

Minutes of Meeting



CORPORATION BOARD

TUESDAY 9 DECEMBER 2025 AT 2PM IN RYE HILL HOUSE, SOUTHWARK COLLEGE
AND VIA TEAMS

Corporation Board Members		Attendance	
Full Name	Position	Attended	Apologies
John Widdowson	Chair of Corporation	X	
Vikki Smith	Independent Governor and Vice Chair	X	
Liz Bromley	CEO – Ex-Officio Governor	X	
Rob Holt	Independent Governor		X
Chris McCourt	Independent Governor	X	
Darren Crossley	Independent Governor	X	
Lisa Gregg	Independent Governor	X ^{^*}	
Chris Wigginton	Independent Governor		X
Andrew Young	Independent Governor		X
Joanne Marshall	Independent Governor	X ^{^*}	
Andrew Forrest	Independent Governor	X	
Ian Dunn	Independent Governor	X	
Paul Fitton	Independent Governor	X	
Raghu Vydyanath	Independent Governor	X	
Louise Humpish	Independent Governor	X [*]	
Chris Byrne	Staff Governor		X
Sally McMahon	Staff Governor	X	
Conor Allen	Student Governor	X	
Karrar Swadi	Student Governor		X
In Attendance			
Tony Lewin	Executive Principal – Curriculum	X	
Gerard Garvey	Executive Principal – People & Culture	X	
Steven Wallis	Executive Director of Quality	X	
Scott Mulholland	Chief Information, Data & Estates Officer (CIDEO)	X [*]	
Lisa Sproats	Chief Finance Officer (CFO)	X	
Jon Ridley	Principal - Newcastle College, Executive Lead (HE)	X	
Claire MacLean	Executive Director – Business Development & External Engagement	X [^]	
Lynne Griffin	Director – People & Development	X	
Simon Ross	Principal – Newcastle Sixth Form College (observer)	X	
Matthew Bell	Student Governor (incoming)	X	
Tyler James Rutter	Student Governor (incoming)	X	
Jane Farrelly	Director of Governance	X	
Beverley Gray	Governance Officer	X	
David Hoose	Forvis Mazars (item 4.1 only)	X ^{^*}	

*attended part of meeting / ^attended virtually

Item	Agenda Item
1.	Opening Items
1.1	Opening and Welcome
The Chair welcomed all those present.	
1.2	Apologies for Absence
Apologies were received from Independent Governors Chris Wigginton, Andrew Young and Rob Holt, Staff Governor Chris Byrne and Student Governor Karrar Swadi.	
1.3	Declarations of Interest
Members were asked if they had any interests to declare in relation to the planned agenda items, however members confirmed that there was nothing new to declare.	
1.4	Update from the Chair on Board Matters
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Chair advised members of the recent launch of the NCG and Purpose Coalition “Breaking Down Barriers” report in the House of Commons. The launch was well-attended and the report serves to raise the profile of further education. • The Chair recently attended the launch of the “Young Lives Young Futures” report in the House of Lords. This study investigates how England’s vocational education and training system can better support the aspirations of young people who don’t go to university. A link to both reports would be shared with the Corporation. • The Chair attended the annual AoC Conference in Birmingham along with many NCG executive colleagues and one of the Corporation Student Governors. The event provided many useful networking opportunities. • The sector continues to be subject to ever-tightening regulatory controls, particularly in the HE space. The Council of University Chairs is currently reviewing it’s Code of Governance which will impact on those FE colleges providing HE. <p>Action CB A66: Links to the Breaking Down Barriers and Young Lives Young Futures reports to be shared with the Corporation.</p>	

2.	CEG Report
2.1	Chief Executive Group Report
The Board received the Chief Executive Group’s (CEG) report from the Executive Principal (Curriculum) and noted the key points as follows:	

- The sector continues to be inundated with policy changes, such that the Business Development team have created the FE Complexity Map to demonstrate how the changes interact with each other and impact on further education.
- The most significant policy development is the Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper which heralds some fundamental shifts within the education landscape including the introduction of V Levels, greater expectation for colleges to award their own Higher Technical qualifications, CPD for teaching staff, and a clear tightening up of the regulations for HE.
- The government has also announced the introduction of Regional Improvement Teams (RITs) to support college improvement, including how they meet skills needs of their communities, and drive attendance and standards. It appears that the RITs will align to the geographical areas currently covered by the FE Commissioner team although it is not yet clear how the two will interact.
- The White Paper is currently out for consultation and NCG will input to the consultation.
- The new Higher Education Centre Limited (HECL) has opened in Canary Wharf in London. Subject to the success of this campus model, there may be scope to adopt a similar model in other locations.
- The 4% pay award was well-received by staff. UCU balloted for strike action but the turnout across NCG was not sufficient for a mandate to strike. Relations with the unions remain strong.
- Members of the executive team recently visited the National Robotarium in Edinburgh to see AI and robotics in action. This has sparked much conversation around the impact of AI on the curriculum and ways of working.
- A partner awarding organisation (NCFE) recently fell victim to a cyber-attack. While they have recovered speedily, there was nonetheless a major impact on their organisation as well as on their governance.
- Redevelopment of the Lewisham and Newcastle campuses continues at pace. It is anticipated that the Discovery School will be formally returned to NCG in the coming weeks which is a key component of the Newcastle infrastructure plan.
- The DfE investigation into the Elizabeth School London has concluded and the final report issued.

The Board, having noted the key points above and the contents of the report, queried the following:

- **Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper** – the Board noted that if the post-consultation outcome is that the White Paper remains in its current form, it will be a huge step change in terms of the impact on colleges.
- **DfE Regional Improvement Teams** – the CEO noted that the implementation of these teams reinforces the perception that schools and universities are ‘good’, while FE requires the supervision of improvement teams as part of its general regulation. She reported that a local MP is a former FE teacher who she is keen to work with, in order to raise the profile of FE in parliament.
- **AI** – student members present noted the current anxiety around future job prospects as a result of the advent of AI. While it is a cause for concern, students reported that certain sectors are vocal about the ‘human focus’ of their business. The Board noted that NCG will need to

maintain a careful eye on AI as it continues to evolve and impact on various aspects of the organisation.

- **ESL Investigation Report** – the Board noted that the DfE has requested that NCG provide the Secretary of State with a plan which has been signed off by the Board, by 30 January 2026. The Board noted that there was nothing of concern to note for NCG within the report and were content to approve the plan via email in January 2026. The Chair noted the length of the investigation (8 months) and the significant amount of NCG resource that had been required to support the investigation. The Board thanked the Executive Lead (HE) and Deputy Principal (HE) and their team for their hard work and efforts in supporting the DfE investigation.

Action CB A67: NCG response to the DfE ESL Investigation to be circulated for approval by the Board in January 2026, prior to submission to the Secretary of State.

3. Strategic Deep Dive

3.1 Report on Quality incl. 2024/25 Self-Assessment Report

The Board received the Report on Quality including the 2024/25 Self-Assessment Report (SAR) from the Executive Director of Quality and noted the key points as follows:

- The annual production of a SAR is not technically required nor is there a set format but is recognised as standard practice across the sector with most colleagues aligning with the Ofsted framework. The document is then a useful starting point for Ofsted should they inspect, and it also provides a record of the performance and quality for the academic year in scope.
- The SAR is a college’s own evaluation of how well it has performed over the year, covering themes of quality of teaching, learner outcomes, leadership, skills and overall effectiveness. It is helpful as a milestone report as it identifies strengths, areas for improvement (Afls) and sets priorities for improvement (which are then framed as lines of enquiry to monitor progress throughout the following year).
- The SAR provides a holistic view of NCG in terms of strengths and areas for improvement and includes a high-level view of individual college SARs also (noting that the detailed college SARs are reviewed by external critical friends, the NCG executive and individual college boards).
- The SAR was reviewed by the FE Quality & Students Committee at their recent meeting who advised upon the key lines of enquiry for 2025/26. This is good practice as Governors are setting the reporting priorities, so that key themes are consistently tracked and monitored by Governors.
- The 2024-25 SAR presents a positive picture of a confident group making good progress in quality of education and student outcomes. Whilst there are no significant weaknesses, the areas for continuous improvement are highlighted, and tend to reflect the challenges in the wider sector. For example, pockets of attendance that falls below expectations, and working to deliver outcomes above national averages in English and maths. For 2025/26, NCG will also work on delivering more high grades in diplomas, A levels and T levels.

- Because the SAR is a retrospective document, it is also the last SAR that aligns to the old Ofsted framework. Future SARs will be aligned to the new Ofsted inspection toolkit which is also focussed on standards.

The Board, having noted the key points above and the contents of the report, queried the following:

- **Progress against previous lines of enquiry** – the Board noted that progress against previous lines of enquiry is also contained within the SAR so the Board can be assured around progress.
- **Teaching, Learning and Assessment (TLA)** – the Board noted that NCG has adopted a standards-based approach which includes the development of a unifying standard for TLA across NCG. The Executive Director of Quality advised that this move to standards will serve NCG well in the new Ofsted framework which is also now standards based, however some realignment will be required when the Quality Plan is updated in 2026.
- **External Environment** – the Board noted the volume of change proposed in the Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper which lack detail, will result in significant change in condensed timescales, and the challenges that will bring to a Group with the size, geography and demographic profile of NCG. The Executive Director of Quality reported that updates on the White Paper and the implications will be reported and sequenced throughout the year, either in the quality or curriculum reports so that Governors are aware of the proposed changes, timescales, and the associated impact. The Executive Principal, Curriculum, will provide a briefing to NCG’s governance community in December.
- **College Boards** – the Chair reported that he had met with the College Board Chairs, who would benefit from seeing the final SAR, in order to contextualise their own college SAR.
- **New Ofsted Framework** – the Board noted that Ofsted have commenced inspection under the new framework. Single word judgements have been removed in favour of a report card with a 5-point grading scale for each judgement area. Reports for those colleges who have been inspected under the new framework are expected in January, although the piloted colleges have been generous in sharing their informal feedback with colleagues across the sector.
- **Quality Update** – with regards to the in-year performance update provided in the paper, a member queried the RAG-rating of some areas and suggested that a comparison to the last performance window would be helpful in terms of providing additional context for Board members. The Executive Director noted that this was available in the summary notes, but will review the reports for clarity.

Decision CB D217: The Board approved the 2024/25 Self-Assessment Report as presented and the 2025/26 Key Lines of Enquiry.

Action CB A68: Performance reporting to include comparative data (e.g. last reporting window or same time last year) to provide additional context and assurance to members.

4. Items for Approval

4.1 2024/25 Financial Statements

Meeting note: David Hoose from Forvis Mazars was in attendance for this item.

The Board received the 2024/25 Financial Statements and associated documents from the CFO and external auditor and noted the key points as follows:

- The work on regularity has completed with no matters arising.
- There has been a clean audit opinion and clean regularity opinion.
- There were no significant risks to note and nothing to raise in terms of actual or potential adjustments.

The Board, having noted the contents of the paper and the key points above, discussed the following:

- The Audit & Risk Committee Chair confirmed that the statements had been reviewed at Audit & Risk Committee who proposed some amendments around a related party transaction and presentational issues relating to the going concern status. The Board noted that reported losses are a structural balance sheet issue and largely due to substantial depreciation charges. They are not considered a risk to NCG's underlying financial performance and the cash position is healthy.

Decision CB D218: The Corporation approved the 2024/25 Financial Statements.

4.2 2024/25 Audit & Risk Committee Annual Report

The Board received the 2024/25 Audit & Risk Committee Annual Report from the Director of Governance / Chair of Audit & Risk Committee and noted the key points as follows:

- The report summarised the work of the Audit & Risk Committee throughout the year. It is required by the College Financial Handbook and College Accounts Direction and must be submitted to the DfE alongside the financial statements.
- The Chair of the Audit & Risk Committee noted that it would be helpful for the Chairs of both the Audit and Finance Committees to meet, to review reporting arrangements and to ensure that items are being reviewed at the appropriate Committee and that this should be reflected in the report.

Decision CB D219: The Board approved the 2024/25 Annual Report of the Audit & Risk Committee subject to narrative around collaboration between Audit and Finance Committees being added.

4.3	2024/25 Internal Audit Annual Report
<p>The Board received the 2024/25 Internal Audit Annual Report from the CFO and noted the key points as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The report outlined the internal audit work carried out for the year ended 31st July 2025 and presents the internal audit view on the adequacy and effectiveness of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Governance, Risk Management and Control; and • Economy, Efficiency and Effectiveness (Value for Money) arrangements. • The opinion of the Director of Business Assurance & was that governance, risk management & control, and value for money arrangements in relation to business-critical areas were generally satisfactory with some improvements required. <p>Decision CB D220: The Board approved the 2024/25 Internal Audit Annual Report.</p>	
4.4	Strategic Risk Register
<p>The Board received the Strategic Risk Register from the CFO and noted the key points as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The scores for cyber and data were amended since the last report to the Corporation. • A session on risk with the executive team is planned for January 2026, where the executives will review the appropriateness of the content and ratings of the current register. <p>The Board, having noted the contents of the paper and the key points above, queried the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic Opportunities – a member queried whether NCG holds a list of identified opportunities as well as risks. The CEO advised that opportunity identification and management is a continuous effort by all executives. The Chair noted that an articulation of the opportunities might be helpful to inform the next Board strategy session. <p>Action CB A69: The executive team to develop a list of strategic opportunities which might inform a discussion at the next Board strategy session.</p> <p>Decision CB D221: The Board approved the strategic risk register.</p>	
4.5	Governance Matters
<p>The Board received the report on Governance Matters and noted the following key points:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Following a revised approach to the recruitment of Student Governors for 2025/26, two Student Governors (Matthew Bell and Tyler James Rutter) were presented for appointment. • Committee membership had been reviewed and amended following the departure of a Governor in September 2025 to ensure adequate and appropriate oversight according to the available skill mix. • NCG has adopted the AoC Senior Post Holder (SPH) Remuneration Code which includes the requirement that FE Corporations must publish a readily accessible annual statement on SPH 	

remuneration. The Annual Statement to the Governing Body was presented for the Corporation's review and approval. This was reviewed and endorsed by the Appraisal & Remuneration Committee at their meeting of 3 December 2025.

Learner Voice

The Board noted the open action on the Corporation action register relating to Learner Voice and received an update from the Director of Governance. The Director of Governance reported that work continues to strengthen and embed learner voice in the relevant governance structures (e.g. at Corporation, College Boards and Committees). Student Change-Making leaders Unloc recently facilitated a development session with student leaders from all of NCG's colleges, including higher education. It is planned to establish a cross-NCG student forum for student leaders from all seven colleges as well as a forum staff working in student voice across NCG. The Board noted the challenges in capturing learner voice from 35,000 students from seven very different college communities but noted the potential of technology (particularly AI) to extract meaningful information from data this already being captured.

Decision CB D222: The Board approved the appointments of Matthew Bell and Tyler James Rutter as the FE and HE Student Governors for 2025/26.

Decision CB D223: The Board approved the 2025/26 Committee membership as presented.

Decision CB D224: The Board approved the 2024/25 SPH Remuneration Annual Statement to the Governing Body.

4.6 2024/25 Gender Pay Gap Report

The Board received the 2024/25 Gender Pay Gap Report from the Director of People & Development and noted the key points as follows:

- The 2024/2025 GPG report had been brought forward this year to allow sufficient governance and executive scrutiny in time for the required publishing deadline of 31st March 2026.
- In this period the workforce consisted of 2,641 colleagues – 1,628 (62%) female and 1013 (38%) male.
- The disproportionate number of part-time and term-time female colleagues at the lower end of the pay scale has impacted the mean and median pay gaps.

The Board, having noted the contents of the paper and the key points above, queried the following:

- **Job Evaluation** - the ongoing job evaluation project will address some of these anomalies and provide transparency around pay-grades.

Decision CB D225: The Board approved the 2024/25 Gender Pay Gap Report.

4.7	Report on Financial Health & Operations incl. Financial Regulations for approval
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The Board received the Report on Financial Health & Operations from the CFO and noted the key points as follows:

- The Q1 forecast is underway, accounts compare to the budget, outturn is favourable and this is expected to continue full year.
- Capital spend was rag-rated amber, due to the March 31 deadline for expenditure of capital grants. The Finance team continue to work closely with the Estates team to support and monitor delivery of established projects and identify contingency projects that can be accelerated if needed to ensure funds are utilised.
- The cash position continues to be favourable with interest being earned through the use of an investment platform.
- The DfE ILR Data has audit concluded after 11 months. With an error rate of less than 5%, the conclusion was satisfactory.
- An anomaly relating to approval thresholds has been identified in the Financial Regulations. The expenditure threshold required for Corporation approval (£5m and above) remains unchanged, however the conflicting note has been removed and the amended Financial Regulations were presented for approval.

The Board, having noted the contents of the paper and the key points above, queried the following:

- **Financial Regulations** – the Board noted the significant amount of redevelopment work taking place across the NCG estate, in particular at Newcastle and Lewisham and were content with the amendments to the Financial Regulations.

Decision CB D226: The Board approved the amendments to the Financial Regulations.

5. Items for Assurance

5.1	Learner Recruitment
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The Board received an update on Learner Recruitment from the Executive Principal (Curriculum and noted the key points as follows:

- Enrolment for 16–18-year-olds has exceeded the 2025/26 funding allocation and successfully achieved the 3% growth target.
- Adult learner enrolments have commenced strongly and remain on track to meet the funding allocation by year-end. To date, approximately 20,000 enrolments have been completed, reflecting a strong start to the year.

- The adult funding environment is hugely complex for NCG as it requires NCG to operate across multiple national and regional authorities with often different funding rules in place. In addition, adult enrolments vary significantly in funding value. The challenge for NCG is to ensure that adult funds are meeting local skills needs and to not over-spend as there is no lagged funding for adult funding.
- ESOL provision currently accounts for approximately 60% of the overall NCG adult fund.

Meeting note: Independent Governors Joanne Marshall and Louise Humpish left the meeting. The meeting remained quorate.

The Board, having noted the contents of the paper and the key points above, queried the following:

- **Local Funding Authority Engagement** – a member queried how this managed in NCG and whether it is the executive or the local college principal who engages in their region. The Executive Principal (Curriculum) advised that Principals are responsible for engaging in their region to ensure that provision aligns to and reflects the requirements of the Local Skills Improvement Plan. The Board noted that the new RITs will have the authority to convene meetings of combined authorities, employers, colleges and universities but that there is potential for conflict whether regional authorities within an area have different priorities. Members noted that colleges are funded competitively but need to work in collaboration to agree provision as not every college can service every priority identified in the Local Skills Improvement Plan, in addition to regional and national priorities. Members also noted that each authority can create their own framework and that this impacts the cost of doing business for NCG who deal with multiple authorities in different regions.
- **Non-priority areas** – the Board discussed the importance of continuing to provide courses in non-priority sectors as these are often demand-led and include students who may not otherwise engage in education and become NEET.
- **T-Levels** – the Executive Principal advised that these had under-recruited but will become a bigger area of focus, now that their future has been confirmed in the White Paper.

5.2	2024/25 GDPR Annual Report
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The Board received the 2024/25 GDPR Annual Report from the CFO. The CFO reported that there has been a significant increase in the number of subject access requests received as well as the number of data breaches reported. It is thought the increase in the number of reported data breaches is a consequence of training rollout to staff during the year, such that staff are more aware of and confident in reporting data breaches. It is believed that AI may be a contributor to the increase in the number of subject access requests.

5.3	2024/25 Freedom of Information Annual Report
<p>The Board received the 2024/25 Annual Report on Freedom of Information FOI from the Director of Governance, noting that this was the first annual report on FOI. The Director of Governance advised that FOI requests remain relatively low (22 in 2024/25) with some press-related requests following stories in the national media around higher education franchising. Compliance with the 20-day statutory deadline was below target and would be an area of focus for 2025/26.</p>	
5.4	Committee Assurance & Escalation Reports
<p>Committee Chair's presented their Assurance & Escalation Reports as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finance & Resources – the Chair was not in attendance to speak to this report, however the board noted that an Integrated Facilities Management (IFM) tender would be coming to the Board for approval in 2026. • People & Culture – this report was presented by the Vice Chair. She reported that NCG continues do a lot of work around staff wellbeing and leadership. The Committee received a presentation on the people implications of the new HE Campus Centre and had a useful discussion on AI and how this will impact the workforce. • Higher Education Governance – the Chair reported the only item for the Board to note were teething issues relating to the opening of the Higher Education Centre Limited campus which will continue to be monitored by the Committee. • FE Quality & Students – the Chair advised that the major item for review had been the SAR which was discussed elsewhere on the agenda. • Audit & Risk Committee – the Chair advised that the majority of items reviewed had already featured on this agenda and there was nothing else to raise. 	
5.5	College Board Assurance & Escalation Reports
<p>The Executive Principals spoke to the reports relating to their respective colleges. The Board noted the key points as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lewisham had invited an external speaker from the DWP to speak to the Get Britain Working strategy. • The Sixth Form College Board, although the largest in number, remains without a Chair. • The Sixth Form is exploring a partnership with a charitable organisation which would result in funding to support high-potential students. • The place-based governance model continues to embed well although discussions sometimes focus on performance issues such as English and maths and attendance, at the expense of discussions which utilise members local knowledge and expertise. <p>In addition to the points discussed above, the Corporation Chair reported back on the recent College Board Chair's meeting. Chairs are keen to receive a simplified quality scorecard for their college. Chairs also queried the role of college boards in safeguarding. The Director of Governance agreed to explore college board quality reporting with the Executive Director of Quality and review safeguarding reporting arrangements in consideration of the agreed governance framework.</p>	

Action CB A70: Director of Governance to explore college board quality reporting with the Executive Director of Quality and review safeguarding reporting arrangements in consideration of the agreed governance framework.

6. Minutes and Action Register

6.1 Minutes of Previous Meeting – 23 September

Decision: CB D227: The Board reviewed and approved the minutes of the meeting held on 23 September 2025 as an accurate record.

6.2 Register of Actions & Decisions

The Board received the Register of Actions and Decisions and noted that there were six open actions as follows:

- the long-standing action relating to reclassification which remains open.
- an action relating to an independent audit of HE partner recruitment practices (on the audit plan for 2025/26, not yet due).
- an action on Learner Voice which was covered in the Governance Matters update.
- an action for a lessons learned report on HE franchising which was not yet due.
- an action to discuss social mobility on a future agenda.
- an action re: medical insurance which was covered in the REMCO report and which could be closed off.

In addition, the Board noted that a report on exam costs for special access arrangements had been provided and therefore this action had been closed off.

7. Closing Items

7.1 AOB

There was no other business raised.

7.2 Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Corporation Board will take place in person at 2pm on Tuesday 24 March 2026 at 2pm in Rye Hill House.