



External review of governance

Commissioned by East Midlands and the Humber RDD

Symphony Learning Trust

November 2022

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Trust	Symphony Learning Trust
Chair	Nigel Harrison
CEO	Tim Sutcliffe
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Key contact	Tim Sutcliffe
Commissioned by	East Midlands and the Humber RDD
Date review commenced	23 August 2022

Reason for the review

The trust has recently grown quite significantly and, in this context, the East Midlands and the Humber RDD Advisory Board have recommended that the trust undergo an External Review of Governance (ERG). This recommendation was welcomed by the trust who had already been planning to commission an ERG.

Background information

Symphony Learning Trust (SLT) is a multi-academy trust with 11 primary schools located in Leicestershire and Derbyshire (based on a north (seven schools) and south (four schools) hub model) and which schools serve a range of demographics. The founder academy was Glen Hills Primary School in Leicester and the multi-academy trust was created in September 2016 with the addition of Ashby Willesley Primary School, Newcroft Primary Academy, Thornton Primary School, The Meadow Community Primary School and Fairfield Community Primary School to the trust as part of a coherent vision to act together in a deep partnership. Since then, five more schools have joined the trust, most recently Ashby Hill Top Primary School and Donisthorpe Primary School, who have joined Symphony in September 2022. The trust has a current pupil population of around 3300 as of September 2022.

The trust is targeting further growth as it wishes to use its established practice, models and structures to provide improving outcomes and educational experiences to as many pupils as possible, and on the basis that it considers it has capacity to support further schools at executive head, school business manager and local governance level. The trust's current growth plan is to target a trust size of 15 schools by 2024.

School	Joined	Phase	Ofsted	Other info
Ashby Hastings Primary School	23 August 2021	Primary, 4-11	No data available	Leicestershire LA
Ashby Hill Top Primary School	1 September 2022	Primary, 5-11	Outstanding (17 April 2013)	Leicestershire LA

			Ofsted report (opens in new tab)	
Ashby Willesley Primary School	1 September 2016	Primary, 4-11	Good (13 June 2019) Ofsted report (opens in new tab)	Leicestershire LA
Donisthorpe Primary School	1 September 2022	Primary, 4-11	No data available	Leicestershire LA
Fairfield Community Primary School	1 September 2016	Primary, 4-11	Good (16 September 2021) Ofsted report (opens in new tab)	Leicestershire LA
Glen Hills Primary School	1 March 2012	Primary, 4-11	Good (3 October 2018) Ofsted report (opens in new tab)	Leicestershire LA
Newcroft Primary Academy	1 September 2016	Primary, 4-11	No data available	Leicestershire LA
Old Mill Primary School	1 September 2017	Primary, 4-11	Good (10 November 2021) Ofsted report (opens in new tab)	Leicestershire LA
Orchard Community Primary School	1 April 2022	Primary, 4-11	No data available	Leicestershire LA
The Meadow Community Primary School	1 September 2016	Primary, 2-11	Good (6 October 2021) Ofsted report (opens in new tab)	Leicestershire LA

Thornton Primary School	1 September 2016	Primary, 4-11	Good (7 December 2017) Ofsted report (opens in new tab)	Leicestershire LA
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The trust's current CEO, Tim Sutcliffe, was appointed in September 2019, having previously led Glen Hills Primary School, as headteacher, through the first primary school academy conversion in Leicestershire in 2012 and subsequently served as an executive headteacher of three of the schools in the trust from September 2016.

The latest available data shows the trust's schools are performing strongly in KS2 SATs with a trust average of 15% above the national KS2 average for combined expected and above in reading, writing and maths.

The trust is also currently in a strong financial position and has recently benefited from having taken a cautious approach to budget assumptions, including GAG, projected pupil numbers, per pupil funding, energy costs and the impact of National Insurance.

The governance framework

In terms of the members and trustees, current information identifies the following:

	Name	Appointed by (ref articles)	Listed Companies House	Listed GIAS	Listed trust website
Members	David William George Park	Appointed by academy members	N/A	Y	Y
	Nigel Grimshaw	Appointed by academy members	N/A	Y	Y
	Sally Christina Cox	Appointed by foundation/trust	N/A	Y	Y
	Susan Christina Clifton	Appointed by foundation/trust	N/A	Y	Y
	William Macmillan Davidson Gilmour	Appointed by foundation/trust	N/A	Y	Y

Trustees	Nigel David Harrison	Appointed by academy members	Y	Y	Y
	Andrew Ellery Warneken	Appointed by academy members	Y	Y	Y
	Laura Hinson Yates	Appointed by academy members	Y	Y	Y
	Lauren Charlton	Appointed by academy members	Y	Y	Y
	Scott Shields	GB/board	Y	Y	Y
	William Macmillan Davidson Gilmour	Foundation/trust	Y	Y	Y
	Tina Hayton-Banks	Appointed by academy members	Y	Y	Y

- There are five members, one of whom, Bill Gilmour, is also a trustee. He was a founder member of the trust in 2016 and the trust's first chair of the board of trustees.
- The board of trustees consists of seven trustees. The CEO, Tim Sutcliffe, is not a trustee.
- The current chair of trustees has been in post since 2019, having previously been chair of governors at one of the schools when it joined the trust in 2016. He served as vice chair of the trust before becoming chair.
- The board operates with two committees, namely a finance and audit committee and a remuneration/HR committee.
- The schools all have local governing bodies (LGBs). Only one of these LGBs, Old Mill Primary School, is currently chaired by a trustee. The LGBs operate under an 'earned autonomy' delegation model that prioritises respect for the learning and community ethos of its individual academies where educational performance levels support that approach.
- The board and the trust's LGBs are supported by a number of executive based best practice 'working groups', namely the Educational Development Group, Business Development Group, Research Development Group, Subject Development Group and Teaching Development Group. These groups overlay the 'earned autonomy' model to ensure that staff and governors across the trust are able to aggregate best practice.
- The education and curriculum side of the trust's executive function has, since September 2021, been headed up by a director of primaries, who was previously an executive headteacher across three of the trust's schools.

- The trust's experienced CFO started her career in the financial services industry and has subsequently worked as a school business manager across a number of schools in Leicestershire County Council and Leicester City Council and, upon the creation of the multi academy trust in 2016, she became CFO.

The external review process

Following appointment on 15 August 2022, an initial scoping meeting was held with Nigel Harrison (Chair), Tim Sutcliffe (CEO) and Matthew Brookes (Director of Primaries) on 23 August 2022. When the new academic year subsequently commenced, it was possible to then start the external review process substantively. Detailed research and document review of governance documentation was carried out. Semi structured interviews by video call were carried out with the following people:

Members

- Bill Gilmour
- Sally Cox

Trustees

- Nigel Harrison — Chair
- Lauren Charlton – Vice Chair
- Laura Hinson Yates – former Vice Chair
- Andrew Warneken – Chair of Finance and Audit Committee and Chair of LGB at Old Mill Primary School

LGB chairs

- Kris Cross – Fairfield Community Primary School
- Caroline Smith — Glen Hills Primary School
- Sue Shearman — Orchard Community Primary School
- Ellena Walshe – Newcroft Primary Academy

Senior Executive

- Tim Sutcliffe — CEO
- Talvinder Tundall – CFO

Additionally, an in-person observation of the board of trustees meeting took place on 24 October 2022 and an online presentation of findings meeting took place on 23 November 2022.

Key message

In terms of the board carrying out its three core governance functions, the trust's board:

1. Has a clear vision and ethos and a clear set of strategic aims. In terms of translating these aims into strategic governance action, the trust has sensibly distilled its mission and vision into both a business plan and a school improvement strategy. This is enabling the members and trustees to have genuine ownership of the trust's strategy and the board of trustees is providing strategic leadership that sets and champions the trust's vision, ethos and strategy and tracks progress against it.

2. Is delivering strong accountability of the executive function in terms of educational improvement. Trustees have a good understanding of education performance data and there is engaged and focused scrutiny and discussion about pupil outcomes. Trustees actively consider and challenge the key information and KPIs in relation to development and progress of the schools in the trust.
3. Maintaining suitably robust oversight of the trust’s finances and challenging the trust executive to ensure that they are taking full responsibility for its financial affairs, stewardship of assets and using resources efficiently to maximise outcomes for pupils.

The board has recalibrated itself since the trust’s creation in 2016, with a view to developing a professional board based on a diverse range of relevant skills and experience. Today, it comprises a good range of skills, experience and aptitudes. All trustees understand the strategic nature of their role and demonstrate the judgement and confidence to effectively hold the executive leaders to account. The board is particularly strong in terms of relevant commercial and financial skills and experience. However, while it is acknowledged that the trust performs highly in terms of educational performance, the educational expertise and capacity of the board would ideally now be enhanced by the recruitment of a further trustee who has primary education sector experience.

The board is a group of trustees who blend well and perform together as a motivated and engaged team. The board also benefits from the leadership of a skilled and committed chair, who provides strong and effective leadership and direction to the governance of the trust.

Local governing bodies are valued and well supported, including through a clearly understandable scheme of delegation that reflects the trust’s vision and ethos.

While the current arrangements for clerking and governance support at SLT are efficient, the board should explore options for further developing this aspect of the effectiveness of its governance arrangements, so that there is governance professional capacity as the trust grows to observe and track the development of key governance themes in the wider trust, reinforce consistency and quality, and promote organisational cohesion in terms of governance.

Overall, it is considered that the trust board is delivering effective governance and I am confident that it will actively reflect on this report’s evaluation and act upon its recommendations in order to seek to maintain the effectiveness of the trust’s governance as it grows further.

Findings

Findings are organised with reference to the DfE’s Competency Framework for Governance and the six features of effective governance

1. Strategic leadership

- 1.1 SLT is a trust that has a clear vision and ethos. The trust’s founding ethos is that all schools in the trust are committed to continuing to raise standards and to inspire young minds. SLT is committed to provide balanced, inspirational and exciting learning experiences for its pupils, with the values of ‘aspiration’, ‘effort’, ‘tolerance’ and ‘integrity’ underpinning this drive. The trust’s stated mission and values are then reflected in the motto ‘Aspiration, Innovation, Excellence’.
- 1.2 The trust also has a clear strategic direction, as a result of clarity about the key elements of how it believes that it can achieve its mission and demonstrate its values and aims. In terms of translating these aims into strategic governance



- action, the trust has sensibly distilled its mission and vision into both a business plan and a school improvement strategy.
- 1.3 The strategic business plan explores in detail the role of governance, risk management, capital strategy and financial strategy in the delivery of the trust's strategic objectives. The business plan is said to be deliberately focused on a few objectives that SLT believes will have a significant impact on the quality of teaching and learning, removing barriers to achievement and enhancing educational outcomes and, as such, it identifies five core objectives, targeted outcomes and milestones across the areas 'leadership and management'; 'teaching, learning and assessment'; 'behaviour, safety and welfare of pupils'; 'outcomes for pupils and groups'; 'outward looking and growth'.
- 1.4 The detailed school improvement strategy sets out its aim to create a self-sustaining school-led system, where the trust's academies develop their collective expertise to enable continual school improvement through collaboration, support and challenge; provides clarity around the expectations, values, roles and responsibilities which both the executive and governance functions of the trust adopt with a view to promoting and securing certain specific outcomes relating to both pupils and staff.
- 1.5 It is clear that the trust has a strong sense of strategic vision and values, and that the trust's aims are clearly understood and respected by both members and trustees. This is supporting the trustees to deliver genuine strategic leadership that sets and champions the trust's vision, ethos and strategy, and prioritise, review and monitor progress effectively against the strategic vision. Furthermore, the trust's clear vision and ethos, allied to the trust's strategic business plan and the school improvement strategy, helps to promote a good sense of integration between the three core governance functions, so that educational and financial performance and the management of risk are all tracked by the board as a means of delivering the SLT vision and strategy, rather than as an end in themselves.
- 2. Accountability**
- 2.1 Members**
- 2.1.1 In terms of the skills and experience of the individual members, it is noteworthy that the trust's members have strong focus on the education sector, including people from the primary, secondary and university sectors. In terms of the approach to members' meetings, the trust's members have a very good understanding of their specific roles and responsibilities within the overall arrangements for governance within the trust.
- 2.1.2 In order to fulfil these roles, they prefer to meet once a term, so have three additional meetings over and above the AGM. Such additional members' meetings, decoupled from the more administrative responsibilities that are managed at the AGM, are not a regulatory requirement but are positive in enabling the members to be able to demonstrate that they are able to discuss trust business at suitable intervals, so that they can keep abreast of developments and have appropriate opportunities to acquire assurances that the board is exercising effective governance of the trust and securing the delivery of the trust's strategy. It is the practice of the members to hold these meetings, which typically last up to 2.5 hours, on school sites as part of a programme of member visits to the trust's schools. Each meeting receives a written report from the CEO and the chair attends to answer



the members' questions.

2.2 **Board of trustees**

2.2.1 The board is delivering strong accountability of the executive function, both in terms of educational improvement and financial oversight. The approach to board meeting agendas is typically based on progression through standing items covering the trust's core areas of business, in turn considering a CEO's report, director of primaries report, finance and audit committee report (presented by the chair of that committee), chair's update and link trustee feedback. Against that background, consideration and interrogation of executive reports on progress against the trust's business plan, in particular the core objectives, coupled with appropriate regard to the trust's school improvement strategy underpin the focus of board meetings.

2.3 **Educational improvement**

2.3.1 In terms of accountability of educational improvement, the trust does not have a standards/educational performance--based committee and, hence, responsibility for delivering accountability for educational improvement is practised equally by all trustees. All trustees appear to have a good understanding of progress and attainment data, and there is engaged and focused scrutiny and discussion about pupil outcomes. Trustees actively consider and challenge the key information and KPIs in relation to development and progress of the schools in the trust. Indeed, at the observed board meeting, a number of the trustees advised the CEO and director of primaries that they would like there to be more of a narrative overlay to the CEO and director of primaries' reports to trustees in terms of educational performance data, in order to provide more context so that it could be the subject of even more meaningful interrogation.

2.3.2 Since 2018, the board has recognised the undesirability of arrangements where trustees serve simultaneously as both trustees and chairs of LGBs. Since then, these arrangements have been kept to a minimum and are justified on a case-by-case basis, and are kept temporary in duration so that, once an LGB's circumstances have improved sufficiently, separation of powers between the layers of governance of the trust is restored. However, the board recognises the important role its LGBs play in supporting educational improvement and it continues to pay attention not only to objective performance data but also to analysing the effectiveness of LGB level governance. This is facilitated through two mechanisms. Firstly, there is a link trustees arrangement. Trustees attend an LGB meeting at their link academy once a year to observe and serve as spokesperson for that school on the board.

2.3.3 Secondly, the CEO and director of primaries are committed to attending an LGB meeting at every academy once a year, and the board then receives an annual overview reporting back for all academies on a range of criteria including level of attendance, quality of questioning (in particular whether the questioning of academic standards was thorough and whether it 'drilled-down') and whether the chair led the meeting effectively.

2.3.4 Currently, the main focus of the board of trustees tends to be on an overview of performance of each individual school. In order to fulfil its growth plans, this will need to evolve in two ways. Firstly, the trust currently consists of all good or outstanding schools, but the board anticipates that there will be opportunities in the short term for the trust to grow further via the acquisition of a number of lower



performing and more educationally challenging schools. The trust's school improvement strategy already provides for categorisation of trust schools from 1–4 based on the school's leadership capacity to ensure progress. An initial judgement is made to inform the capacity required to support the school and the subsequent school improvement plan and then, on a termly cycle, each school's category is reassessed based on current quality assurance information. For category 4 schools, this will be carried out every half term. However, the inclusion in the future of weaker schools will require the trust to revisit and refresh some aspects of the core objectives in its business plan.

2.3.5 Secondly, the recent growth in the size of the trust is likely to begin to compromise the capacity for the board to get involved in in-depth discussion of each academy and, in anticipation of further growth to 15 schools, the trust board will now need to begin to recalibrate its focus to increased consideration and challenge of the performance of the whole trust. Therefore, it is recommended that, as part of the process of ensuring that the trust's governance is fit for growth, it would be sensible for the board to start reflecting on what will be the right level of detailed information to be provided to trustees at full board. The key will be to develop a balanced approach to the level of detailed information that trustees are asked to engage with that will satisfy a range of criteria, including enabling the board to extract strategic meaning, facilitating a suitable compliance audit trail and proportionality of production time for the executive and trustees. Alternatively, consideration could, in due course, be given to the board delegating to a new standards/educational performance based committee.

2.3.6 Additionally, while it is acknowledged that the trust performs highly in terms of educational performance, the educational expertise and capacity of the board would ideally now be enhanced by the recruitment of a further trustee who has primary education sector experience. This will enable the board to demonstrate clearly, ahead of further growth, that the trustees are able to triangulate strategic information around educational performance independently of the CEO. This is discussed in more detail under "Right people round the table" below.

2.4 **Financial oversight**

2.4.1 The trustees are maintaining suitably robust oversight of the trust's finances and challenging the trust executive to ensure that they are taking full responsibility for its financial affairs, stewardship of assets, and using resources efficiently to maximise outcomes for pupils.

2.4.2 The trust is committed to efficient and effective school resource management, with a view to supporting the better outcomes for its pupils that are targeted in its strategy. The Trust is accredited by 'SchoolMark', a quality assurance scheme developed in consultation with the DfE and awarded by the Institute of School Business Leadership. The trust also works extensively with Keystone Knowledge, to develop the efficiencies of its centralised business functions and monitor capacity to support the trust's ambition for further growth. While the trust operates under an 'earned autonomy' delegation model that prioritises respect for the learning and community ethos of its individual academies, where educational performance levels support that approach, the trust's business development group overseen by the CFO has been steadily progressing a programme of centralisation, centralising business functions across areas such as human resources, health and safety, estates, and compliance. Indeed, the current pressure on school budgets



nationally is being seen by the executive and governance functions of the trust as a potential opportunity for the trust to make substantive progress towards the benefits of GAG pooling.

2.4.3 A large proportion of its trustees have high-quality business and financial skills and experience, which is key in enabling the board to play its role in ensuring value for money in the trust's operations. The board also benefits from the capacity to carry out 'deep dive' scrutiny of finance and risk in its finance and audit committee. The existence of the finance and audit committee is in compliance with the requirements of the Academy Trust Handbook, which provides that academy trusts must establish an audit and risk committee. Academy trusts with an annual income over £50 million must have a dedicated audit and risk committee. Smaller trusts must either have a dedicated audit committee or combine the function with another committee, which is SLT's approach.

2.4.4 This committee, which is chaired by Andrew Warneken, meets four times a year, with the purpose of providing rigorous monitoring of the budget and ensuring the trust continues to provide value for money. The committee has suitable terms of reference that set out the powers and functions delegated to the committee. The committee meetings are attended by the CFO and, additionally, the trust convenes monthly management accounts remote meetings which are attended by the chair of the finance and audit committee, the chair of the board of trustees, and the CEO, CFO and Director of Primaries.

2.4.5 In terms of the management of risk, the trustees understand and act upon their duty to identify and review the risks to which the academy is exposed and to ensure that appropriate controls are in place. The trust has a risk management strategy which aims to:

- outline the roles and responsibilities for risk management
- identify risk management processes to ensure that all risks are appropriately identified, controlled and monitored
- ensure appropriate levels of awareness of risk throughout the trust's roles and responsibilities.

2.4.6 A risk register is a key document in this context, as it will identify the potential strategic, operational and financial risks, and scores and prioritises the risks in terms of their potential operational and financial impact. Appropriately, SLT maintains risk registers at both trustee and LGB levels of governance. Ownership of risks is identified, along with impact, likelihood and mitigating actions to be taken. The trust level risk register is presented and considered at every meeting of the finance and risk committee, and the chair of the committee is committed to continued evolution of the functionality of the risk register to enhance its effectiveness. Local risk registers are also regularly reviewed and presented to LGB committee meetings.

2.5 **Robust performance management**

2.5.1 In terms of performance management of the CEO, two trustees, typically the chair and vice chair, are nominated to carry out the performance appraisal of the CEO, which takes place in the autumn term of each academic year. However, following the change of vice chair at the recent October board meeting, it has sensibly been determined that the outgoing vice chair, Laura Hinson Yates, will this year stay involved in the CEO's performance management, to provide continuity and share

her knowledge and experience of this process with the new vice chair. The performance appraisal both appraises the performance of the CEO during the past year, assessing performance against the responsibilities of their role, and objectives are set for the coming year to support the improvement and development of the school and the CEO's own professional development. Progress against the objectives set is then reviewed in March of the following year.

- 2.5.2 The CEO and director of primaries work very closely and effectively together, both day to day and in reporting to the board of trustees, and this should continue. However, now that the trust is in the second year of having a director of primaries, the robustness of the trust's performance management arrangements should now be enhanced by refreshing the CEO and director of primaries roles and responsibility descriptions. The focus should be on developing more discrete remits for these two key roles that can then underpin finer distinctions in these senior executives' respective performance management targets that will, in turn, enable the board to be more targeted in its scrutiny, holding to account and performance management as the trust continues to grow.

3. People

3.1 Right people round the table

- 3.1.1 Initially, following the creation of the trust in 2016, the board consisted of the chairs of the member academies. However, since 2018, the standard approach of the trust has been that, save for in exceptional circumstances dictated by the short-term governance needs of a particular school (last year, Ashby Hastings Primary School; this year, Old Mill Primary School), no trustees are also members of school LGBs.

- 3.1.2 From January 2018, the board has been recalibrated, including via a programme of recruitment of 'independent' trustees via Academy Ambassadors based on business and financial skills. The chair's priority has been to recruit trustees that will enable the trust to develop a professional board, based on a diverse range of relevant skills and experience and one that is confident in holding to account. All current trustees understand the strategic nature of their role and demonstrate the judgement and confidence to effectively hold the executive leaders to account.

- 3.1.3 In terms of the skills and experience represented on the board, a skills audit was most recently carried out earlier this year (which had five out of six respondents,) which saw the board evaluate itself highly across all six features of effective governance. Certainly, the board benefits from trustees who have a high-quality and comprehensive range of relevant business and financial skills and experience, with which trustees can play an important role in ensuring value for money in the trust's operations. The board also monitors for skills gaps and training requirements on an ongoing basis, and the very recent recruitment of Tina Hayton-Banks from the banking industry, where she has executive responsibility for operational risk and resiliency, as an additional trustee was, in part, the result of the board's reflection on the latest skills audit.

- 3.1.4 However, the educational expertise and capacity of the composition of the board, which plays an important part in the ability of the board to hold the CEO to independent account, is currently less well-developed. Current trustee specialist expertise in this area comprises of the new vice chair, Lauren Charlton. Lauren has a degree in primary education and is currently employed by Fresh Start in



Education, a company specialising in providing interim support to young people who are having difficulty accessing education. She has a passionate interest in SEND and safeguarding and has an obvious hunger to address educational disadvantage. As such, Lauren's election as the trust's new vice chair in October 2022 has been a positive development, putting educational expertise closer to the leadership of the board.

- 3.1.5 The wider board's bias towards commercial and financial expertise and the lack of strength in depth of the board in terms of educational expertise is reflected in the aforementioned latest skills audit, completed in 2022, as part of which trustee understanding of how the trust's curriculum meets the needs of all pupils was one of a small number of areas that was scored less highly.
- 3.1.6 While it is acknowledged that the trust performs highly in terms of educational performance, the educational expertise and capacity of the board would ideally now be enhanced by the recruitment of a further trustee who has primary education sector experience. This will enable the board to demonstrate clearly that the trustees are expertly triangulating information around educational performance independently of the CEO and director of primaries. The importance of this will only increase if, in the future, the trust takes on weaker schools as part of its growth strategy and, as the trust grows, this in-depth expertise will also add to the board's capacity to skilfully aggregate school-by-school performance data to ensure that discussions remain strategic in this area. A number of the trustees I spoke to recognised this weakness and supported this becoming a priority for the board to address in terms of further trustee recruitment.
- 3.1.7 In terms of board composition more generally, it is noteworthy that the CEO is not a trustee. While the DfE's strong preference is that no employees other than the trust's senior executive leader should serve as trustees, in order to retain clear lines of accountability, it is not currently a regulatory requirement that the CEO not be a trustee. However, the most recent new model Articles of Association for academies includes a footnote that explains that members should carefully consider the benefits and risks of appointing the senior executive/CEO as a trustee, seeking evidence to support their decisions. At the point at which the trust's current CEO, Tim Sutcliffe, was appointed in September 2019, the chair and board proactively considered the question and reached the view that the new CEO should not be a trustee, in order to maintain clear lines of accountability.
- 3.1.8 The current board also has a good level of gender and age diversity to inform the strategic direction of the trust and facilitate cohesive strategic decision-making. Ethnic diversity within the board of trustees is still a work in progress, as it is for many academy trust boards.
- 3.2 **An effective team**
- 3.2.1 I was impressed with the commitment and passion for the work of the trust exhibited by the trustees I interviewed and also those I met at the board observation. Taken together, they are a trustee group who gel and blend well as a coherent and effective team. They are performing together as a motivated and engaged group and there is a respectful and trusting, yet challenging, dialogue within the trustee group and between the trustees and the senior executive. However, going forward, in order to track this important theme, I would recommend that the board of trustees should implement a board self-evaluation exercise annually at the end of each year,



in order to promote reflection and review of whole board performance.

3.2.2 In the meantime, the chair recognises the importance of nurturing the relationships within the trustee group and, to this end, while he understands that remote meetings via Teams have advantages to some trustees, he intends for full board meetings post-pandemic to continue in person and only committee meetings will take place online.

3.3 **Chair**

3.3.1 The Chair of Trustees, Nigel Harrison, has been in post since 2019, having previously been chair of governors at one of the schools as it joined the trust in 2016. He served as vice chair of the trust before becoming chair. Nigel has had a career in the hospitality sector, focused on learning and development and technology, and is currently employed as a project delivery manager in a retail data systems company.

3.3.2 In Nigel, SLT benefits from having a chair who has a good level of school and trust governance experience and who is committed to education and the communities that the trust serves. Since becoming chair, Nigel has played a key role in supporting trustee recruitment and promoting the development and performance of the board of trustees as a team. Nigel is committed to giving the board strong leadership and direction and keeping its work focused on its three core functions of ensuring clarity of vision, ethos and strategic direction, holding executive leaders to account for the educational performance and overseeing the financial performance, and he expressly seeks to manage board meetings against the background of this framework.

3.3.3 In the board meeting observed, he demonstrated a good level of preparation and he led from the front with robust challenge and scrutiny that set the tone for other trustees to build on with their own many contributions. He was forensic as to detail but, at the same time, suitably careful to marshal the operational/strategic divide. He managed the agenda and used available time effectively, facilitating engaged discussions and reflection among the trustees before, very effectively, bringing to a conclusion agenda items to ensure that the meeting progressed with a business-like efficiency.

3.3.4 It is clear that Nigel is also highly respected by his members and fellow trustees, - who see him as hard-working, well organised and an engaging leader. In terms of the chair's relationship with the trust's senior executive leaders outside of board meetings, it is clear that Nigel and Tim work very closely and collaboratively together. However, the closeness of that relationship is never allowed to compromise the professional dynamic of support and challenge and accountability.

3.3.5 Given the fundamental importance of the role of chair of a trust board in setting the highest expectations for professional standards of governance and accountability for the board, succession planning for the role is always a key responsibility of the board. This is not a pressing matter for the trust, given the current chair's length of service to date. However, succession planning across most roles in both the executive and governance functions of the trust is an area of notable strength, with an impressive commitment to supporting the professional and personal development of an identified talent pipeline. The role of the chair of the board should be no exception.



3.4 **Governance professional/clerk**

- 3.4.1 The trust has recently needed to contract with a new governance professional, Sara Dunn, after her predecessor, Karen Yates, moved into an employed position in one of the trust's schools at the start of the academic year 2022/23. Sara provides administrative support and advice on governance, constitutional and legal matters to a number of multi-academy trusts, and at SLT she is responsible for clerking meetings of the board of trustees, finance and audit committee, and the LGB meetings of two of the trust's academies. Members' meetings and the AGM are clerked by a business manager from one of the trust's schools, and the remaining academies make their own clerking arrangements. The board and LGBs also have access to NGA Gold membership and Learning Link.
- 3.4.2 While the support provided under the trust's current governance professional arrangements is efficient, there is likely to be a need to invest in a more involved level of support as the trust grows.
- 3.4.3 The current support to the chair and the board is more of an administratively focused clerking service than a governance professional, and there are some indications of capacity issues. For example, the trust has a range of documentation on its website relating to its governance arrangements — for example a 'governance plan' and a 'staff and trustee handbook' — but information in these is not up to date and does not accurately reflect certain aspects of the current arrangements.
- 3.4.4 As such, while the current arrangements for clerking and governance support at SLT are efficient, it is recommended that they are developed further. It is envisaged that, if the trust grows further, governance support capacity will need to be relied upon to observe and track the development of key governance themes in the wider trust, reinforce consistency and quality, and promote organisational cohesion in terms of governance. The high level of competence, commitment and self-sufficiency of the current chair probably, to some extent, mitigates the risks that the trust faces from the current lack of capacity for more comprehensive governance professional support. As such, the board should explore options for further developing this aspect of the effectiveness of its governance arrangements.

4. **Structures**

4.1 **Members**

- 1.1 In terms of the number of members, the DfE "*strong preference*" is now for academy trusts to have five members and SLT complies with this preference. In terms of the makeup of the members, historically, both the chair and vice chair of the trustee board were also members. However, sensibly, only one of the trust's five members is now also a trustee, and that trustee is neither the chair nor vice chair.

1.2 **Trustees**

- 4.1.1 DfE advice on size is that academy boards should be no larger than they need to be to have all the necessary skills to carry out their functions effectively, with everyone actively contributing relevant skills and experience. Historically, the board of trustees has had nine trustees, but it currently comprises of seven trustees following the very recent recruitment of Tina Hayton-Banks. This relatively small size of board creates good conditions for the board to be cohesive, dynamic and



act decisively and is also an appropriate size, at this point in the trust's growth and having regard to its current committee structure. However, this should be kept carefully under review in the short term if the trust grows further, to ensure that trustee workload is manageable, and expanding the size of the board will be necessary, in particular, if a decision is made to add a new standards/educational performance-based committee.

4.1.2 The SLT board meets four times a year and delegates to two issue-based committees, namely a finance and audit committee which meets four times a year and a remuneration/HR committee that meets once a year.

4.2 Local governing bodies

4.2.1 The trust serves 11 primary schools located across Leicestershire and Derbyshire and these schools serve very different communities. As described elsewhere in this report, SLT strongly believes that every one of its schools should have its own identity in terms of curriculum and educational delivery. As it is described in the trust's governance documentation, the trust will provide the 'trunk' in terms of business, HR, school support, monitoring and improvement, while school leaders and local governors are given the room to retain and grow the 'branches and leaves' to provide their own bespoke educational offer for the children at their school.

4.2.2 In terms of how this translates into local governance arrangements, the board of trustees is committed to ensuring that the responsibility to govern is vested in those closest to the impact of decision-making and that such responsibility matches the capacity of those assuming responsibility. As such, each of the trust's academies has a local governing body, for the most part made up of individuals drawn from the academy's local community, both as elected and appointed members.

4.2.3 The trust's LGBs operate under an 'earned autonomy' scheme of delegation that sets out that the responsibilities of an LGB include:

- ensuring values and objectives for the school are in place and in operation
- setting and agreeing the school improvement strategy with priorities and targets
- monitoring whether the school is working within agreed policies and managing its finances well
- engaging with stakeholders
- reporting to the trust board
- forging links with the community
- acting as an ambassador for the school

4.2.4 The scheme of delegation reflects the trust's vision and ethos and enables the LGBs to make a meaningful contribution to the achievement of the trust's strategic aims. It is also comprehensive, of a sensible length and easy to follow, through a combination of the use of narrative explanation and a matrix analysis. The meaning of the scheme in terms of governance roles and responsibilities appears to be well-understood at LGB level. Notwithstanding this, the trust is highly committed to supporting the continuing increasing effectiveness of the contributions of its LGBs and, as part of this ongoing commitment, there are plans to revisit the scheme of delegation with a view to making it even clearer where there is delegation and autonomy and where there are non-negotiables, in terms of educational, financial and governance performance of the individual academies.



- 4.2.5 Additionally, the trust provides LGBs and their chairs with the benefit of a range of high-quality supporting documentation and templates, including an LGB induction checklist, an individual governor skills matrix (for each governor to annually self-assess their skills), an overall governor skills matrix (to combine each governor's skills audit to ascertain LGB skills strength and gaps), an LGB annual tasks checklist which identifies key tasks every LGB must complete both every term and in specific terms and who is responsible for ensuring these tasks are completed, and an annual individual governor review for each governor to complete in the autumn term to ascertain impact on their LGB. Certainly, the LGB chairs I met felt very supported and said they felt a valued part of the trust.
- 4.2.6 Sensibly, given the respect afforded to its schools' own identities in terms of curriculum and educational delivery, the trust also implements a range of initiatives that support collaboration and a sense of belonging across the LGBs, which the CEO describes in terms of 'symphonising'. These include termly group meetings of the chairs of LGB attended by the chair of the board of trustees, CEO and director of primaries. These meetings are valued by the LGB chairs for enhancing the sense of belonging to the wider trust and also the consistency and quality of communication, both longitudinally between the board and LGBs and also horizontally between the academies who are part of the trust.
- 4.2.7 Additionally, the board and the trust's LGBs are supported by a number of executive based best practice 'working groups', namely the educational development group, business development group, research development group, subject development group and teaching development group. These groups overlay the 'earned autonomy' model to ensure that staff and governors across the trust are able to aggregate best practice.
- 4.2.8 The sense of value from being part of SLT and the support and benefits that the LGB chairs I interviewed described their academies receiving from the trust was significant. They also appreciate very much the networking and collaboration opportunities that exist for the trust's LGB chairs.
- 5. Compliance**
- 5.1 Reports to the ESFA and Companies House are completed on time. It is clear that the members and trustees understand the legal, regulatory, contractual and financial requirements upon multi-academy trusts and understand statutory and other governance guidance sufficiently confidently to underpin the strategic nature of their roles and responsibilities. This includes the trust having a designated trustee lead for safeguarding.
- 6. Evaluation**
- 6.1 There is good evidence that the board is committed to evaluating its impact and effectiveness. While the East Midlands and the Humber RDD Advisory Board recommended that the trust undergo this ERG, this recommendation was welcomed by the trust, who had already been planning to commission an ERG, recognising that it was now in its sixth year of existence.
- 6.2 The people and processes that characterise the trust's board of trustees and its senior executive clearly take governance seriously and have a genuine commitment to reflection and continuous improvement of governance effectiveness. Following the independent evaluation provided by this ERG, it is recommended that the board should commit itself to self-evaluating its

effectiveness annually and, then in each third year, triangulating its self-evaluation with the involvement of an external evaluator.

Recommendations

Vision and strategy

- In anticipation of there being opportunities in the short term for the trust to acquire a number of more educationally challenging schools the trust will need to revisit and refresh some aspects of the core objectives in its business plan. To stay ahead of this curve the board should start to reflect on what evolutionary changes to the SLT business plan could be necessitated by further trust growth of this kind.

Holding to account

- While there is currently capacity for the board of trustees to scrutinise in detail the performance of each individual school, as part of the process of ensuring that the trust's governance is fit for growth, it would be sensible for the board to start reflecting on what will be the right level of information to be provided to trustees at full board to enable it to recalibrate its focus to increased consideration and challenge of the performance of the whole trust, rather than academy by academy. Alternatively, consideration could, in due course, be given to the board delegating to a new standards/educational performance-based committee.

Governance structure and practice

- While it is acknowledged that the trust performs highly in terms of educational performance, the educational expertise and capacity of the board would ideally now be enhanced by the recruitment of a further trustee who has primary education sector experience. This will enable the board to demonstrate clearly that the trustees are triangulating information around educational performance independently of the CEO and Director of Primaries. The importance of this will only increase if, in the future, the trust takes on weaker schools as part of its growth strategy.
- The current size of the board of seven trustees is an appropriate size to create good conditions for the board to be cohesive, dynamic and act decisively. However, this should be kept carefully under review in the short term, if the trust grows further, to ensure that trustee workload is manageable, and expanding the size of the board will be necessary, –in particular, –if a decision to add a new standards/educational performance-based committee.
- Succession planning for the role of chair is always a key responsibility of the board and, given the chair's influence on the success of the trust is significant, and just as succession planning across most roles in both the executive and governance functions of the trust is an area of notable strength, succession planning for role of the chair of the board should not be overlooked.
- While the current arrangements clerking and governance support are efficient, the board should explore options for further developing this aspect of the effectiveness of its governance arrangements so that there is governance professional capacity, as the trust grows, to observe and track the development of key governance themes in the wider trust, reinforce consistency and quality, and promote organisational cohesion in terms of governance.
- Following the independent evaluation provided by this ERG, it is recommended that

the board should commit itself to self-evaluating its effectiveness annually and then, in each third year, triangulating its self-evaluation with the involvement of an external evaluator.

Detailed actions to be undertaken

See governance action plan.

Progress review

March 2023.

Acknowledgments

The reviewer would like to thank members, trustees, LGB chairs and senior executive leaders for their collaboration and the open, transparent and constructive way in which they have engaged with this review.

Date completed

28 November 2022