-academy trust sector. A key group of governors have offered support and challenge with regards to a recent critical incident. The chair of Finance ensures the agenda is focused on overseeing financial performance and key risks.

To strengthen practice and improve the Board's effectiveness it should consider

1. Strengthening the link between vision, ethos, strategic direction and operational practice in order to regularly monitor and evaluate progress towards achieving its vision and key strategic goals.
2. Strengthen its ability to hold executive leaders to account by explicitly aligning closely the Achievement and Standards sub-committee agenda to the school improvement priorities
3. Financial oversight is sound but the GB could strengthen its programme of internal regulatory audit from third party professionals (e.g. H&S, Estates, GDPR etc.) as part of its role in securing value for money.

### Findings

#### The core governance functions

##### 1) Ensuring clarity of vision, ethos and strategic direction

- a) The WGA website outlines the Ethos, Values and Vision. It states clearly how it intends to achieve its vision through a series of intents. The strapline for the school is *Seek wisdom*.
- b) Through the documentation reviewed it is unclear how the FGB's strategic vision links to the Academy Improvement Plan and into the work of the GB and its sub-committees. The key components of the plan are linked to the Ofsted framework (FGB – September 2022) but the actual objectives are not clearly stated or explicitly linked to agenda items where appropriate. The minutes record the process of development of the AIP at FGB and Achievement and Standards (October 2022). The AIP and SEF were discussed at the Visioning day.
- c) The FGB self-evaluation achieved a 91% score of agreeing or strongly agreeing that it was effectively carrying out its core functions but in this section the lowest score achieved was for its own Evaluation and Impact.
- d) The FGB are fully engaged in the strategic conversations and direction of WGA in the academy sector.
- e) The FGB is clear about its key risks. The chair of Finance highlighted the management of strategic risk as a priority as well as business continuity due to the length of time some senior leaders have been





at the academy. The GB has created a separate committee to work closely with senior leaders on an extremely challenging situation.

**2) Holding executive leaders to account for the educational performance of the organisation and its pupils, and the performance management of staff**

- a) There is clear evidence in the minutes and through meetings held with the chair and headteacher that both the FGB (Headteacher Report) and Achievement and Standards receive the appropriate information and presentations on the strengths and areas for development in educational performance. A detailed report in September 2022 was received by Achievement and Standards on examination performance.
- b) The GB self-evaluation achieved a 96% score of agreeing or strongly agreeing on its effectiveness in holding leaders to account for the quality of education.
- c) The Achievement and Standards committee in October 2022 have recognised the need for greater visibility of the Academy Improvement Plan. This needs to happen so that the GB can effectively track progress of its implementation whilst providing support and challenge of leaders with regards to its effective delivery against stated outcomes.
- d) The documentation provided to governors is extremely comprehensive., especially the Headteacher Report (normally over 50 pages). It provides detailed information about the performance and life of the school. The minutes don't always capture the richness of the conversation to be able to evaluate governor questioning. However, at the observed meeting there was clear challenge and support from the FGB.
- e) There is a Headteacher Performance Committee in the terms of reference and both headteacher and chair when interviewed felt that this mechanism, the frequent meetings between the chair and head and the actual structure and business of the FGB held the head and senior leaders to account. A view held by the FGB (see 2b above).

**3) Overseeing the financial performance of the organisation and making sure its money is well spent**

- a) Most aspects of financial oversight are delegated to the Finance, Audit, Premises and Safety sub-committee. The annual budget is recommended to the FGB for approval.
- b) The committee receive regular external assurance from an external Responsible Officer focused on
  - i) Full year forecasts
  - ii) Testing of bank reconciliations and aged debtor and creditor records
  - iii) Governor minutes, Management Accounts, balance sheet and Payroll
- c) The most recent external audit on the website (March 2022) was clean.
- d) The Board is currently reviewing its financial oversight of the management accounts in line with the Academies Trust handbook.
- e) Other than the Responsible Officer reporting there was limited evidence in the documentation of internal regulatory audit from third party professionals and regular review of the academy's risk register.

**NGA's eight elements of effective governance**

**4) The right people round the table**

- a) The FGB is made up of an appropriate number of governors from 3 constituent parts (parents, staff and community). It has the necessary skills to fulfil its functions though responsibilities often fall to a small group of committed members.



- b) Individual governors undertook the NGA audit in the summer of 2022 but it was reported at the AGM that not all governors had completed this.
- c) Potential new governors are interviewed by the chair and headteacher followed by a recommendation to the FGB.
- d) The Members of the academy trust meet annually and review and agree the Reserves Policy, the Financial Statements for the year ending and to determine the auditors for the forthcoming year. The chair of the FGB is a Member. This matter was raised at the July 2022 AGM.
- e) WGA is a gold member of NGA and therefore has access to a comprehensive range of services and support.

**5) Understanding the role and responsibilities**

- a) Governance structures are appropriate for a single academy trust.
- b) The terms of reference for each committee are clear.
- c) There is a WGA Governor Code of Practice, originally put together in January 2013. Governors are expected to read it and sign it at the first FGB meeting each year. It outlines the functions of the FGB, the role of a governor including conduct and expectations appropriate for such a document. This includes an appendix outlining Nolan's Seven Principles of Public Life
- d) The DFE Governance handbook (October 2020) was circulated to all governors when it came out and is given to new governors.
- e) New governors have an induction with the head and Finance Director. They are asked to complete the NGA skills Audit, a declaration of Interest and code of conduct forms.
- f) A range of special responsibilities have been allocated to governors including Pupil Premium, Health and safety, Post 16, Careers, SEND etc.,

**6) A good chair**

- a) The chair of the FGB is also chair of Achievement and standards sub-committee. This overlap does not present any conflict of interest but is likely to limit succession planning.
- b) The chair is well respected and enjoys good working relationships with governors and professionals from the academy.
- c) **There is no review process for chair performance such as a 360 degree appraisal.**

**7) Professional clerking**

- a) The clerk to the FGB has undertaken her role for approximately 10 years. She is also the headteachers PA. She also clerks the Finance, Audit, Premises and Safety sub-committee.
- b) In 2015 the clerk successfully completed through the National College a course on the role of the clerk to the governing board.
- c) The clerk seeks governance advice and guidance from the NGA and other organisations including a firm of solicitors.
- d) The clerk, following a conversation with the consultant, is considering developing a work plan to support the FGB in its strategic functions.

**8) Good relationships based on trust**

- a) The chair and headteacher work closely together, share the same ambition for the school and clearly have a trusting professional relationship.
- b) The observed meeting saw governors and staff engaged, mutually supportive but appropriately challenged. There was clearly mutual respect and discussions were professional. The meeting became inquorate towards the end with a couple of colleagues having to go early.

**9) Knowing the school**

- a) There is a committed group of governors who know the school well. The workload is not always evenly distributed. Governors who attend regularly will have a good working knowledge of the school.
- b) There is extensive reporting on the academic performance and life of the school.



- c) The Safeguarding Policy is reviewed annually based on the Sandwell model policy and is in line with KCSIE changes and relevant to WGA. An independent safeguarding review was commissioned and reported to the FGB at the observed April meeting. The review made some recommendations. It was confident that safeguarding was effective. There is detailed reporting on safeguarding and student welfare in the Headteacher Report including referrals to LADO and to outside agencies.
- d) The minutes do not always capture key aspects reported and subsequently discussed.
- e) The FGB and its committees enable governors to know and understand the school.

#### 10) Committed to asking challenging questions

- a) The sub-committees generally demonstrate support and challenge at the meetings. At the Achievement and standards there is clear evidence of departments that are strong and those not so but not always clarity of the key issues. The Finance, Audit, Premises and Safety sub-committee review the financial performance of the academy and hold leaders to account against a set of financial KPIs.
- b) Especially for the Finance, Audit, Premises and Safety sub-committee more external third-party reviews commissioned as part of the regular FGB workplan would support governors in their questioning.
- c) There are not many follow-up actions that arise from governor meetings. This might help explain why governors find it hard to demonstrate their impact as evidenced in the FGB self-evaluation questions. Only 50% of responses were positive with a total score of 76%. It is clear what is being discussed but not necessarily what are the resultant actions that need to be followed up.

#### 11) Confident to have courageous conversations

- a) Whilst there was no direct evidence of this aspect, based on conversations had with the chair and head both individually and together the consultant is confident that the necessary conversations would be had should they be needed. There is evidence that the school's response to a particular incident did see this happen.

### Recommendations

#### 1) Governance structure and practice itself

- a) Develop a governance workplan that brings together all aspects of the core governance functions and links both to the academy work streams and internal self-evaluation so that workflow is clear and transparent and produced against agreed deadlines.
- b) The FGB should consider the introduction of an annual review of the chair's performance and the chair or vice chair undertaking annual conversations with trustees.

#### 2) Vision, ethos and strategic direction

- a) The FGB should consider how it strengthens the link between vision, ethos, strategic direction and operational practice in order to regularly monitor and evaluate progress towards achieving its vision and key strategic goals. These goals need to be clearly articulated underpinned by the Academy Improvement Plan and the academy's self-evaluation and visible in the work of the FGB and its sub-committees (e.g. Academy Improvement Plan outcomes and Achievement and standards sub-committee).

#### 3) Monitoring and holding to account

- a) The FGB minutes need to capture the richness of conversation, challenge and support at the meetings. They are a public record and must effectively demonstrate the FGB fulfilling its core functions.





- b) Agenda items should reference the section of the Academy Improvement Plan or the academy's strategic objectives. Actions should be tracked centrally so that the FGB can evaluate transparently its impact.

**4) Financial oversight**

- a) Strengthen the role of internal regulatory audit from third party professionals, other than the responsible Officer, (e.g. H&S, Estates, GDPR etc.,) as part of its role in securing value for money.

**Ongoing support**

- 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](mailto:membership@nga.org.uk), will be in touch with you shortly to arrange this.
- NGA is able to provide professional development for all kinds of governing boards. 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](#) or contact [consultancy@nga.org.uk](mailto:consultancy@nga.org.uk) for more details.
- For further consultancy support, including external advisors for headteacher performance management, contact [consultancy@nga.org.uk](mailto:consultancy@nga.org.uk)

**Acknowledgments**

The consultant would like to thank Sue Dawes, the FGB and the headteacher for their assistance in conducting this review.

**NGA sign off**



## Annex

Detailed recommendations			
Issue	Action	By whom	By when
1) Governance structure			
a)			
b)			
2) Vision, ethos and strategy			
a)			
b)			
3) Holding to account			
a)			
b)			
4) Financial oversight			
a)			
b)			

