

Summary of feedback meeting at The Gryphon Multi Academy Trust 15 January 2018

Present: Elizabeth Cook (Chair) Alan O'Sullivan (CEO) Felicity Gillespie (Education Advisor, DfE)

FG reminded colleagues of the purpose of the visit commissioned by the RSC office: to review the governance structures of the Gryphon Trust. She thanked the Chair and CEO for allowing the board observation and interviews with themselves and the Head of The Arnewood School, Nigel Pressnell.

The key points of feedback were:

Recognising the period of turbulence the board has weathered, there is clearly a real commitment to the trust by the trustees and the longevity of some of the appointments including the Chair's service of over 30 years is demonstration of this.

It was reported that the renaming of the Arnewood to the Gryphon trust was in recognition of the need to see the MAT as more than just the Arnewood trust to a new group of equal-status schools. The Chair suggested that if the identity were to change, the 'rest will follow'. As the trust now seeks to grow, more steps are needed now to move to a model and practices of effective corporate governance appropriate for a MAT of several schools.

Board structure

- The board is made up of nine trustees including two members of staff. There are four members; one of the members is also a trustee.
- The DfE recommends limiting terms of office to four years, and to trustees serving no more than three consecutive terms; currently the Gryphon Trust has a policy of four year terms of office but no limits on the number of terms of office that may be served.
- The Chair and Vice-Chair were re-appointed at the meeting. There was no evidence of the process undertaken leading to these appointments; or if there had been criteria drawn up, or a search for candidates beyond the existing trustees.

Board meeting

- Whilst the meeting was effectively managed and run to time, the quality of challenge and discussion of some key points raised by the executives was not consistent and there is room for development of the capacity of trustees in this area. By way of illustration, some examples included:
 - The financial analysis presented to the board included a plan to reduce the deficit involving a reduction of spend on staffing to 78%. There was no discussion of this, or questions as to how this figure had been arrived at or what the consequences for the quality of teaching might be.
 - Discussion of the pupil data predictions presented might have been stronger; for instance, there was no challenge of some of the Eaglewood data that might reasonably have been cause for discussion.
 - The Head gave a compelling analysis of some of the challenges facing the school, for instance around recruitment and retention of staff and the reasons for disappointing pupil achievement data. However, there was far less discussion by trustees around strategies to address these difficulties. The Head highlighted the quality of teaching as a key target; earlier in the meeting during a discussion of finance he had reported that 'we've stripped CPD back to the bone'. There was no probing by trustees as to how these might be inter-connected.

- It was good to see the trust has a risk register that is reviewed at each board meeting. However, the version presented to this board did not refer to the less than ideal use of supply teaching that the Headteacher of Arnewood referred to as a key challenge facing the school given the challenges of recruiting sufficient strong teachers in the New Forest.
- It was not clear that trustees fully embrace the potential of alignment possible within the model of a MAT, and much of the discussion focused on maintaining the autonomy of individual schools. For instance; the discussion around the top slice (currently set at £10k plus 2.5%) did not address the purpose of the top slice or the value for money it could offer, and the discussion was therefore focused on how to minimise the top slice, based on the assumption that this was the best. This discussion also reflected the room for improved use of data: one trustee said ‘my gut feeling is that £5k is better than £10k’ without any others challenging.
- It was not clear that either the nature of the scheme of delegation or the basis for the current agreed topslice was understood by all, including the Chair.
- The board meeting opened with agreement of the terms of reference of the board, although it was not clear what the legal status of these would be given the accountability of the trustees set out in the Articles of Association.

Recommendations

1. The DfE recommends that a maximum of only one member of staff be a trustee and this would usually be the CEO. The headteacher of the schools would be expected to be present to report to the board meetings but would not be a voting trustee. Nigel Pressnell and Mike Horswell should therefore come off the board and instead report to it.
2. The board should review its policy on the recruitment of members and trustees to ensure transparency and that there is access to a wide and diverse pool of talent. It might also review if it is most effective to recruit trustees living 300 miles away who can only attend meetings over Skype. FG passed details of Academy Ambassadors to the CEO as a potential resource for the recruitment of additional trustees in the future.
3. Greater clarity is required about the importance of the scheme of delegation; the purpose, rationale and implementation moving forward to a point when there are more schools in the trust. Is the board clear what the purpose of the MAT is, and how the children in each school will benefit from greater alignment of the schools’ activities? On the evidence it is not clear that the real benefits for teaching and learning are understood or that this understanding informs the way the scheme of delegation will be designed.
4. FG suggested the board seek some mentoring opportunities with other more experienced boards and suggested Alan could contact the RSC office to identify suitable trusts. It could be helpful for trustees to observe other trusts’ board meetings and have the opportunity to observe how other MATs operate.
5. FG supported suggestion by RSC colleagues that John Challoner, CEO of GLF provides mentoring to the CEO support to the trust by joining the board.
6. There was a consensus that the move to link with Ringwood is a positive and the update on attempts to engage the school in discussions were met with approval. However, progress is slow and FG suggested Alan contacts the RSC office to see if they can encourage Ringwood to engage more actively in discussions.

Felicity Gillespie
17 January 2018