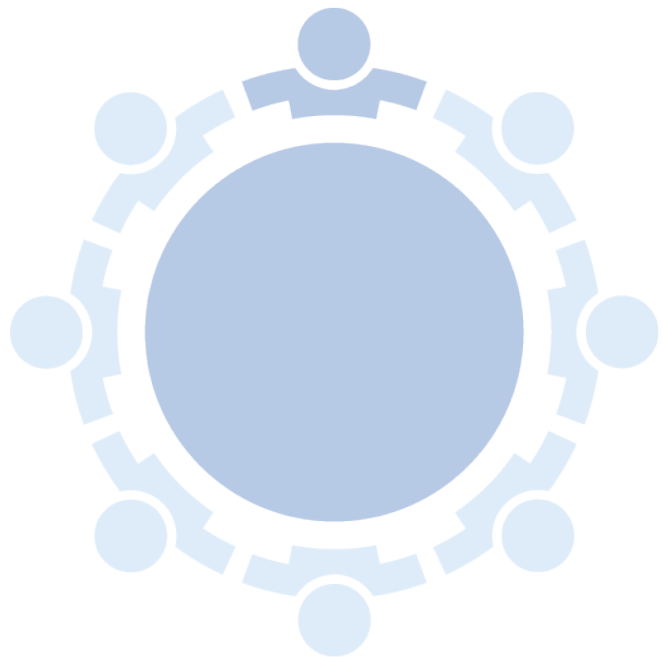


Hartford Primary School External Review of Governance

Janet Myers

April 2022





National Governance Association

The National Governance Association (NGA) is the membership organisation for governors, trustees and clerks 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.

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Consultant	Janet Myers
School	Hartford Primary School
Key contact and email	Mair Fairweather, head@hartfordprimary.cheshire.sch.uk
Chair of governing body	Mike Watson
Chair's email	mwatson@hartfordprimary.cheshire.sch.uk
Headteacher	Mair Fairweather
Ofsted status and date	Good, December 2021
Local authority	Cheshire West and Cheshire
Membership details	GB Gold 1032450
Reason for commissioning the review	
<p>The governing body decided to have an external review of governance following an exit questionnaire completed by a former governor six months after his resignation. The board would like assurance that they have the right skills, experience and knowledge to govern the school and that they are undertaking their three core functions appropriately. They would like to understand if they are being appropriately transparent, and if they are acting in accordance with their code of conduct.</p>	
Background information	
<p>Hartford Primary School is a two-form entry 4-11 community primary school in Cheshire West and Cheshire. The school has 396 children on roll.</p> <p>6.6% of children are eligible for pupil premium funding, 4.8% of children have English as an additional language, 52.3% are boys and 2.3% have an education, health and care plan.</p> <p>The headteacher has been in post for nine years and has been a governor for 20 years. As well as being a governor at Hartford Primary, she is also a governor at another Cheshire West school.</p> <p>Ofsted judged the school to be good in December 2021 and stated that "Governors possess a range of experience and expertise that equips them well for their role. They know the school well. They ask questions of leaders to help them understand the school's strengths and the areas that require further work. This enables governors to hold leaders to account for their work and support the school's development."</p> <p>The Department for Education performance tables show that, in 2018 and 2019, key stage 2 progress was average or above average. The average percentage of children meeting the expected standard in reading, writing and maths in from 2017-2019 was 80%, above the local authority average of 62% and a national average of 63%.</p> <p>Headteacher performance management is undertaken by a panel of three governors advised by an independent advisor.</p>	



It was reported in the scoping meeting that, following a notice of concern issued by the local authority, the school now projects a substantial surplus.

The governance framework

The governing body consists of 9 governors and includes four parent governors, a staff governor, and the headteacher. There is one vacancy for a local authority governor. Governor details are provided on the school website and Get Information about Schools.

Attendance information and a register of interests are included on the website, although the register of interests does not include all governors.

The governing body has been operating on a flat model with no committees, meeting six times per year. It has just added a finance committee. The chair of governors has been a governor since 2016 and chair for two years.

Full governing body meetings are clerked by Second2None.

The governing board completed the Shaping Governance programme with Insight to Impact Consulting Ltd in April 2021.

The external review process

The consultant met with the chair, the head teacher, a co-opted governor and the governance professional to understand the background and context of the school. The clerk and headteacher provided background reading including meeting agendas, minutes and paperwork and the school development plan.

The consultant canvassed the views of governors using the Evalu8 online board appraisal. All 17 governors and SLT members responded to the appraisal. The results of the appraisal were presented to the governing body and discussed in the workshop.

The consultant held a three-hour virtual workshop. Seven governors attended, including the chair, the staff governor, and the headteacher.

Key message

Following a period of turbulence, this is a good governing body with committed and engaged governors and excellent relationships between governors and with the senior leadership team. It understands its core functions, and should be commended for continuing to carry them out despite a period of reduced numbers on the governing body, a global pandemic and a series of ongoing complaints.

The governing body showed during the external review of governance process that they are self-reflective and open to improving their practice. To do this, the governing body should implement the recommendations of this review, particularly recruiting at least one governor who is completely independent of the school, and ensuring that the full range of challenge offered during and between meetings is reflected in the minutes.

Findings

Findings are organised with reference to 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



- a) The school's website includes a vision, mission statement, and four values. It states that "The Staff and Governors recently undertook a visioning session, during which time they discussed and proposed various options for the Vision, Mission and Core Values of our school. These options were voted upon by the whole school community, including Parents and Pupils, in order to finalise a set of statements that we all share and can passionately embrace. Staff and Governors are continuing to work together to move this process forward so please revisit this page soon in order to learn more about our new Vision Statement, Mission Statement and Core Values." However, it was discussed in the workshop that the vision, mission statement and values were put together in 2014/15, before any of the current governing body were in place, and that it would be useful to revisit them, bearing in mind that the mission statement and values might not change, but the vision should set out what the school would like to achieve in the next three to five years.
- b) The strategic school improvement plan (SSIP) is an operational one-year plan, including a useful one page summary. The SSIP was presented to governors in October 2021, but minutes only record one question about it. The Shaping Governance report states that governors need more involvement in the development of the SSIP, and the headteacher advised that she provides governors with her suggested priorities for discussion. Some priorities go over two years. It was discussed in the scoping meeting that the school has not recorded where it wants to be in 3-5 years. However, the school does have long term priorities that it would benefit from recording in a strategy document.
- c) As part of their involvement in the Shaping Governance programme, governors identified that they need to focus more on the school's work to achieve its vision. Following this programme, the school's vision has been added to all agendas, and the headteacher report is linked to the vision. School values are also included on email footers.
- d) Minutes evidence policy review, and it was advised in the workshop that the board uses a policy review schedule to ensure that all policies are reviewed at the right level in a timely manner. Questions are often raised by email in advance of the meeting, and these should be added to the minutes to evidence effective scrutiny.
- e) It was stated in the scoping meeting that the current chair has led the board towards more strategic matters and that he interjects if the discussion is becoming operational. It was also stated that the governance professional helps governors to frame their question in a more strategic way.
- f) Minutes evidence governors having strategic discussions about joining a multi-academy trust.

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

- a) Headteacher performance management is undertaken a panel of three governors advised by an independent advisor. There are formal review points throughout the year. The advisor has been in place for approximately five years, and the headteacher and governing body greatly appreciate her guidance. However, it is good practice to change the headteacher performance management advisor every three to five years, and the governing body should consider appointing a new advisor.
- b) The pay policy gives the pay panel responsibility for making pay decisions based on recommendations from the headteacher. The governing body used to have a pay panel but now delegates this responsibility to its new finance committee. The policy states that the pay panel is also responsible for submitting reports of its decisions to the governing body.
- c) The appraisal policy states that the governing body will consider "an annual report, including statistical information, on decisions made in accordance with the policy." The headteacher stated in the workshop that she had paused this report during Covid, but that it would now be reinstated.

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

- a) Until recently, finance matters were dealt with by the full governing body rather than a finance committee. The board did have a finance committee for a short period when the local authority issued a notice of concern for finance. The committee was chaired by a governor with experience as



- a multi-national CEO and the notice was lifted after less than a year. At that point, the committee was disbanded, however the governing body has very recently reinstated the finance committee, having recruited a governor with finance experience who will chair the committee.
- b) The first meeting of the finance committee was clerked by the school business manager (SBM). This is a conflict of interest, and it is difficult for the SBM to participate in the meeting if she is clerking it. The governing body has recognised this and will ask their governance professional to also clerk these meetings.
 - c) The school business manager provides the board with a finance report covering the budget, pupil numbers, and staffing, and attends governing board meetings to present the report. Minutes evidence governors discussing this report.
 - d) Schools Financial Value Standard paperwork is completed by the headteacher, chair and school business manager and is emailed to governors before submission. Governors should ensure that they review SFVS documentation in detail at a meeting.
 - e) It was reported in the scoping meeting that, following a notice of concern issued by the local authority, the school now projects a substantial surplus. However, the November 2021 minutes show a re-forecasted budget showing an in-year deficit in 2021/22 and a deficit carry forward in 2022/23. The minutes record that spending will be tightly controlled and that the budget forecast is expected to be more positive when it is next revisited. It was confirmed in the workshop that this was due to errors by the local authority budget team, which came to light less than 24 hours after the budget was presented to governors. It is impossible to budget with such volatility, and the school should work with the local authority to gain assurance of an accurate budget position.
 - f) It was identified in the workshop that the financial manual of internal procedures needs updating, and that the governing body could improve its approach to benchmarking.

NGA's eight elements of effective governance

1) The right people round the table

- a) The governing body consists of nine governors and includes four parent governors, a staff governor, and the headteacher. There is one vacancy for a local authority governor. Governor details are provided on Get Information about Schools. They are also provided on the school website, however biographies are only provided for some governors, and the table of terms of office, link roles and business interests is incomplete.
- b) Of the nine governors, five are parents, two are local headteachers, and two are staff. The board therefore lacks balance and should ensure that the local authority governor vacancy is filled by someone who is entirely independent of the school and local education leadership. In the workshop, governors discussed possibly increasing the number of governors on the school's instrument of government in order to allow for more independent governors. Governors also wish to increase the diversity on the governing body.
- c) Governors have served on the governing body for between two weeks and seven years. NGA recommends that governors serve for a maximum of eight years at one school, so the board should look at succession planning for the staff governor, who is reaching the end of her second term this year.
- d) It was reported in the scoping meeting that the governing body is fully invested in the school and has a wide range of skills, including education, health, EDI, legal, finance, and management. It was stated that the board regularly reviews the skills matrix and that recruitment reflects this. The governing body uses two skills audits, the NGA one on an annual basis, and the one contained within Trust Governor on a rolling basis. The skills audit with Trust Governor includes a number of governors who are no longer on the board, and does not include a number of newer governors, and therefore requires updating. The governing body is currently advertising on Inspiring Governance



for a governor with health and safety experience, and should ensure that they appoint someone who can take a strategic view of health and safety rather than an operational one.

- e) Attendance information is shown on the school website and shows good attendance.
- f) A register of interests is included on the website, although two governors are missing from the register. Declarations of interest are discussed at the start of meetings.
- g) Several governors also govern or have governed at other schools.
- h) The school has a governor expenses policy although a number of governors were not aware of it.

2) Understanding the role and responsibilities

- a) The governing body has been operating on a flat model with no committees, meeting six times per year. It has just added a finance committee.
- b) The list of governors with specific responsibilities is different between the school website and the October 2021 minutes. The minutes are correct and show governors with responsibility for Safeguarding, Health and Safety, Equality & Diversity, Wellbeing, Finance, Maths, Reading, Pupil Premium & Sports Premium, EYFS, and SEND. As there have only been five non-staff governors until recently, these roles have been shared between them, with the chair taking on four roles. Governors feel that their system of link governance works, but that they would like to share out roles more evenly as they increase the number of governors. New link governors are introduced to their link member of staff, and the link governor protocol is explained to them. Governors would like to adopt role descriptions for link roles.
- c) It was stated in the scoping meeting that the governing body has an expectation that governors will undertake two CPD activities per year, either based on their link role or their general governance responsibilities. The board's training record evidences governors undertaking training, although some is related to their professional roles rather than their governance roles, and may not provide a full understanding of the governance role. For example, staff safeguarding training does not include training on the governance of safeguarding. The school invests in governor development, eg through the Shaping Governance programme, and governors have access to in person training through Edsential. The governing body has appointed a training governor and has recently introduced a training proforma to feedback following training.
- d) Induction has been provided for two new governors consisting of a tour of the school, external training, a copy of the governance handbook, and a copy of relevant paperwork. The board has appointed buddies for them. The governing body uses an induction checklist. In the workshop, governors talked about how helpful the buddy system was both for the new and the established governor, and it was stated that the chair makes the role and expectations very clear.
- e) The governing body has Gold NGA membership, however the low score in the online board for making use of good governance practice from across the country suggests that all governors might not be taking full advantage of their membership benefits.
- f) The governing body stated in the workshop that, "being effective requires self-reflection" and they completed the Shaping Governance programme with Insight to Impact Consulting Ltd in April 2021.

3) A good chair

- a) The chair of governors has been a governor since 2016 and chair for two years. He works as a CEO in the sports industry. He has previously governed at a primary school in Wigan and is a Member at a local primary trust. He has undertaken chairs' training via webinars and seminars including events run by the Cheshire West and Chester Governance Association. He is also the link governor for finance, health and safety, safeguarding, and Maths. The chair was described in the scoping meeting as hearing everyone's views and stepping in if the meeting becomes unprofessional or operational.
- b) The governing body does not currently have a vice chair, and governors should appoint one from amongst their number for contingency management and succession planning. It may be helpful for



one or two governors to complete the [Development for Chairs](#) programme as part of this succession planning.

- c) Elections for the chair and vice chair are held every two years. It was reported in the workshop that nominations are requested in advance of the meeting and that the candidate(s) leaves the meeting during their appointment. This should be recorded in the minutes.
- d) The Shaping Governance report states that the headteacher and chair meet fortnightly.
- e) The chair has not yet undertaken 1-1s with governors.
- f) The board does not yet undertake a 360° appraisal for the chair.

4) Professional clerking

- a) Governing body meetings are clerked by Second2None. The governance professional has been clerking since May 2019 and clerks another 13 schools in addition to Hartford Primary. She has received internal training at Second2None.
- b) Minutes and agendas for full governing body meetings are clear and appropriately detailed. Challenge is appropriately recorded. Minutes and agendas are divided into part 1 and part 2. The governing body uses an action log to ensure that actions are monitored to completion.
- c) Governors have access to documentation using Trust Governor. It was suggested in the workshop that the timeliness of paperwork being sent to the governance professional could be improved to ensure that all papers are provided a week before the meeting.
- d) The dates of full governing body meetings are agreed at the end of the previous academic year.
- e) AOB is included on the agenda, including a declaration of AOB at the start of the meeting. It was stated in the workshop that AOB is required in advance of the meeting. If AOB is retained on the agenda, the declaration of AOB should be before the declaration of interests to allow governors to declare any interests against the items of AOB. The January 2022 minutes evidence AOB being used to raise an operational matter about the reception class. This is a risk with AOB, and the board may wish to consider removing it from the agenda.
- f) Papers for the March 2022 meeting include a letter from the complaint panel to parents, their response, and a further response from the governance professional. These papers should not be shared with the full governing body due to confidentiality and future impartiality. It is appropriate to share the panel's recommendations with the board. It was stated in the workshop that governors may benefit from further training regarding complaints.

5) Good relationships based on trust

- a) The online workshop demonstrated good relationships within the governing body. The headteacher stated in the scoping meeting that she feels well supported by the current governing body.
- b) The governing body has adopted a code of conduct.
- c) It was stated in the scoping meeting that governors communicate between meetings by email, copying in the governance professional. Important questions from these emails should be reflected in minutes, and any decisions taken should be ratified in a meeting.
- d) As part of their involvement in the Shaping Governance programme, governors identified that they felt that they could improve how they hear the voices of parents and pupils, and January 2022 minutes record that the school will undertake a bi-annual parent questionnaire.
- e) It was stated in the scoping meeting that governors meet with children to understand the pupil voice, and also talk to teachers.
- f) In the online governing board appraisal responses, governors felt that they could improve the information that they provide parents about the activities of the governing body.
- g) In the March 2021 external partner visit report, it states that the NGA wellbeing evaluation tool has been used within the school and the results shared with staff and governors, and that the governors need to complete the audit with the headteacher. Minutes evidence governors receiving and discussing the results of a staff wellbeing survey.



- h) Comments from senior leaders in the online board appraisal suggest that staff value the link governor visits and reports, and the relationships that they have built. Comments suggest that this provides staff with a voice in governor meetings.
- i) In the online board appraisal, a member of the senior leadership team commented, "I believe the governors have played a key part in the improvement of the school over the past three years. As a staff, we always feel like they have their support and this has been even more apparent while teaching through a pandemic. Governors work with the relevant staff well, showing an interest and a shared desire to ensure the children receive the best education possible in a safe, welcoming environment. The governors are kind, friendly and respectful. I feel comfortable to talk to any member of the team and know I will be listened to and supported."

6) Knowing the school

- a) In the scoping meeting, the chair described governing body meetings as a start or end to the process of monitoring. It was stated that governors triangulate appropriately, particularly using their link roles.
- b) The Shaping Governance report states that members of the staff other than the headteacher used to be invited to full governing body meetings to provide information but this was paused due to Covid and should restart. Minutes evidence governors receiving information from the school business manager and the deputy headteacher. However, the deputy headteacher is the staff governor, and therefore is usually in attendance at meetings, so the governing body would benefit from presentations from other members of staff.
- c) The headteacher's report is short and contains attendance, exclusion, pupil numbers, safeguarding and SEND data under Part 1, and staffing matters under Part 2.
- d) The Shaping Governance report suggests that the reporting of data to governors was paused due to Covid. The school has two data drops per year, and consolidated data is reported to governors. July 2021 minutes evidence governors receiving a report on progress and achievement data. In the workshop, governors stated that challenge was provided in the meeting, but there is none reflected in the minutes.
- e) July 2021 minutes evidence governors receiving the school's curriculum statement, detailing the curriculum intent, implementation and impact, along with subject overviews for each subject, however no questions about these documents are recorded in the minutes.
- f) The school works with a School Improvement Partner and Associate School Improvement Advisor. Their reports are shared in full with the full governing body. The April 2021 and November 2021 minutes record such reports being shared with governors, but no questions from governors about the reports. April 2021 minutes record the local authority health and safety compliance officer attending the meeting to provide assurance and answer questions following concerns raised by a governor.
- g) Link governance is a particular strength of the governing body, with a regular programme of school visits, followed by reports being presented to the full governing body. There is excellent evidence of these reports continuing online during Covid. The July 2021 minutes evidence visits by five link governors (English, Safeguarding, Maths, Pupil Premium & Sports Premium, and Equality and Diversity) but no questions about the reports of visit. However, earlier minutes record more discussion following monitoring reports.

7) Committed to asking challenging questions

- a) It was stated in the scoping meeting that challenge is rigorous and that governors try to be constructive and challenge from a point of knowledge. Challenge in minutes has reduced significantly this academic year. In general, it is variable, with some robust challenge (Finance, July 2021), some operational questioning (pupil self-isolation, July 2021), and many important reports



and discussion items accepted without question. Governors were clear in the workshop that many of the reports discussed about had been challenged, either by email or during the meeting. Governors must therefore ensure that the minutes capture their challenge.

- b) Governors engaged well in the workshop and challenged the consultant appropriately.

8) Confident to have courageous conversations

- a) Governors suggested in the workshop that they had become adept at courageous conversations due to difficult circumstances over recent years. It was stated that the culture is that governors are respectful but not scared to disagree with each other and the SLT.

Summary recommendations

Recommendations are made based on the findings of the review.

1) Governance structure and practice

The board should recruit an independent governor and engage in succession planning.

2) Vision, ethos and strategic direction

The governing body should review the school's mission, vision and strategy.

3) Monitoring and holding to account

The governing body should ensure that challenge is reflected in the minutes. It should provide parents with reports about the work of the governing body.

4) Financial oversight

The governing body should arrange for the school's governance professional to also clerk the finance committee and work with the local authority to gain assurance of an accurate budget position.

Detailed actions to be undertaken

See annex

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, 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 for more details.
- For further consultancy support, including external advisors for headteacher performance management, contact consultancy@nga.org.uk

Acknowledgments

The governance professional, chair and headteacher provided paperwork and information for the review. The head and chair organised the virtual scoping meeting and online workshop. The staff and governors were open and transparent in the workshop. The consultant enjoyed working with them and wishes them well in their governance journey.

NGA sign off

25 April 2022

Annex

Detailed recommendations			
Issue	Action	By whom	By when
1) Governance structure			
a) Governors	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Provide up to date and complete information about governors on the school website, including about link roles. 2) Increase the independence of the governing body by recruiting governor(s) who are independent of the school. Use services such as Inspiring Governance and Governors for Schools to identify possible candidates before using a formal recruitment process. 3) Look at succession planning to ensure that governors do not serve for more than eight years, especially with consideration to key governance roles. 4) Update the skills audit on Trust Governor to inform recruitment and training. 5) Remind governors of the governor expenses policy. 6) Update the register of interests on the school website. 7) Share link roles more evenly now that there are more governors. 8) Adopt role descriptions for link roles. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Governance professional to lead 2) Governing body 3) Governing body 4) Governing body 5) Governance professional to add to agenda 6) Governance professional 7) Governing body 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Jun 2022 2) July 2022 3) Nov 2022 4) Jun 2022 5) May 2022 6) May 2022 7) Jun 2022
b) Meetings	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Consider removing AOB from agendas. 2) Ensure that important questions from emails written between meetings are reflected in minutes, and any decisions taken are ratified in a meeting. 3) Invite members of staff other than the headteacher and deputy headteacher to present to the governing body. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Governing body 2) Governance professional 3) Governing body 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) May 2022 2) May 2022 3) Jul 2022
c) Chair	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Undertake 1-1s with governors. 2) Undertake a chair's 360 appraisal. 3) Appoint a vice chair 4) Ensure that the minutes record an appropriate appointment process for the chair and vice chair. 5) Consider training for future chairs, eg governors participating in the Development for Chairs programme. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Chair (and VC) 2) Chair 3) Governing body 4) Governance professional 5) Governing body 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Oct 2022 2) Oct 2022 3) May 2022 4) Sep 2022 5) Nov 2022



2) Vision, ethos and strategy			
a) Mission, vision & strategy	Review the school's mission, vision and strategy.	Head & Chair to lead	Dec 2022
1) Holding to account			
a) Performance Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Consider appointing a new advisor to the headteacher performance management panel. b) Ensure that the finance committee, acting as the pay panel, submits reports of its decisions regarding to the governing body, in line with the pay policy. c) Reinstated the annual report for governors about the implementation of the pay policy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Governing body b) Finance committee chair c) Headteacher 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) June 2022 b) Dec 2022 c) Dec 2022
b) Communication with parents, pupils, and the local community	Consider appropriate communication with parents and the local community for example through the school website or newsletter and the completion of an impact report.	Governing body	Jul 2022
b) Challenge	Consider the recording of question and challenge in minutes.	Governing body	Jun 2022
c) Reporting	Improve the timeliness of paperwork being sent to the governance professional to ensure that all papers are provided a week before the meeting.	Headteacher to lead	Jun 2022
d) Complaints	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Ensure that detail of any complaints is not shared with all governors to ensure impartiality. b) Consider undertaking training about complaints. NGA provides this training as e-learning or face to face. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Governance professional b) Governing body 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) May 2022 b) Sep 2022
2) Financial oversight			



a) Finance committee	Arrange for the school's governance professional to also clerk the finance committee.	Chair of finance committee	June 2022
b) Budgeting	Work with the local authority to gain assurance of an accurate budget position	School business manager	May 2022
c) SFVS	Review SFVS documentation in detail.	Finance committee	Feb 2023
d) Financial manual of internal procedures	Update the financial manual of internal procedures.	School business manager	Jul 2022
e) Benchmarking	Scrutinise benchmarking data.	School business manager and finance chair to lead	Jul 2022