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**A COMPENDIUM OF THINKING  
ON INNOVATIVE GOVERNANCE  
IN THE FE AND SKILLS SECTOR**

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# FOREWORD

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## Dame Ruth Silver,

*President of the Further Education Trust for Leadership*

The importance of good and enterprising governance to the success and wellbeing of further education and skills is increasingly well recognised, yet it remains, by some distance, the most under-scrutinised authoritative role in the sector. Ensuring governance that is fit for purpose, fit for context, fit for phase, fit for circumstance and, finally, fit for place is a big issue; one of the biggest facing the sector. Yet there is little in the literature to support governors in working with their executive teams to adapt to change or to help them innovate in appropriate, context-relevant ways, and comparatively little in the way of oversight of the work they do.

Building on the shifting sands of policy reform and curriculum change demands creative, adaptable governors who are able to think both strategically and differently. The modern world of governance has changed in ways people have perhaps not noticed. Freedoms have been granted to boards and freedoms have been taken away. Like the professionals in the sector, governors have found their discretions changing all the time, like the shifting shapes of an amoeba. One thing has not changed, though. We continue to expect a huge amount of governors and boards; more, sometimes, than they have been able to deliver.

This report, and the project from which it arose, sought to create a space in which governors have been able to think about their role, how it can best contribute to the success of the sector, and how this is best achieved. One thing I have heard repeatedly in FETL's work on governance is that while institutions have sought to bring in bright, adventurous governors from other worlds to be on their boards, in practice these individuals, great innovators and risk-takers in their own worlds, have become rather cautious and risk-averse when faced with the reality of public sector protocols and accountabilities.

Thrust into this new, largely unfamiliar and fast-evolving world, it can be tempting to reach for tried-and-tested approaches and fall into entrenched coping strategies, developed to meet the challenges of yesterday, even when the circumstances call for new ideas and a re-evaluation of current practice. We don't want to lose this wonderful spirit of innovation and we want to ensure that the relationship between board and executive is dynamic and challenging as well as open and trusting. We do well to remember that there is no training ground for governors before they take up their role. Their learning is very much all work-based learning. Given these challenges and the paucity of relevant material currently available, there is a clear need for resources which support and stimulate boards and governors in thinking about innovation in the context both of national-level policy and of their own institutions and the communities they serve. This is what this project sought to do, first soliciting the thoughts and experiences of governors and governance experts in the sector, through in-depth interviews and focus groups, before conceptualising those thoughts and experiences in useful and interesting ways.

This is very much the way in which FETL wants its projects to operate. We are not interested in imposing an agenda on the FE and skills sector: it has many already. All the ideas we support come *from* the sector in its system. That is what is different about us. We recognise that there is significant wisdom out there, about what is going on, what works and what doesn't. There is also a wish to step up to the plate and make a difference, as well as a will to learn and a willingness to get involved in the process of inquiry about that. FETL's role is to offer the invitation to think, to harvest the responses, and help sector leaders and connected colleagues to think further and conceptualise those ideas and experiences with others so that they can be shared and applied to the wider life and experience of the sector. The think pieces and other papers and resources that emerge from this are offered as footprints for the future, taking us from practice to theory and back again, with alterations in both. I am delighted to see this emerging methodology reflected now in a number of FETL projects, this one in particular.

What particularly excites me about this project, and, in particular, its conclusions, is its message of liberation and the invitation it offers, simply, to be different. It tells us that there is no one *right* kind of innovation, no authoritative map or rule book. That, to me, is in itself extremely energising. We need to understand that we can make our own innovation, that what works for one might not work elsewhere, and that what is innovative in one place might be deeply old-fashioned somewhere else. In other words, you have to find the innovation that fits your particular institution in its particular context, and which helps serve your particular communities. What worked in Lewisham would not necessarily work in Lewis. To have that formally set out in a document like this is really important. And to provide governors both with a sense of what good, innovative governance can look like, and with a framework through which they can reflect on their current practice and think about how to improve it, is extremely useful and timely. Adaptation, as we know, is a constant in the FE and skills world, but there is no point in adapting to yesterday's circumstances. That is not renewal.

# ABOUT THE PROJECT

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**The Innovative Governance in Further Education (FE) project focuses upon creating a space to think about the kinds of governance we need to secure the continued success of the sector, and how to go about achieving this. It also seeks to help those governors who want to think about how they can better go about the business of governance.**

By drawing on the insights and recommendation of fellow governors, Board members are provided with a tangible contextual background against which to reflect upon where they are now, and where they want to be in the future.

The findings of the research are based upon a wealth of experience and expertise from across the FE and better governance sectors. Including:

- 25 in-depth interviews with current governors and governance experts
- Nine focus groups, with contributions from 65 participants including; principals, clerks and governors
- The results from the work of five governor participant observers
- An innovative governance online survey
- Consultations with leading figures who have an extensive familiarity with, and understanding of, FE and good governance
- A review of the relevant literature

This compendium of resources is divided into six sub-sections, each of which is intended to facilitate individual governors and Boards to think about innovation, and how this can benefit the institutions they represent. Each section is composed of a 'think piece' designed to bring an analytical lens to our shared understandings of innovative governance, and a supporting narrative that presents an analysis of the key findings.

The aim is to share knowledge and effective practice from across the FE sector, to support governors to have the confidence, clarity and freedom to develop and implement innovative models of governance.

Each section begins with self-reflective questions which readers may like to consider to help relate the insights provided by the panel of governors to their own contexts. The first two subdivisions consider what is meant by innovative governance, and how it can be utilised to improving outcomes for stakeholders. Section three acknowledges the continually evolving nature of governance and reflects upon the significance of innovative approaches to bringing about effective transition and change. Although there is no one right model of governance, there are innovative approaches that can benefit all Boards. Hence, section four presents some basic propositions that governors have suggested others may find useful. The penultimate section summarises the central themes to emerge from the investigation and suggests some ways forward for innovative governance. To conclude, section six offers a self-reflection framework that governors can use to consider their current practice and think about practical ways of developing and enhancing this.

July, 2016

# WHAT IS INNOVATIVE GOVERNANCE?

## SELF-REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS:

***What does innovative governance mean to you?***

***Can you give examples of innovative governance taking place at your college?***

An online survey asked governors from across the East Midlands what innovative governance means to them (a representative selection of their replies are presented below). Most respondents suggested that, for them, innovative governance means considering fresh ideas or re-evaluating current practice.

## Doing Something New or Different

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*Doing things differently trying to think outside of the box*

*Alternative approach to provide maximum benefit*

*Bringing new ideas to governance*

*New / different ways of developing effective and efficient governance*

However, governors emphasised that innovative governance is not simply about doing things differently; innovation should have a purpose. A frequent reason mentioned for trying something new, was to improve the efficiency or productivity of the Board. This was seen as particularly important in relation to bringing about constructive changes at an institution.

## Direction Setting and Strategic Leadership

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*Doing things differently to improve effectiveness and efficiency of governance*

*Providing direction, control and support*

*New thoughts and actions in relation to strategic leadership*

*Provide fresh ideas as to strategy*

Four innovative governance themes have emerged from the research:

**Opportunity and Risk, Purpose of FE, Social Justice, and Local / National / International Economy.** These topics were reflected in the thoughts of governors who considered what innovation should look like in the FE setting:

### Opportunity and Risk

*The ability to develop new ways of working in response to policy initiatives.*

*The ability to plan and prepare for present and future challenges facing an organisation.*

*The ability to review and challenge in a streamlined format that doesn't constrain innovation from the executive team by imposing structures that are inflexible and time consuming.*

*The ability to create ambitious yet realistic strategic goals that hold the students of the institution at their centre.*

### Purpose of FE

*Developing new ways of conducting governance, aimed at supporting the main purpose of the business.*

*Ensuring that awareness of developments in the sector is understood, considered by the Board and agreed strategies implemented by the management team.*

*Governance which goes beyond scrutiny, monitoring and compliance. It looks at the purposes of a college and poses powerful questions which it then works with management to answer.*

*Looking at the way governors can most effectively contribute towards the success and mission of the college.*

### Social Justice

*The capability and willingness to consider new and inventive solutions to serve our stakeholders.*

*Pragmatic and creative means by which governing bodies go about their drive to excellence for students that are within the overall boundaries of regularity accountability.*

*New approaches to governance to secure improved experiences and outcomes for students.*

*Working in a modern way which sees the college as an integral part of the community and not something which is just situated within the community.*

### Local/National/International Economy

*Finding and supporting new/different ways to deliver first class educational and vocational opportunities against a rip tide of economic, political and demographic changes. Trying to stay ahead of those changes and have in place procedures and structures which will not only be robust and endure but which will be attractive and relevant for learners and employers into the next decade.*

*Ensuring the college delivers for both students and employers by delivering qualifications, skills and knowledge to support economic growth within our location.*

*Being responsive to employer needs and providing the skills needed to re-balance the economy and eliminate the mis-match between supply and demand.*

As well as helping governors to foster new means of further improving the institutions they represent, it was also suggested innovative governance can assist Boards to look to the future, and adapt to changing circumstances.

## Responding to Challenge and Change

*Doing even more with even less money and carrying the can if you can't!*

*Being on top of whatever's going on*

*Progressive and proactive thinking across the full spectrum of responsibilities*

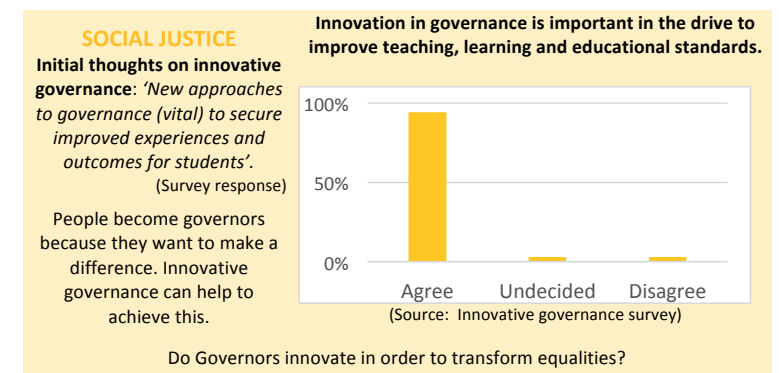
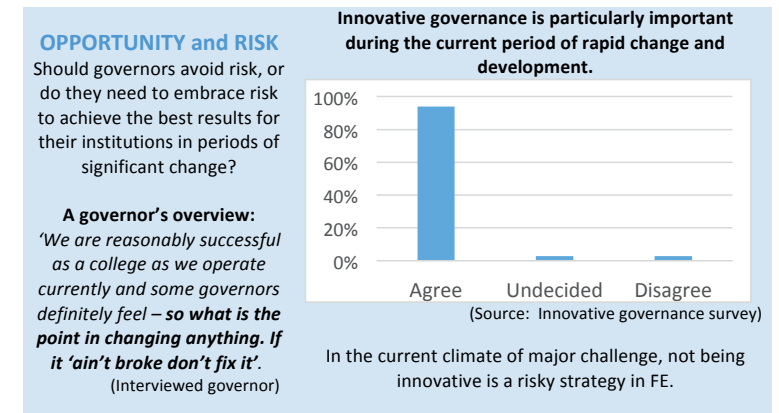
Something of the range of tasks, responsibilities and level of commitment encountered by present-day governors was summarised by one contributor, who suggested that innovative governance is:

*"Where governance keeps a college solvent, builds reserves, maintains high quality provision, is responsive to all their communities, maintains active commitment to equality and diversity, holds executive to account, supports executive and student voice actively, works with other corporations to improve governance through peer review."*

## What is Innovative Governance?

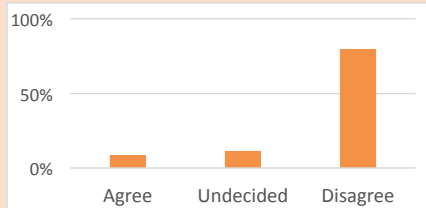
Innovative governance themes: **Opportunity and Risk**, **Purpose of FE**, **Social Justice**, and **Local/National/International Economy**.

These themes have been derived from a review of the literature, consultations with key stakeholders, focus group discussions, in-depth interviews and an online survey of governors across the East Midlands.



# BENEFITING FROM INNOVATIVE GOVERNANCE

**Innovation should come from the principal and senior staff, not the Board of governors.**



(Source: Innovative Governance survey)

**Who determines strategic direction?**

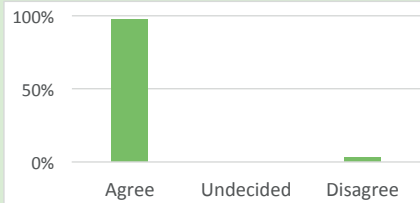
Governors innovate to set the agenda or... external agendas, funding bodies, government?

## PURPOSE OF FURTHER EDUCATION

What is the purpose of FE? What are colleges' and providers' ambitions in times when public funding is much reduced?

**Initial thoughts on innovative governance:** 'Governance which goes beyond scrutiny, monitoring and compliance. It looks at the purposes of a college and poses powerful questions which it then works with management to answer.' (Survey response)

**If we want innovation in the offer for learners and employers, innovation has to be characteristic throughout the institution including governance.**



(Source: Innovative governance survey)

## ECONOMY

**A governor's overview:**

'Governing bodies need to look out as well as inwards to the college. The best governors bring connectivity with other spheres that are helpful for the thriving of an organization.'

(Interviewed governor)

Governors' industry experience means we can learn from innovative Boards in commercial and other contexts.

How can innovative governance help the changing Local/ National/ International economy?

**Three lenses have emerged from analysis of the data, which we are using to examine the four Innovative governance themes:**

1. Innovation with impact - Collaboration and structures for governance.
2. Innovation with impact - Processes and decision making, using governors' time and expertise well.
3. Innovation with impact – Range of people, including those with expertise in innovation, who are and could become governors.

## SELF-REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS:

***What benefits can innovative governance help to foster at your college?***

***How can you help to encourage an atmosphere of innovation within your Board meetings?***

Think Piece One sets out four innovative governance themes: **Opportunity and Risk, Purpose of Further Education, Social justice and Local/ National/ International Economy.** Think Piece Two explores these themes in more detail, viewing them through the three lenses that have emerged as priorities for focus from the research so far:

- Collaboration and structures
- Processes and decision making
- Range of people

In doing so, Think Piece Two considers how innovative governance can drive all of these key areas.

The research indicates that many Boards are innovative in their approach to governance, and are committed to introducing beneficial changes to the institutions they represent. Participants have suggested innovation involves being open minded and deliberately reviewing and considering change as well as areas for continuity. Nearly all governors have reported they are



determined to innovate in order to lead and succeed in the face of new challenges for the FE sector. A widespread consensus has emerged that Boards need to be open to and capable of innovation.

Research evidence from interviews and focus groups conducted with governors from across the East Midlands indicates that many believe innovative governance helps institutions to improve the way they perform, as one governor, Tim\*, stated:

*"Finding new ways of doing things better, as opposed to the way things happened in the past."*

While Nichole reflected that:

*"By using innovation, we can have the same or even less effort and time, but improve the output or outcomes"*

There was also a wide ranging consensus that freeing up space to think about and debate innovation can have a valuable impact upon the FE sector by helping Boards to look forward to and create the future.

For Sandy:

*"From a governance point of view, innovative to me means a freedom and an ability to express one's opinions."*

## Opportunity and Risk

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*"Governing bodies need to look out as well as inwards to the college. The best governors do it to bring connectivity with other spheres that are helpful for the thriving of the organisation."*

(Michael, governor)

Responses collected during the research suggest that many governors feel that Boards should be risk averse, and that by being innovative, governors can help create new opportunities and help mitigate risk.

\* All informants have been given pseudonyms to protect anonymity.

Many participants also asserted that they believe governors have a key role to play in managing risk by supporting, and scrutinising, the actions of the senior management team. Focus group members suggested that in order to facilitate the management of opportunities and risks, Boards require individuals who can recognise the need for change, and who are adept at reacting to a changing environment and who can lead strategic transformation of organisations whilst also being able to understand risks, and prepared to accept that some risks are worth taking. One participant in the research, and expert in the voluntary sector, observed:

*"The private sector can be characterised as managing risk in order to take risk, and old style public sector characterised as having a focus on managing risk in order to avoid risk."*

A range of governors who have helped with the research expressed that it is important they help FE institutions to embrace new opportunities, in order to continually strive for outstanding results for both learners and the wider community. Some governors suggested that collaboration with other institutions is a way of achieving this. The form that collaboration should take was viewed differently by governors, ranging from sharing ideas to amalgamating resources. Karen suggested that providers should not stand apart from other institutions, instead:

*"Get to know them, understand their weaknesses, their strengths, the things they do well."*

Some governors have expressed concern at a lack of innovation surrounding potential collaboration. For instance, Anne commented that:

*"We should share experiences beyond the boundaries of the college. But in my college, governors only look inwards to our college, not strategically beyond."*

A balance of outward and inward looking at corporation meetings needs to be considered. So too, a balance between rear view monitoring of performance and scrutiny and steers and challenge for forward direction.

## Purpose of Further Education

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*“Governing bodies have a responsibility to lift its eyes from what it’s doing today to where we might want to go.”*

(Fay, focus group participant)

A number of governors have reported giving considerable thought to the purpose of FE, with participants stating that it is fundamental and ongoing to consider the purpose of the organisation for which you are responsible. There was a general consensus that the real focus of FE should be learning and teaching for the benefit of individuals, the economy, productivity and society. Provision with impact and positive outcomes.

The majority of respondents believe that strategic thinking is a key part of governance. This was encapsulated by Heather’s view that:

*“We should be doing strategic thinking, and focusing upon what direction the college could or should be taking, and using our time for this looking forward.”*

However, for Sally:

*“In general governing bodies are spending most of their time answering the question ‘how have we done’ in one form or another. The amount of time that they spend looking at where we are going, what we are supposed to be delivering, a definitive sense of purpose, that is pretty minor in terms of time consumption in my view.”*

Contributors recommended that governors’ time and expertise should be used more effectively. By freeing governors from the more routine matters they can focus upon innovation in order to create direction. Governors have wider than institutional interests as they are the guardians of the public, economic and social benefits that FE provides in the long-term and are responsible for the sustainability of FE in their localities:

*“It gives sovereignty back to a Board in the sense that they can focus upon what’s important for the organisation, not what they have to do in terms of compliance.”*

(Sadie, governor)

## Social Justice

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When focusing upon social justice the majority of governors suggested that FE institutions should be an integral part of the community, and that students should have representation within a college’s decision making processes. Innovation and collaboration were adjudged to have a central role in providing new services to students, which could protect and improve student access, engagement and progression with FE.

It is widely acknowledged that Boards are composed of talented people, who bring a great deal of knowledge, skills and experience to the institutions they govern. For Trisha:

*“Most governing bodies cover themselves pretty well on professional skills, skills you need to run a multi-million-pound organisation.”*

However, Kevin expressed concern about the composition of some Boards, asserting that:

*“The sort of person who becomes a governor at the moment is somebody who fits a gap on a fairly rudimentary skills driven matrix.”*

There was a suggestion from a research participant that governors, whilst clearly not being representatives:

*“Should reflect the student body in all kinds of diverse ways.”*

(Tina, governor)

Like Tina, Dennis suggested that ideally it would be:

*“A cross-section of the world really [otherwise] there is a whole lot of expertise that is missing there.”*

The necessity to find innovative ways of recruiting governors to ensure that Boards are reflective of society was comprehensively supported.

# Local/ National/ International Economy

*"If courses don't meet the local needs of employers, then frankly everybody is wasting their time."*

(Kevin, governor)

Many governors have recommended making very strong connections with businesses in order to understand local and national economic needs. Groups of governors insist that Boards should include some members who recognise the needs of a good range of business themselves, as Jeremy said:

*"We need people who understand and have run commercial organisations."*

This viewpoint was supported by Francesca, who on reflection, stated that:

*"We have a head of economic development of the local authority, a leader of a global engineering company in our area. I do think it is important to have the particular perspectives of SMEs and a large national / multinational company as they bring questions of scale, cultures and systems in very thoughtful ways."*

# Benefiting from Innovative Governance

Themes	Lenses	Issues Raised:	Implications:	Ways Forward:
Opportunity and Risk	Collaboration and structures	Collaboration with suitable partners presents opportunities e.g. sharing effective practice and resources, as well as possible unities.	- Governors to need to look outwards to other institutions as well as inwards. - Governors have a key role to play in taking and managing risk by supporting and scrutinising the actions of the senior management team. - When circumstances change rapidly, governors say they need to innovate.	- Innovative governance requires individuals who can recognise the need for change, and who are able to react to a changing environment and lead transformation. - Governors focus on the future opportunities and think how governance needs to change.
	Processes and decision making	Innovative governance can support the success of a college by improving planning and implementation.	- The purpose of being a governor is to help to bring about best public and economic benefits from FE. - "Governing bodies responsible for lifting eyes from what were doing today to where we might want to go." (FE governor) - To add full value to an institution, governors are central to strategic thinking about different futures.	- In light of Area Reviews of Post-16 Education, corporations will want to demonstrate recent reviewing of diverse partnerships - and membership with capability, skills and characteristics, experience and commitment to drive the new institution forward. (Reviewing Post-16 Education and Training institutions, BIS/15/526)
	Range of people	Colleges need governors who continually stretch and challenge the institutions to bring greatest value to its mission.	- FE corporations integral part of local community, giving strategic leadership to meeting needs, including in partnership with other colleges / providers. - Governors to: "reflect the student body in all kinds of diverse ways." (FE governor). - Need innovative way of recruiting governors so they reflect society.	- College Boards include governors who are from the commercial world, who understand and have run large commercial organisations. - "We know a lot more than we did when this college or education system started, lets apply some modern business rules, new HR ideas to the whole lot." (FE governor)
Further Education Purpose of	Collaboration and structures	Collaboration amongst institutions can better equip them to bring about the purpose of FE.	- Collaboration amongst institutions can better equip them to bring about the purpose of FE.	- Governors look at the future direction of the institution, and colleges in our localities, in order to determine definitive sense of purpose. - Consider scenarios that are possible, choosing which to implement. This process is enhanced by creative governors and their thinking.
	Processes and decision making	Governance is about determining the purpose and future direction of the institution, and that processes are appropriate for the future.	- "A governing body without strong expertise in FE is not well placed to navigate the very challenging circumstances we face." (FE governor) Collaboration can protect and improve student access and progression, and address issues of equality for local benefit.	
	Range of people	Involvement of student governors is essential; there should be more active consultation with students and their bodies.	The composition of a Board should reflect society, and all the skills and capabilities needed to strengthen social justice. "I see our job as working with employers to take more of our young people on at 16 or 19 as apprentices." (FE governor) We should be finding innovative ways to serve the needs of the individual and of industry and new business models. Need governors who understand commerce and governance of multi million pound organisations with reducing public funds.	
Social Justice	Collaboration and structures			
	Processes and decision making			
	Range of people			
Local/National/ International Economy	Collaboration and structures			
	Processes and decision making			
	Range of people			

# UTILISING INNOVATIVE GOVERNANCE: EFFECTIVE TRANSITION AND CHANGE

## SELF-REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS:

*How can innovative governance help your Board overcome risks and respond to changing circumstances?*

*Which innovation(s) do you think would bring most value to your Board meetings?*

The Innovative Governance in Further Education project has identified four key themes for the research: **Opportunity and Risk, Purpose of Further Education, Social justice** and **Local/ National/ International Economy**. It is examining these using three lenses that have emerged as priorities:

- Collaboration and structures
- Processes and decision making
- Range of people

The current research update examines ways in which innovative governance can assist the process of transition and change, and introduce changes that can benefit FE institutions and the stakeholders they support.

## Opportunity and Risk

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### The role of innovative governance in bringing about change

Governors who have participated in the research have obviously thought deeply about their role, and have a well-defined sense of the purpose of governance. Many governors have advocated that a Board is there to do more than scrutinise decisions. However, some governors have suggested that a compliance culture means that a governor's job becomes checking what has happened. Fay, for instance, said that

*"I think the role of a governing body in FE up to now has been pretty securely anchored in the rear view mirror's environment".*

With too much attention focused upon "how are we doing, how have we done". Another governor, Sam, expressed a similar view stating that

*"Governance is so much more about compliance and check lists, structures rather than approaches and practice".*

The majority of governors who were consulted emphasised that a key role for the Board is to set the strategic aims, values and standards of the institution they govern. Eric summarised this view concisely saying that

*"We should be doing strategic thinking, and focusing on what direction the college could or should be taking, and using our time for looking forward".*

A fellow governor reinforced this by stating that a governor's role should be *"insight activities, rather than routine approvals"*.

These observations point to governors having a dual role in bringing about change. Firstly, setting the direction that their institution is to take, and secondly, overseeing the way in which this is carried out. Undertaking these duties entails a Board being responsible for both setting the long-term vision of the institution, and also protecting its interests.

Nearly all the governors who have assisted in the research have emphasized the vital role of effective leadership in successfully initiating and adapting to change. Jane for instance, noted *"if you have good*

*leadership, you have a successful organisation"*. Many reasoned that utilising innovative approaches to governance could assist Boards to take advantage of opportunities and respond to risks. A survey respondent recommended:

*"Leading from the top, bringing new and ideas of best practice to an institution, looking to get involved in external communities of governors"*.

## The Purpose of Further Education

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### Innovative governance providing leadership of change

A cross-section of governors reported that an important part of their role is to lead change at their institution via strategic thinking, rather than by planning. One governor, Sara, asserted that

*"Management runs the business, the role of the Board is to ensure that it is well run and going in the right direction"*.

Governors have advised that by taking responsibility for strategic thinking, Boards free the executive to concentrate on day-to-day management of the organisation. As Phillip, a governor who participated in a focus group remarked,

*"The executive should focus upon running the business – making the college successful, and not be distracted by worrying about what might happen. They shouldn't be distracted from the college's main business, which is education"*.

While the majority of governors view strategic thinking as primarily the Board's concern, many stated the belief that this should be founded upon delivering the central mission of the institution for which they are responsible. Governors said for instance:

*"It is much more I think about strategic thinking, rather than the planning. Because surely planning is more of a management type role, but it is even more than that, it is about going back to sort of basics in what is the purpose of the organisation you are responsible for. Which I think must come before strategy, because strategy really is a tool isn't it; it is a tool to do something."*

(Clair, interviewed governor)

*“The fundamental aspects I think of governing is obviously the running if you like, not the day-to-day management, but the actual big brush strokes of actually running the college - the financial health. But that is only there obviously for the actual quality of the standard of education, and the quality of the service you are offering the students.”*

(Joan, interviewed governor)

Support for such views came from a governor who remarked that the

*“Leadership of an organisation is there for the day-to-day, governors are there to help achieve the higher purpose”.*

A number of governors shared Stephen’s view that:

*“I think there needs to be a divorce really from governance and the executive, which is very clear. I think that is one of the important things for me, so there is a clear dividing line between governance and management.”*

(Stephen, interviewed governor)

While another governor was a staunch supporter of the idea that if governance

*“Is just doing something that the management might do, then you might as well just get a consultant in”.*

They went on to say that when considering the task of governance:

*“It is about what we want these people to do. Because if we are saying we just want them as unpaid consultant, who are acting as perhaps a higher level of management just looking over what the management are doing, then that doesn’t warm the cockles of your heart particularly does it? We really need to make these roles meaningful, so they are not just sitting in a meeting hearing all the grind.”*

(Carlo, interviewed governor)

## Social Justice

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### Innovative governance bringing about purposeful change

Many FE governors have stated that they view the primary purpose of their institution as bringing about change that will benefit key stakeholders, including, learners, the local community and business. Thereby, colleges are overcoming barriers to social justice, supporting learners’ economic prosperity and ensuring the economy has future employees who have received good quality training.

There was a widespread acknowledgement that needs of stakeholders have to be habitually reassessed. During an interview one governor remarked that it is imperative to

*“Usher in change to ensure that the institution’s purpose remains relevant and valid”.*

Governors have recommended speaking with a range of people and getting their views to facilitate this process. Particular emphasis was placed upon engaging with the learner voice, with Geoffrey revealing that at the college where he is a governor

*“The strategy for involving students is really influential and brings an important perspective for the governing body”.*

While a survey respondent proposed that:

*“The divide between staff and governors should be opened up in order to allow specialist knowledge from all involved and in turn will create outcomes for innovation in all colleges.”*

Participants have noted that Boards need to have perspective, and a degree of impartiality. The independent role of governors means that they are ideally placed to introduce innovation and change that is in the long-term interests of stakeholders. Governors who contributed to the research have said that Boards should be asking themselves such things as:

*“What problems do we want the FE sector to solve in the future – what needs do we want it to meet?”*  
 (Kerry, interviewed governor)

*“What should we be doing, and what do we need to do for the college long-term?”*  
 (William, focus group participant)

## Local/ National/ International Economy

### Changing demands upon governance

There was an almost universal acceptance on the part of governors contributing to the research that an undeniable change to the future landscape of FE will be the increasing size of institutions, and that this will inevitably have an impact upon governance. A focus group participant observed

*“As colleges become bigger the demands and responsibilities on governors grow”.*

In response to this, a range of governors advocated changing models of governance to make them more effective or adaptive, or adopting a model for a specific phase which could be merger or new strategic alliance, for example, and so governance needs to be right for leading a particular transition. A governor with substantial experience in the commercial sector advocated that the length of Board membership should be flexible, recruiting to meet the short-term needs of the Board in terms of skills and experience. This notion was supported by a fellow governor’s proposal that Boards should

*“Have non-executive temporary strategic Board members to feed in new information, or to help initiate a ‘project’”.*

Most of the governors involved in this research have mentioned time commitments and the importance of effective time management as governance has become a continuous process. There is a wide-ranging consensus that governors’ time has to be used to greater effect, as Alex pointed out *“we have two hours – should an hour just be spent on ticking boxes – no!”* Support for this view came from governors saying that:

*“Boards need to be given time to be innovative, every so often we should give time to think purely about strategy”*  
 (Helen, interviewed governor)

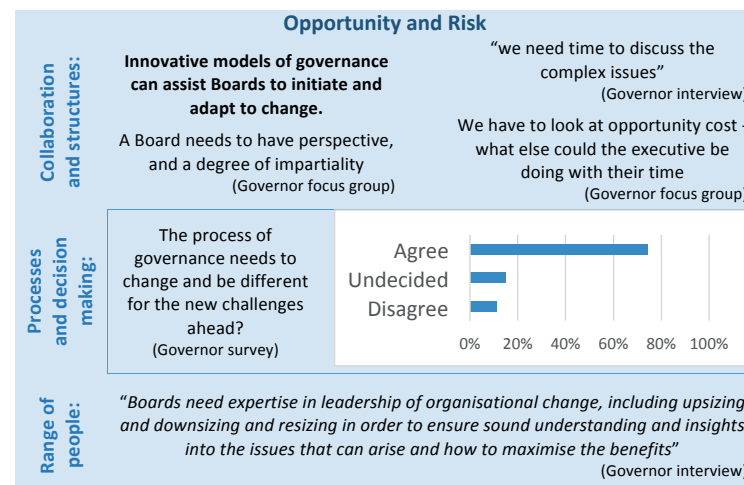
*“Crucial for effective and creative governance is stopping to think together when something significant is said – not plough on with the timed agenda items in a meeting.”*  
 (Richard, focus group participant)

Some governors indicated that they believe the composition of Boards may have to alter, to meet changing needs in relation to skills, experience and diversity. The main focus of this argument centered around getting the appropriate mix of abilities, enthusiasm and vision. As Kay pointed out

*“The skills set of the Board should be balanced. That means having the right mix of and balance of skills and experience”.*

The competences that most governors felt of Board members required were *“being able to get things done”*, *“willing to devote the time and effort”*, as well as being able to give dynamic and open-minded strategic leadership through diverse perspectives and expertise.

## Utilising Innovative Governance: Effective Transition and Change



# ASPECTS OF INNOVATIVE GOVERNANCE: SPECIFIC PROPOSITIONS

**Social Justice**

**Collaboration and structures:** Independent decision making safeguards so that progressive innovation and change is instigated.  
*"Boards can take a long-term view in the interests of the college. Work in its best interests"*  
 (Governor interview)

**Processes and decision making:** Board meetings should be less formal, offering more space for governors to contribute?  
 (Governor survey)

Response	Percentage
Agree	75%
Undecided	15%
Disagree	10%

**Range of people:** *"Very impressive learner voice at our college.... really influential and brings an important perspective for the governing body"*  
 (Governor Interview)

**Collaboration and structures:** There has to be an efficient flow of information to the governors, so that they are presented with all of the key information to make appropriate decisions about which changes to introduce.  
 Governors need to know what needs to change, and an awareness of the barriers to change.  
 (Governor focus group)

**Processes and decision making:** More power should be delegated to Sub-Committees reducing the time the Governing Bodies spend on routine approvals?  
 (Governor survey)

Response	Percentage
Agree	75%
Undecided	10%
Disagree	15%

**Range of people:** *"you need governors who can get things done"*  
 (Governor interview)  
*"a valuable innovation would be to make things as simple as possible"*  
 (Governor focus group)  
*"It's really about the different things that people can bring. And it may be different for different sorts of colleges."*  
 (Governor interview)

**Local/National/International Economy**

**Collaboration and structures:** The purpose of FE can be characterised as bringing about changes that will benefit a broad range of stakeholders, including students, the local community and industry.  
*"the needs of the individual and of industry, and if we can see that as the mission of the whole education sector, you start doing the right thing"*  
 (Governor interview)

**Processes and decision making:** The particular contribution of governors is more oversight than innovation?  
 (Governor survey)

Response	Percentage
Disagree	55%
Undecided	15%
Agree	30%

**Range of people:** *"We should be doing strategic thinking – and focusing on what direction the college should be taking. Using our time for looking forward."*  
 (Governor interview)  
*"there needs to be a lot of dialogue with the local industry and community."*  
 (Governor interview)

## SELF-REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS:

*If you were to offer a new Board member advice about innovative governance, what would it be?*

*Can you identify factors that can lead to enhanced creativity and innovation taking place at your college?*

A range of governors with a wealth of experience in both the further education and commercial sectors, have been invited to share their perspectives on innovative governance. The suggestions and recommendations which they have made can be summarised by the eight propositions relating to innovative governance summarised below. These examples are indicative of topics that Boards may want to consider when introducing innovation into their own governance:

### 1. Asking questions about the way you govern presents the possibility of introducing innovation that can enhance governance

Some governors have suggested it is important for Boards to continually consider ways of improving their governance practices. For instance, Peter stated that *"keeping governance under review means that we are open to change to get the best out of governance"*. He stressed that this was



*“Not just changing governance for its own sake, but for the scale and types of challenges we have. Just introducing some changes makes us think about our governance and how we want it to be and to develop”.*

Stephen, a leading expert in governance, has suggested that there is a clear justification for introducing meaningful innovation, saying that:

*“I think that governors of FE colleges really have an opportunity in this environment, with a lot of changes taking place within the education sector to bring more of a corporate mentality to the running of a college. Now I don’t mean all the bad things to do with the corporate world, and there are many bad things, rather things such as an independent mind set, there are clear processes in place in terms of decision making.”*

Other governors have argued that not questioning current practice, and being unwilling to innovate, is a risky approach to governance. Richard, for example, asserted that

*“Three out of ten colleges are in trouble – the governance seems the problem. The issue is that they always want to do things the way they have been done”.*

This contention was supported by another governor, who remarked that:

*“I caution against keeping governance the same and hanging onto traditions. You might argue with me and say that maintaining continuity if things are working is fine, and the right thing to do. But no this is not the case, as always keeping the same solidifies practices and thinking and routinises governance to a point where it is not deliberate and thoughtful governance but can be almost mindless - which is not good governance.”*

## **2. The role of the Board is to set the strategic direction for the college, and then scrutinise how this is carried out**

A variety of governors emphasised that they felt the Board has a dual role in actively engaging in planning for the future, and then making sure this is carried out effectively. As Amanda, who has served as non-executive director with a number of FTSE 100 companies, observed

*“The Board should test the proposed strategy to the point of destruction in order for the maximum assurance that the strategy, with revisions as needed, has the best chance of working”.*

Consequently, it is important how the Board utilises the time it has available. One governor said that

*“The main thing is the reweighting of how we spend time as a Board and getting the right balance of forward strategy and accountability monitoring”.*

Peter agreed with this proposal, commenting that the Board on which he serves

*“Continuously thinks about the balance between time spent looking forward and strategy, and our looking backwards monitoring and scrutiny functions”.*

## **3. Each Board member must be well informed about the institution for which they are responsible and understand its purpose**

There was a broad ranging consensus that it is advantageous for governors to be well informed about the college for which they are responsible.

One way of achieving this is to have an induction process that provides a genuine understanding of the systems that they are to work within. As Jane, a company secretary and advisor to several Boards, noted:

*“Because I could get, I don’t know, the finance director from a multi-million-pound private company who is good, but they would have to be able to apply their knowledge within what works in the sector. And I could have someone with a mass of teaching experience, but they still have to understand it within the sector that we work within.”*

Some governors have suggested that a good way for Board members to get to know how a college functions is to have broad ranging discussions with stakeholders. There was a suggestion that governors could hold open surgeries for staff and students. A governor reasoned that:

*“As long as it is understood they are not there to be advocates, they just begin to understand the whole culture, the whole system, and I have done that in the past and it can be very beneficial. It can open their eyes quite honestly, you know, ‘I didn’t realise we were doing this’ or ‘why didn’t someone tell me that?’. I think that there are more positives than negatives, so I think they have got to know the institution for which they are guardians essentially.”*

(William, interviewed governor)

A chair of governors remarked that the Board on which they serve jointly came to the realisation they were not talking enough about teaching, learning and assessment. Thus, an innovative decision was taken:

*“That all the Board had to take responsibility and really understand teaching, learning and assessment. Now we have teaching, learning and assessment as the first part of every corporation meeting, and we have a range of ways in which we do this e.g. department head comes and talks through the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and risks in their area – and the governors are clear that we do not want sugar coating but the real picture. We want problems or risks to be out in the open so that they can be addressed. This was a culture change for the college – both for governance and the senior managers and means that we are on a proper footing now.”*

#### **4. Boards require governors who are open to innovation and change, and not risk averse**

A survey respondent clearly stated the importance of governors being open to change:

*“Innovative governance includes being open to consider new ways of governing that is best for the strategic context. It is vital that governors, chairs, clerks and principal have an open mind-set around what governance is, should be, could be. In times of great financial negative pressures, the role of collaborative governance, whether strategic alliances, federations or mergers have to be considered so that there is a viable, vibrant and high quality network of FE colleges. The financial pressures may mean that without those kinds of developments some*

*colleges will ‘fall by the wayside’ and so a wider strategic response is needed. The process of governance can be staid and not necessarily get the best from the combination of skills and wisdom in governors and therefore the collective decision making of the corporation may be sub optimal. The usual format of agendaed business meetings are only one way and part of the way for having effective governance. Corporations also need diversity and divergent thinkers as part of leading innovative colleges, and valuing and drawing on this well is essential.”*

(Survey respondent)

The notion that Boards should not be risk averse, and should be willing to take calculated risks has been a prominent theme, which many governors have referred to throughout this research. This point was reiterated by Peter, who observed that:

*“Investment in innovation can be very wise and prudent, and risks are to be managed. Governance should not be anti-risk. However, in practice, sometimes college governors can see prudence leading to a mind-set of protection of assets, rather than assets being there to be invested to make the biggest difference to our local people.”*

(Peter, interviewed governor)

William also advised that a risk appetite is important, warning that *“particularly in times of significant change there is a tendency for people to pull up the drawbridge, and that is the wrong thing to do”*.

#### **5. Board members need good working relationships, innovating together to get the best results of the college**

Many governors have referred to the fundamental importance of the culture of the Board. As the custodians of the college, they set the tone for the whole institution. Research respondents have suggested that relationships are at the heart of successful governance. Without good working relationships and trust it is difficult for a Board to collaborate effectively. One governor spoke of a negative experience with Board members not knowing each other or having mutual trust. However,

the governors concerned were able to put a strategy in place to overcome this obstacle:

*"We now have away days for our college governors with the principal/ senior team in a hotel, and have done so over the last three years. This has proved invaluable as we really have gotten to know each other and strengthened the social dynamics of the Board – and we have worked well and intensively together to set a hard direction for the college, having been open and critical of our strengths and weaknesses."*

(Governor interview)

This type of approach was also recommended by Amanda who said that

*"Full, frank discussion, informal time getting to know each other and options being looked at very thoroughly – no question ... and the open culture of the Board is vital for this to be secured".*

Similarly, Richard suggested that a supportive culture is essential at all levels. He revealed that:

*"The governors appointed the new principal and we made sure that we have a relationship that is open, constructive, self-critical and warm. This is fantastic, and we get the best from the principal for the Board through transparency and being open and in fact seeking of challenge, and the principal gets the best from the Board."*

## **6. The Board must continually ask questions of itself to ensure it is operating in the college's best interests**

Research participants have recommended governors continually questioning whether they are functioning in the college's best interests, both as individuals and collectively as a Board. At the collective level, it seems obvious that a Board requires the correct team in place with the appropriate blend of skills to achieve stated objectives. A potential way of achieving this is via continual professional development. As Stephen has observed:

*"Nobody is ever the finished article, training and development is just as important for college governors as it is for directors of large corporations. So I would urge governors to think about training and improving their skills. Regulations and structures change all the time, having that constant refreshing of that knowledge and understanding is very, very important, especially when you introduce and induct new governors."*

There may be occasions when the Board chooses to initiate innovation in order to better address the college's needs. One governor has suggested that removing committees and introducing monthly meetings has better facilitated them to focus their collective expertise on priority areas. This highly experienced governor noted that:

*"Governing in the same way becomes a blockage to change and there will be times when change is essential for progress or even essential for survival. So we have to make sure that we have reflective and dynamic governance with capacity and capability to change itself as needed to give the best strategic leadership and governance oversight. Shaking governance up a bit and on a regular basis helps people to think differently."*

On a more personal level, governors may at certain points, choose to ask themselves some searching questions. Jane reflected that occasionally

*"Individuals recognise that whilst I have done a good job to date, what happens in the future is not for them and they have to step down".*

## **7. It is important that Boards have clarity and transparency in their processes and decision making**

Governors have commented that they feel a culture of transparency is important throughout an organisation. One governor summarised the opinion of a range of respondents, saying that:

*"The larger an organisation becomes, there then become greater questions about do the people at the top of the organisation ... know what is going on at the very bottom. That is all about clear and transparent and effective management lines right the way through from the teachers and professionals all the way through to the governors."*

(Governor interview)

Richard gave an example of value of this policy in practice, saying that when recruiting new people to the Board it was

*“Based on skills and recommendations from a range of local networks such as the chamber of commerce, local government and the voluntary sector ... We opened up the governance and so showed we were serious about being transparent in our recruitment”.*

He went on to say that *“we were clear that we needed to have people who would speak their minds and ask searching questions, and be open to change and development i.e. forward looking not backwards”.*

## 8. Governors are ideally placed to introduce innovative local /national /international economic ideas

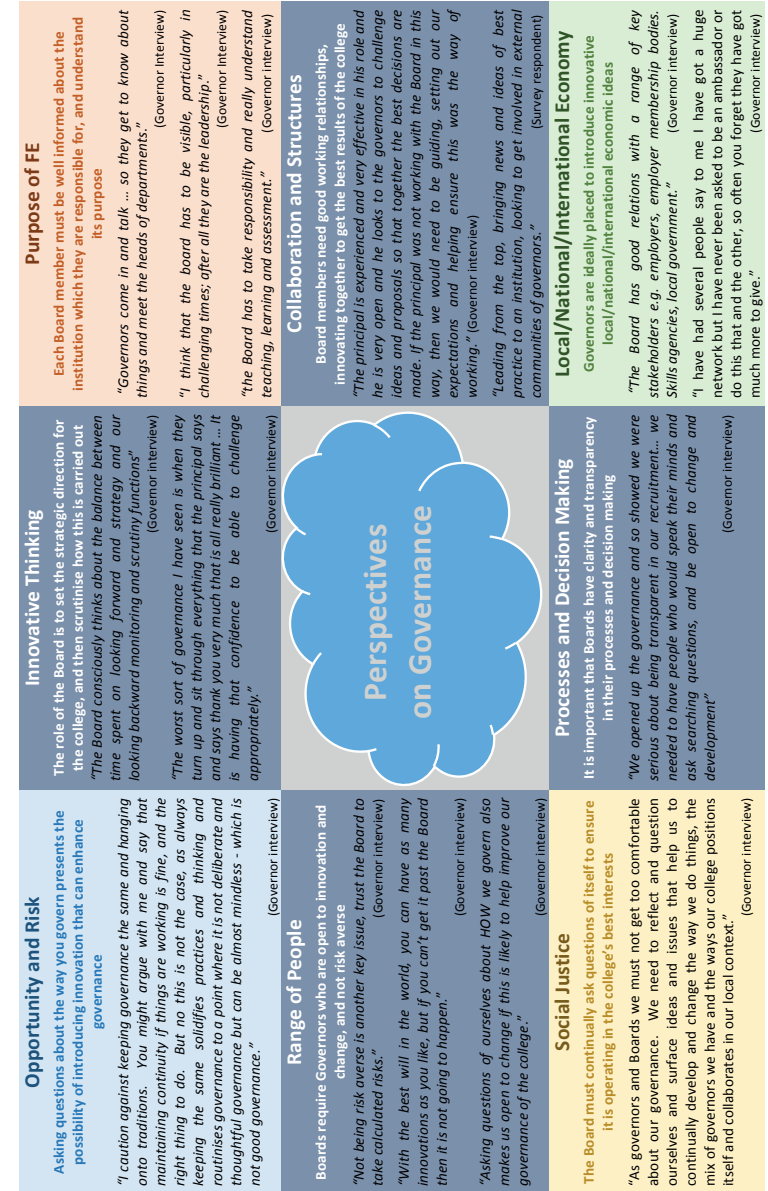
A number of contributors have observed that due to the skills set and networking possibilities that governors bring to the Board, they are ideally placed to make a valuable contribution to a colleges economic position. For instance, Peter has commented that the Board he chairs includes *“a head of economic development of the local authority”* and *“a leader of a global engineering company in our area”*. He went on to say

*“I do think it is important to have the particular perspectives of an SME and a large national / multinational company as they bring questions of scale, cultures and systems in very thoughtful ways”.*

This type of insight presents institutions with the opportunity to take advantage of new and innovative opportunities. For example, a governor has reported that at the college they represent

*“The principal has a collaborative style and ways of working in the locality, and as governors we scan the horizon and think about partnerships and pressures and strategic opportunities for the college to make a difference for students and employers – often in concert with other organisations”.*

## 4. Aspects of Innovative Governance: Specific Propositions



# SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The research has uncovered a number of key findings in relation to innovative governance:

- Being open to new ideas is the first step in the innovation process. By continually questioning the way they function, Boards introduce the possibility of improving their approaches to governance.
- There is no distinct or correct way to be innovative. However, it is possible to discern what is outstanding within innovative governance in further education.
- Innovation is a relative term; something which might be considered innovative at one institution could be customary practice elsewhere. As a result, sharing experiences amongst governors is a valuable exercise.
- A positive attitude towards taking calculated risks is critical. Some governors have argued that the real risk is failing to innovate in response to a changing environment.
- Different providers have different needs in terms of governance. While there is no universally agreed definition of what good governance should look like, as it is dependent on context. It is evident that innovative approaches to governance can help boards to create and take opportunities and mitigate risks.
- The four key themes for innovative governance: Opportunity and Risk, Purpose of Further Education, Social Justice and Local / National / International Economy are clearly interconnected. This means that they

have to be taken forward in an integrated and coordinated way in order to bring about effective and beneficial change.

- The culture of a Board is of vital importance. Governors are the leaders of the culture and set the tone for everyone else to follow.
- Relationships are central to effective governance. There has to be an effective working relationship between the governors, the senior management team and the clerk.
- Collaboration is perceived as being a continuum that can facilitate innovation, ranging from informal sharing of ideas through to federations and mergers. It has been strongly advocated there should be sound reasoning behind the level of collaboration a college implements.
- FE is in a period of greatly heightened risk and financial pressures, it faces the prospect of significant transition and changes in the future. Governors have a key role to play in successfully responding to this by concentrating on strategic thinking and leadership of the FE system. Careful thinking and review of the right balance of organisational interests with the wider local area interests is a big question for FE governors, and with the impetus being on thriving rather than surviving.

## INNOVATIVE GOVERNANCE: SELF-REFLECTION FRAMEWORK

Further Education governance has changed a great deal in recent years, and continues to change rapidly. Governance has never been so central in ensuring the improvement of educational performance and opportunities for all students, making innovation for positive organisational development increasingly important. Think Piece Five draws on research with a cross-section of governors and sector leaders who have shared their experiences and perspectives on governance. It proposes a Framework for Reviewing Innovative Governance, designed to support boards to assess their own practices and performance, highlighting strengths and potential areas for improvement.

Although being a governor is a rewarding experience, this research has illustrated the increasing demands and responsibilities of the voluntary role. While there are a large number of sources of information and advice available to assist governors, Think Piece Five offers a means for governing bodies to assess their own ability and capacity to innovate. Helping governors to think about improvements and enhancement through considering innovations in their own governance, reflecting upon appropriate new.

The questions in the self-review are designed to help governors reflect on current practice and create the future governance, rather than to cover every aspect of innovative governance. Research findings suggest that looking at the key topics below can help boards to focus upon important areas of innovative governance. The criteria are broken down into the four innovative governance themes: Opportunity and Risk, Purpose of Further

Education, Social Justice and Local/ National/ International Economy.  
 By viewing each of these through the three lenses that have emerged as priorities for focus (collaboration and structures, processes and decision making, and range of people), the self-review framework will assist governing bodies to rate their innovative governance potential.

The questions ask governors to score features of innovation for their governing body as: Excellent - 4; Good - 3; Satisfactory - 2; Weak - 1; Absent - 0, for each criterion depending on how they feel they are performing. There is a column for you to list key evidence, and another action column to detail the activities that will, if necessary, help to move the Board towards excellent. When completed, the framework gives you a RAG rating for each innovative governance theme, and an overall innovative governance potential rating out of 100.

There is a blank action plan at the end of this framework for the board to populate, including relevant timescales and responsibilities, and it can be used to develop the innovative performance of individual governors, including the chair.

## How would you rate your boards performance in relation to each of these themes?

- 
- 4     **Excellent**
  - 3     **Good**
  - 2     **Satisfactory**
  - 1     **Weak**
  - 0     **Absent**

Opportunity and Risk	
<b>Collaboration and structures</b>	
a) Innovation, especially in relation to our governance structures and partnerships, is a regularly part of our agenda and discussions in our Board meetings.	
b) There is strong support, appetite and backbone for innovation in governance, as well as across the organisation, from the senior management team.	
<b>Process and decision making</b>	
c) The board looks outwards to gauge new strategic opportunities and risks, and devotes the majority of its time to steering for the future, not rear-view checking and reporting.	
d) Governors purposefully consider and choose the best methods and processes for them to explore innovative new thinking and ideas.	
<b>Range of people</b>	
e) The college has identified the expertise - and innovative mind sets that are needed for the governing body to achieve its ambitions.	
f) The recruitment process identifies and develops high-potential innovation leaders in governance and the executive.	
<b>Total</b>	

Purpose of Further Education		
Collaboration and structures		
g)	Governors have clearly articulated the college's core purpose and this is reflected in our mission.	
h)	Ways to innovate are purposefully considered when the Board works to create the vision, mission and purpose of the college.	
Process and decision making		
i)	The governing body has clear expectations of roles and responsibilities with regard to introducing innovation and an innovative culture.	
j)	Short term pressures do not dilute attention away from long-term efforts and innovation.	
Range of people		
k)	The size, composition and committee structure (if any committees) of our governing body is conducive to innovative and effective working, new ideas and innovative solutions.	
l)	There is a culture that ensures everyone understands that innovation is a cross-disciplinary and cross-functional process and needs to be led and managed coherently and ambitiously across any 'silos'.	
<b>Total</b>		

Social Justice		
Collaboration and structures		
m)	Governors have a sound understanding of the key networks and groups relating to social justice that the college participates in, and the impact of these on the college.	
n)	All governors have a strong commitment to introducing innovation that will improve outcomes for learners from all backgrounds.	
Process and decision making		
o)	As a Board we have created effective and innovative mechanisms to hear from and inform students, staff and the local community.	
p)	The governing body regularly reviews its committee structure and terms of reference to ensure they meet current needs and are able to introduce innovation to the governing body.	
Range of people		
q)	The governing body has adopted a thorough approach to self-review of its innovation and performance on improving social justice.	
r)	We have a professional clerk who manages the governing Board's induction and development needs, targeted to the needs of members and embedding innovation	
<b>Total</b>		



Local/National/International Economy		
Collaboration and structures		
s)	The college Board benefits from collaboration and learning about innovations in governance in other colleges and sectors including business; locally, nationally and internationally.	
t)	Governors use their business and other wider community links to find innovative ways to support the learning experiences of students, and of staff so they are highly engaged with dynamic businesses to benefit the college.	
<b>Process and decision making</b>		
u)	Information is disseminated to governors inform and in ways which can help them reflect on new and innovative approaches to governance.	
v)	We use innovative approaches to help meet future economic demands.	
<b>Range of people</b>		
w)	Governors are able to clearly evidence the impact of governor training and development on the quality of innovative governance in the college, borrowing and adapting from business, as appropriate.	
x)	Governors bring considerable expertise from the outside world, including business, and vitally direct experience of governance in commercial settings. They are well placed to, and they do, introduce new and innovative ideas to the Board.	
<b>Total</b>		<b>0</b>

y)	Board members, including the chair and chairs of committees, have expertise in innovation and governance, and are prepared to consider new approaches to ways of working and innovative new solutions.
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### Innovative governance theme score:

0 – 8 Red

9 – 16 Amber

17 – 24 Green

### Innovative governance potential rating:

0 – 39% Could benefit from being more innovative

40 – 69% Consider additional way of introducing innovation

70% > keep up the good work

Notes:

**Innovative Governance Action Plan**

Key Strategic Actions for Governors to drive Stronger Innovation	By whom	By when



**emfec**

NOTTINGHAM  
TRENT UNIVERSITY 

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