EDUCATION TRAINING FOUNDATION

Case Study with RNN Group: how does a board know?

Building assurance without losing strategic focus

Boards need enough insight to challenge confidently, especially when colleges face fast-changing pressures around funding, workforce, curriculum and learner need. Their greatest value, however, comes when they use that insight to stay strategic rather than being pulled into operational detail. Paul Lomas, Chair of RNN Group, explains how the board is strengthening the line between assurance and management while keeping strategy, risk and learner impact in view.

This case study accompanies the ETF Governance White Paper and draws on a discussion with Paul and Sarah Connerty, Director of Governance. It is intended to prompt discussion, not prescribe a single answer.

The case illustrates a practical governance challenge: how a board can get close enough to the evidence to understand the organisation, while remaining disciplined about the decisions and behaviours that belong to governance. It also shows how strong working relationships between the board, the Chief Executive and the wider executive team can create the trust, openness and clarity needed for effective oversight.

Assurance starts with a shared direction

RNN Group's strategic plan sets out its purpose and direction over five years. It was developed with input from a broad range of stakeholders, including staff and learners, local authorities and the South Yorkshire and East Midlands combined authorities. Demographic change, skills priorities, government reform and the expectations of regulatory and sector bodies all informed the plan.

For Paul, that does not make strategy a document to revisit periodically. The Group treats it as a continuous feedback loop. Stakeholder conversations and strategy days are used to test whether the assumptions behind the plan still hold. The board's next strategy day will use a stress-testing exercise to explore how changes in the external environment could affect the Group and whether its present direction remains robust.

At RNN Group, that shared direction gives governors a basis for scrutiny. Committee papers identify the connection to the strategic plan and the potential impact on learners. Key performance indicators are aligned to strategic plan outcomes and linked to senior postholder responsibilities, with progress reviewed at every board meeting. This has helped conversations move beyond whether activity has taken place towards whether the evidence shows progress against the outcomes the board has agreed.

Getting under the bonnet without taking the wheel

The boundary between governance and management is not always straightforward. Governors need enough proximity to understand what is happening, particularly where performance requires improvement. Yet detailed involvement can create pressure for staff, blur accountability and pull the board away from the work only it can do.

RNN Group has been working deliberately through that tension. During earlier periods of intervention, a more tactical approach may have been necessary. As the organisation has developed, the board has had to adjust its own behaviour. Paul describes the shift as

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moving from asking for more information to asking the 'so what?' question: what does the evidence mean, what assurance does it provide and what are the implications for strategy?

The link-governor scheme is central to this approach and is focused on the learner experience across the curriculum. Link governors build trusted relationships with executive and senior leaders in the key areas of safeguarding; SEND inclusion and equality, and careers and additional areas including adult skills and apprenticeships, curriculum, higher education and estates. Their role is not to direct delivery. It is to gather insight, test consistency and bring strategically relevant assurance back to the board.

Task and finish groups provide another route when closer attention is warranted. An English and maths group, bringing governors together with senior leaders, has helped the board examine staffing, capacity and performance while preserving executive ownership. Learning walks, events and governor briefings add further evidence. The effect is a richer board conversation: governors can test what lies beneath headline reporting without becoming an additional management tier.

The same openness is evident in the way the executive team works with governors, particularly committee chairs and link governors. Senior leaders share context, evidence and emerging issues transparently, helping governors understand the operational picture well enough to provide proportionate oversight and accountability. In turn, governors use those relationships to deepen assurance, test whether board reporting reflects lived experience and build trust, while remaining clear that accountability for delivery sits with the executive.

Move from receiving data to understanding it

The board recognises that access to data does not automatically create assurance. Reporting has improved, including greater use of trends and sector benchmarks, but Paul sees further work ahead. Governors need to become more comfortable understanding data, interrogating it and recognising when different sources do not tell the same story.

Link governors are helping to triangulate departmental information against reportable college data, testing whether the picture is consistent. Formal data is also considered alongside learning walks, student experience and case studies. This matters because a number on its own may indicate movement without explaining its significance or the experience behind it.

A programme this term will take governors through the learner journey, including the systems and data the college uses at different points. The aim is to strengthen governors' confidence in how information is generated, what it can reliably tell them and where further challenge may be needed. The Group also plans to develop a more accessible board dashboard, an action included in its governance improvement plan alongside work on the Board Assurance Framework.

Digital capability is part of the same discussion. A recent skills audit identified it as an area for development and succession planning. The pace of artificial intelligence and

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technological change raises questions about the board's capability and the effect on learners, curriculum and future skills. Every board will need to keep learning rather than assume that one appointment will settle the issue.

Treat risk as an input to strategy

Paul draws a clear distinction between risk compliance and the strategic management of risk. Operational risks and controls require disciplined oversight through the executive and the Audit and Risk Committee. But the full board also needs to consider how shifts in the risk environment should change its choices.

Workforce risk offers a practical example. Difficulty recruiting English, maths or specialist STEM staff is not simply a vacancy-management issue. It may constrain curriculum delivery, growth and the Group's ability to meet local skills needs. Funding reform, demographic change and emerging technology present similar questions. The strategic issue is not only whether each risk is being managed today, but what the combined picture means for tomorrow's plan and risk appetite.

At RNN Group, the risk-management system is being reviewed with this distinction in mind. The impact will be tested over the coming year. The intended shift is clear: operational compliance should have a strong home, while the full board creates more space to examine how risks and opportunities should influence future direction.

Balance immediate pressure with long term intent

Growth in student numbers has brought this challenge into sharp focus. Strong recruitment is positive, but it also creates immediate questions about capacity, funding, staffing, curriculum and estates. The board must respond to the pressure in front of it without allowing short-term solutions to undermine longer-term priorities.

The strategic plan provides the reference point, while targeted assurance helps governors understand the trade-offs. The English and maths task and finish group is one example of the board concentrating additional attention where growth and staffing pressures intersect. The purpose is not to take the decisions away from leaders, but to make sure the implications are visible and the right questions are being asked.

The Chair creates the conditions for good governance

Paul sees the chair's role as creating clarity and consistency around what governors are there to do. RNN Group's Map of Change brings the board's operating environment onto one page. It connects external drivers to the activities the board will undertake, the outcomes it expects and the impact it wants to see. It also acts as an anchor for assessing whether the board is focusing on the right work and adding value.

The Map is reinforced through the governance improvement plan, agenda design and explicit links between board business, strategic priorities, risks and opportunities. Annual one-to-one reviews, six-month touchpoints and regular communication allow Paul to understand how individual governors are contributing and where support or a different conversation may be needed.

Leadership is deliberately shared. The Vice-Chair focuses on the board's internal workings, while Sarah manages the governance cycle, day-to-day communication and the framework

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within which governors operate. Regular Triumvirate meetings between Paul, Sarah and Jason, the Chief Executive, provide a disciplined space to align governance, strategy and operational insight. The relationship is built on regular communication, appropriate challenge and mutual clarity about roles, and Paul sees it as one of the Group's strengths: a practical model of governance leadership that is recognised across the further education sector as good practice because it creates a dependable bridge between strategy and operations.

That bridge matters because it helps the board hold the executive to account without drawing leadership energy away from delivery. The Chair/CEO relationship provides a route through which strategic intent, operational reality and emerging risks can be discussed honestly and early. It supports executive autonomy, protects leadership bandwidth and helps ensure that board challenge is focused on assurance, outcomes and impact rather than operational direction.

Board development also includes understanding how people work together. RNN Group has used the Insights model to explore governors' working styles and how these affect discussion and decision-making. Strategy days, development sessions and informal dinners involving governors and executives create time to build relationships away from the formal agenda. That investment makes constructive challenge easier when difficult decisions reach the board table.

Use external review to examine impact

The Group has taken a similarly deliberate approach to its external governance review. Time was spent agreeing a scope that would be genuinely useful, supported by a working group and an experienced FE chair who could offer peer insight.

The review asks whether the board is focusing on the right things, at the right time and pace; whether its culture and interaction with the executive drive improvement; how succession is being developed; and what evidence shows that governance adds value and improves outcomes for students.

Framed in this way, external review becomes part of the assurance system. It tests the board's own view of its effectiveness and turns the findings into the governance improvement plan.

Make a demanding role easier to perform well

Time remains one of the biggest constraints. RNN Group has a comparatively young board with many governors in employment. Some can engage in most activities; others have capacity only for mandatory meetings and selected development. The answer cannot be to expect every governor to attend everything.

Sarah has designed a programme that offers different routes into the work. Governors undertake three additional activities each year and can choose from learning walks, events and short twilight briefings. Sessions are recorded, allowing people to engage with the themes most relevant to their roles and availability. Link governors make a deeper commitment in defined areas, while the wider board still benefits from what they learn.

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The Group is also examining avoidable friction. Better executive summaries, clearer links to strategy and learner impact, and more accessible presentation of data can reduce the effort required to find the important issue. The team is considering whether digital tools, including short audio summaries of papers, could help governors prepare more efficiently without diluting the underlying evidence.

Paul believes colleges should be candid at recruitment about the commitment involved. RNN Group has learned to describe the time requirement more realistically rather than understate it. The wider challenge is to remove obstacles that do not add value, so that governors can devote scarce time to understanding, questioning and deciding.

Strong strategy still needs strong foundations

A push towards more strategic governance should not be confused with making compliance secondary. Governance failures rarely arise because a board lacked an ambitious strategy alone. Weak controls, unclear accountability and gaps in oversight can destabilise an organisation before strategic intent has the chance to deliver.

The task is therefore to build a strong framework that gives governors confidence to operate at the right level. The chair and governance professional are critical to that balance. Clear processes, focused papers and reliable assurance create the space for strategic discussion; they do not compete with it.

For Paul, effective governors combine commitment to the purpose of further education with the judgement to challenge, scrutinise and support. They do not need to know everything. They do need to keep learning, understand how evidence fits together and ask the question that moves the discussion forward.

Question, question, question, but at the right level

That principle runs through RNN Group's approach. Strategy provides the direction, triangulation builds confidence in the evidence, and a disciplined governance framework keeps responsibility in the right place. The result is not a board that stands further away from the college, but one that is better able to focus its time, challenge and collective judgement where they will add the greatest value.

Key takeaways for boards

- Assurance is strongest when it is anchored in agreed strategy and learner impact.
- Governors need routes into the evidence, but those routes should strengthen assurance, trust and accountability rather than replace executive responsibility.
- Data, visits, stakeholder insight and external review are most useful when they are triangulated into a coherent assurance picture.
- A strategic board still depends on strong foundations: focused papers, clear roles, reliable controls and disciplined agenda design.

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- Strong relationships between the Chair, CEO, Director of Governance and Executive Team can connect strategy and operations while protecting leadership bandwidth and autonomy.

Questions for boards

- Can governors explain how the information they receive connects to strategy and learner impact?
- Where does assurance activity risk crossing the line into operational involvement?
- How do the Chair, CEO and Director of Governance maintain a relationship that bridges strategy and operations without blurring accountability?
- Does the board use risk to shape future choices, or mainly to monitor present controls?
- Which obstacles could be removed to help governors use their limited time more effectively?

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Thank you

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