



Department  
for Education

# **Effective senior post holder appraisal and chair performance review**

**March 2025**

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## Purpose

This guidance has been written to provide support to FE Governing Bodies in undertaking effective appraisals of senior postholders and governance professionals and to ensure that there is regular and constructive review of the performance of chairs.

This guidance will help you to:

- review your procedures to ensure best practice and compliance with your adopted code of good governance.
- fulfil your board's duty to deliver college strategic aims through the efficient use of resources and supporting and holding senior leadership to account.
- implement change to drive team and individual performance and growth.

It is guidance written by the sector for the sector to seek to reduce variability in approach across colleges and spread effective practice.

## How to use this guidance

Use the guidance as a supportive tool. It is not prescriptive and can be applied to any college according to its size, complexity and circumstances. Its checklist approach is intended to support colleges to self-identify skill gaps and to spread effective practice captured from peers across the sector.

## Executive summary

The guidance identifies 4 principles that inform effective Senior Post Holder (SPH) appraisals and regular review of chair performance.

1. Purpose – have a clear purpose that links to the bigger strategic picture.
2. Process – design & implement a clear, transparent and fair evidence led process.
3. People – ensure the system is owned and delivered by competent and trained governors.
4. Pay, Progression & Professional development – performance appraisal should be one element that informs fair and appropriate remuneration for SPHs and opportunities for enrichment of skills for both SPHs and chairs.

Each principle is described by way of a checklist of questions for colleges to consider, supplemented by examples of effective practice. A scenario study is set out as an Appendix to show how using the checklist might lead to a clear action plan for improvement. The examples are not intended to limit innovation but to share ways of working in the sector that are driving good governance. There is no 'one right way.'

## Senior post holders (SPHs)

The governing body/board is responsible for the selection, appointment, grading, suspension, dismissal and determination of pay and conditions of service of senior postholders (SPHs) and the governance professional (GP). SPHs were introduced into the sector as a check and balance to ensure key employment decisions relating to key posts are taken by the board and that key postholders have a direct responsibility to the Board. For other staff members the Principal/CEO is responsible within the framework set by the board.

The college instrument, articles of government and standing orders will define senior posts – usually the Principal/CEO and such other posts as the corporation may decide.

## Checklist

### **Which posts do you designate as Senior Post Holders (SPH)? Is this reviewed from time to time?**

The Principal/CEO and the Chief Operating Officer (or equivalent post with responsibility for Finance) are generally designated as SPHs. The board has the same responsibilities for a GP whether or not they are designated a SPH. Senior management/leadership teams may not all be SPHs.

### **Does your governing body satisfy its duties to SPHs?**

The board is responsible for the formal appraisal of SPHs and the GP. It is common practice for the Chair of Corporation to undertake appraisal meetings with the Principal/CEO and the GP (acting as line manager) on behalf of the board but for the Principal/CEO to act as day-to-day line manager and undertake appraisals for other SPHs. To ensure that the governing body satisfies its duties to SPHs all relevant documentation concerning SPHs (including outcomes of appraisals) should be signed off by board (generally following detailed consideration by the relevant Committee).

## Guiding principles

This guidance sets out four key principles that inform effective SPH and GP appraisal and chair performance review.

1. Purpose – have a clear purpose that links to the bigger strategic picture.
2. Process – design & implement a clear, transparent and fair evidence led process.
3. People – ensure roles are undertaken by competent and trained governors.
4. Pay, Progression & Professional development – performance appraisal should inform fair and appropriate remuneration and opportunities for enrichment of skills.

Each principle is described by way of a suite of effective practice for colleges to consider. These examples of effective practice are not intended to limit innovation but to share ways of working in the sector that are driving good governance. There is no 'one right way'.

The guidance is structured to consider SPH appraisal first and then chair performance review. The appendix uses a scenario study to show how use of the checklist approach might inform a board action plan for improvement.

# Senior post holder & governance professionals appraisals

## Purpose

### Have a clear purpose that links to the bigger strategic picture

Effective appraisals align individual goals with organisational goals, linking individual performance to the bigger strategic picture. Aligning appraisal discussions and targets to organisational goals and strategic expectations can provide a golden thread that ensures appraisals play a core role in college development and achievement. Having a clear purpose that links with the college's values and aims will help create an appropriate tone to ensure that the desired outcome of the appraisal process is the delivery of college strategy.

## Checklist

### Do appraisals align individual and organisational goals linking individual performance to the wider college strategic picture?

Many boards use the college strategic plan, risk register, annual accountability statement and KPIs set by the board as the starting point for CEO and GP accountability, alongside any college governance improvement plan and external board review findings for GPs. These key documents can help define 'the what' in terms of successful outcomes and objectives.

### Do appraisals focus on 'the how' as well as 'the what'?

Defining 'the how' is also important to drive the right behaviour and organisational culture – seeing the CEO and other SPHs as role models of how College culture manifests itself can be useful. What kind of leaders are aspired to? What values and behaviours facilitate a positive college working culture? And which do not? How is succession planning and development achieved across the wider college management team? What behaviours does a top performing team working in collaboration with others manifest? The ETF Professional Standards for CEOs/Principals and the ETF Competency Framework for governance professionals can be useful checklists against which to discuss and assess performance.

## **Do appraisals create a safe, constructive space for continuous improvement?**

The constructive appraisal of SPHs/GPs sets a tone of continuous improvement for appraisal across the college. An effective appraisal should support the SPH/GP to develop as a sector leader and be a supportive, constructive and a 2-way open conversation. An appraisal should build on in year performance management and not generally raise performance issues not previously discussed. If there is an issue of underperformance it is important to recognise this early in order to provide appropriate support and training. Identifying professional development needs is also key to the bigger picture.

## Process

### **Design & implement a clear, transparent and fair evidence led process**

The process for SPH/GP appraisal needs to be clear, transparent, fair and evidence led.

## Checklist

### **Is SPH appraisal a regular constructive performance conversation? Is communication two way?**

Effective appraisal is not an annual one-off event. Where it works well it is usually iterative and regular with a 'no surprises' approach - a constructive performance conversation with a consolidated annual review. Effective 2-way communication is key to create a safe environment not a critical space.

### **Is your process well defined and consistently applied?**

Clarity is best achieved through a defined process. Using the college-wide system applicable to staff (with any appropriate modification) can provide consistency and demonstrate a commitment to equal treatment. There are many methods of appraisal which vary in formality and can incorporate tools such as self-appraisal. Advance completion of a self -assessment template can be a useful mechanism for identifying progress against objectives and any significant variances in the views of appraiser and appraisee and help structure conversations. Timing of meetings is important to ensure that relevant up to date data on college performance and strategic direction is available.

### **Do you prepare well?**

Preparation for appraisal discussions and making the time for face-to-face meetings is important, setting a tone of continuous improvement and a psychologically safe environment for performance conversations. Arrange meetings well in advance, avoid postponements and always prepare. Ensure the venue has as few distractions as possible. Give notice of dates and be clear on the agreed process in advance. If there is a self-appraisal form, ensure a timetable is agreed well in advance of the meeting so that you can properly consider it.

### **Do you have a structure for appraisal meetings?**

If there is an effective college-wide appraisal system this can provide a useful and consistent structure. If not, then a useful structure for appraisal discussions is to look back and then forwards. Many chairs find this format helpful:

- discuss past performance and future expectations.
- review performance against previously set objectives.
- set new objectives to work towards
- establish any training and development needs and opportunities.
- document a written record of discussion.

Listen and encourage a 2-way open discussion. Try not to interrupt or dominate the discussion. Ask open questions about performance what has gone well? What could have been better? Do not underestimate the value of thanks and praise for areas that have been complex or have delivered well. Do not avoid any issues of under performance and focus on establishing a good working relationship. Acknowledge self-reflection and steer conversation towards what support might be beneficial. Many chairs reflect that a coaching style is effective.

## Checklist

### How will you measure progress against objectives?

How will you know if progress has been delivered when you look back? What sources of data will you use? Qualitative feedback can be as rich a source of data as quantitative data. Some useful data sources include Ofsted reports, annual strategic conversation letters, surveys (stakeholder, staff and students), self -review, audited accounts, KPIs. Setting a range of acceptable outcomes so that performance does not rest on delivery of one hard metric which might turn out to be out of the SPH's control can be an effective way to ensure evaluation is rounded and evidence led. Covering 'the how' and 'the what' will ensure organisational culture and performance delivery have equal focus.

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## **Is training and development a focus of appraisals?**

What does the appraisee identify as appropriate training & development? The following questions are used by some chairs to encourage discussion that leads to identifying actions that will enhance performance:

- gaps in up-to-date knowledge of effective, contemporary educational pedagogy, policy and best in class expectations?
- professional understanding goes beyond teaching and learning. Is there a detailed understanding of the wider FE landscape including ethical, legislative, financial, sustainable and quality considerations?
- is there an agile approach to adapting to address external and internal factors? Including risk and assurance?
- is there an emotional maturity and resilience demonstrated to others? Is talent of others well managed?
- is there role modelling of values – including work/life balance, a positive ambassador for the college and the sector (at a local and national level) and recognition of different ways of working?

## **Do appraisals take into account feedback, including from governors and staff?**

Involving other governors (including staff and student governors) is usually key to an inclusive and transparent process. Many chairs involve a vice chair or chairs of committees, some hold a conversation at remuneration committee. Some take a 180-degree approach and seek feedback from executive staff or even 360 degrees with feedback from partners. These wider processes can add a rich layer of evidence about behaviours and abilities outside of the narrow college environment, but they need to be proportionate and not overly time consuming (perhaps every few years not annually).

## **Are appraisal meetings adequately documented?**

Documenting the dialogue is important. Using college wide systems can be helpful. Agree who will produce a draft, agree a timetable and ensure the opportunity for comment and change is available after reflection on the draft. If there is disagreement record it. The outcome of annual appraisal should be reported to board often via a remuneration committee (or committee with oversight/responsibility for reviewing SPH matters).

## People

### Ensure roles are undertaken by competent and trained governors

Governors are involved in a number of ways in the appraisal process. Each of these roles has a different purpose and therefore a different ideal skill set.

- the Chair of Corporation as appraiser (or other relevant governor responsible for appraisals)
- governors as consultees to the chair and as members of the board undertaking their duties in overseeing SPH and GP appraisal outcomes.

## Checklist

### Are governors adequately trained to perform roles effectively?

Adequate training to ensure that governors can perform their roles in a competent way is essential. Skills audits can usefully self-assess competency to deliver these roles in order to identify any gaps that can be filled by training and development.

- an effective governor as appraiser needs to create a psychologically safe space with clarity of role, clarity of expectations and application of clear and fair judgement in an open and inclusive way. Many chairs report that coaching skills and dealing with conflict as well as appraisal training have been beneficial in building their skills base. Some report that discussion with another governor to prepare in a safe confidential environment has improved confidence (for example a vice chair or other governor with a strong HR skills base)
- governors as consultees to the chair need to provide opinion on performance backed by objective evidence-based examples. Targeted training enhances governor skill and confidence to provide constructive feedback on achievements but also on things that could be improved. Training on college-wide systems may also be useful.
- the governing body needs to apply college policy, be aware of regulatory requirements, seek to avoid bias and comply with the principles in their adopted code of governance when considering appraisal outcomes. Many report that having a preparation session with the GP or senior college HR professional is beneficial as well as unconscious bias, safer recruitment and decision-making training.
- a minority of colleges appoint a governor, often known as a Senior Independent Governor (SIG), to lead the board in the performance review of SPHs and the

chair and act as trusted intermediary. This could be someone with specialist HR and conflict resolution skills or extensive management experience.

### **Do the governing professionals support governors in the appraisal process?**

An informed and trusted GP should ensure that governors are well supported in undertaking these roles and help identify appropriate induction, training and succession planning. GPs should respect confidentiality. A GP should be alert to a process that seems to be overly led by the SPH, is tokenistic or is not based on the core principles set out in this guidance. They should be confident and supported by the board in raising issues and identifying opportunities for improvement.

## **Pay, progression & professional development**

### **Performance appraisal should inform fair and appropriate remuneration and opportunities for enrichment of skills**

There is a reputational risk to a college where SPH pay appears to be high and unjustified. Appraisal of performance should be one of the elements that feed into fair and appropriate remuneration for SPHs and the GP. Board must comply with relevant Accounts Directions, their adopted remuneration code and any OfS conditions of registration. Managing public money requires DfE approval for some outcomes, including pay and severance above certain defined thresholds. The decision to apply performance related pay is for individual colleges to make and is not a requirement of fair and appropriate remuneration. In making recommendations to board on pay and progression the normal principles of good decision making apply – application of agreed policy and justification of decisions that relate to the competitive environment, value of the roles and institutional performance. Board must demonstrate how the level of remuneration of the CEO, GP and other SPHs has regard to the principles in HM Treasury senior pay guidance including that it is in the interests of college students, a good use of resources, proportionate and reasonable and good value for money. Compliance with reporting requirements concerning publication of SPH remuneration is also key to a transparent process.

### **Checklist**

#### **Do you have a remuneration committee (or equivalent) responsible for senior postholders and governing professionals remuneration?**

Many colleges have a remuneration committee that is responsible for SPH and GP remuneration, others include this role in the terms of reference of a Resources or Governance Committee. Chairs of Committees and any governor with specialist HR skills may sit on the committee that considers SPH/GP remuneration and this helps with reflection on overall performance. Board should keep remuneration under review and, as with appraisals, ensure it is not an annual tick box exercise. Follow the adopted remuneration code (or explain why one is not adopted). The AoC code states that the Chair of Corporation should not chair the remuneration committee.

#### **Does the college have a clear policy on SPH pay?**

The board should have a SPH remuneration policy to ensure consistency of treatment of staff, avoidance of bias and to set a process and timeline for remuneration decisions. For example, it might be a college's policy to look to pay its staff in line with the median for those in similar roles in similar-sized colleges. Relevant factors are likely to include:

- the individual performance of the postholder.
- the pay award made to other college staff.
- any nationally recommended pay award (from AoC).
- sector data or benchmarks for the same role in similar colleges (available from the AoC and SFCA and from the Annual Accounts data).
- market data from recent adverts and appointments.

Many boards seek an analysis of the external data from the executive leader with responsibility for human resources. If boards treat senior postholders differently to other staff, or staff doing similar roles elsewhere a clear rationale for decisions should be recorded.

## Chair performance review

A competent and effective chair of governors (and where appropriate vice chair(s)) is a vital element of effective governance. Regular, constructive review of chair performance helps ensure chairs are competent and effective. Similar principles apply as for SPH appraisal with appropriate modification to reflect the nature of the (generally) unremunerated role.

### Checklist

#### **Purpose: is performance review linked to chair responsibilities and competencies?**

The purpose of chair review is to align performance with good governance that supports chairs to deliver their responsibilities, to lead strategically and with resilience. When seeking feedback many colleges use a structure that aligns with the ETF Chair and governor competency framework and/or any chair role profile used by the college to ensure feedback correlates with chair responsibilities and competencies. As with SPHs behaviours and approach ('the how') is important to ensure that college culture and values are shared at board level.

#### **Process: is there a process for regular, constructive feedback on the performance of the chair?**

Regular performance review provides a mechanism for identifying any skills gaps and implementing constructive development support. As with SPHs the process should be clear, fair, transparent and evidence led. An annual process that gathers feedback from governors and the senior team (including the Principal/CEO and GP) is commonplace. Self-assessment is also a valuable learning tool. Some colleges use questionnaires, others include face to face dialogue (sometimes through the vice chair or SIG) and a minority commission external resource. A vice chair or SIG might lead the process and act as intermediary supported by the GP to gather feedback and work with the chair to identify and action any learning. The ETF Chairs' Leadership programme is one source of development support and mentoring support can be invaluable as can active support available from the FE Commissioner.

#### **People: does chair review take into account the views of all governors (including the Principal/CEO) and student and staff governors?**

An inclusive process that gathers views from all governors (and the GP) will provide rich data. Some colleges also seek feedback from senior staff, stakeholders and partners. self- assessment is also well used. Where another governor leads the review process, they should have appropriate skills and training to ensure the process is constructive.

## **Progression: does review inform action?**

Pay is not a factor for unremunerated chairs. But review should inform skills enrichment for the chair with feedback informing the identification of training and development and succession planning, including the role of vice chair(s). Some colleges feed actions into a wider governance action plan that links to the college-wide self-assessment.

## Checklist summary

Which posts do you designate as SPHs? Is this reviewed from time to time?

Does your governing body satisfy its duties to SPHs?

Do appraisals align individual and organisational goals linking individual performance to the wider college strategic picture?

Do appraisals focus on 'the how' as well as 'the what'?

Do appraisals create a safe, constructive space for continuous improvement?

Is appraisal a regular constructive performance conversation?

Is your process well defined and consistently applied?

Do you prepare well?

Do you have a structure for appraisal meetings?

How will you measure progress against objectives?

Is training and development a focus of appraisals?

Do appraisals take into account feedback, including from governors and staff?

Are appraisal meetings adequately documented?

Are governors adequately trained to perform roles effectively?

Does the GP support governors in the appraisal process?

Do you have a remuneration committee (or equivalent) that deals with SPH and GP remuneration?

Does the college have a clear policy on SPH pay?

Is there a process for regular, constructive feedback on the performance of the chair?

Is it linked to chair responsibilities and competencies?

Does it take into account the views of all governors (including the Principal/CEO) and staff?

Does the review inform action?

## Useful Links

- ETF Competency Frameworks [Governance programmes - The Education and Training Foundation \(et-foundation.co.uk\)](#)
- AOC SPH Code [Colleges Senior Post Holder Remuneration... | Association of Colleges \(aoc.co.uk\)](#)
- Senior Pay Controls for Colleges [Bite-size guides to aid colleges in meeting new requirements following reclassification - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)
- Guidance for approval of senior pay [Guidance for approval of senior pay - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)
- FE Governance Guide [FE and sixth-form college corporations: governance guide - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)
- FE Financial Handbook [College financial handbook - Guidance - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)
- ETF Governance Development Programme [Governance Development Programme - The Education and Training Foundation \(et-foundation.co.uk\)](#)
- FEC Active Support [Help and support for colleges - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

## Appendix

In this appendix a hypothetical scenario is used to show how the checklist approach might inform an objective diagnostic of current practice to identify actions for improvement.

### Scenario

Claire has recently been appointed chair of a college. It is time for the annual appraisal of the Principal. There is no documentation or set objectives from the previous chair and the Principal says that he just had an occasional chat with the former chair prior to being told of his pay award. Governors say that they were not involved in the appraisal process and rubberstamped what the chair and Principal recommended to remuneration committee. Claire has already had some disagreements with the Principal as she believes he should be doing more on net zero and sustainability. She believes that he thinks this is a waste of time preferring to focus on his 'pet project' of developing a new sports centre which is currently overspent compared to budget and slipping on timescale for completion.

### Diagnostic assessment using checklist

Issue	Checklist prompt	Strengths	Area for improvement
SPHs	Which posts do you designate as SPH? Is this reviewed from time to time?	Senior posts defined in standing orders – GP, Principal and Director of Finance (DoF). Standing Orders regularly reviewed	
	Does your governing body make appraisal decisions for SPHs?		Board not making appraisal decisions for all SPHs – only DoF appraisal

Issue	Checklist prompt	Strengths	Area for improvement
			documents go to board drafted by the Principal.
	Do appraisals align individual goals with organisational goals linking individual performance to the wider college strategic picture?		Absence of goal setting for SPHs. Opportunity to align goals to strategic plan and KPIs – including sustainability and capital development.
	Do appraisals focus on ‘the how’ as well as ‘the what’?		No evidence of discussion of behaviours with SPHs and no relevant goals set. Opportunity to openly discuss area of ‘disagreement’ in context of college priorities.
	Do appraisals create a safe, constructive space that sets a tone for college wide appraisal?		Absence of formality – an occasional chat. Opportunity to reset a positive, constrictive tone.
	Is appraisal a regular constructive performance conversation?		No regular process or focus on professional development. Opportunity to embed college wide system for SPHs.
	Is your process clearly defined?	College wide process is clear and defined – includes self assessment and	College wide process not being applied to SPHs. Opportunity to treat all staff consistently.

Issue	Checklist prompt	Strengths	Area for improvement
		structured template documentation.	
	Do you prepare well?		Opportunity for preparation and reset of future appraisals
	Do you have a structure for appraisal meetings?		Opportunity to implement college wide system (with any appropriate modification)
	How will you measure progress when you look back?		Opportunity to agree goals and targets that align to college strategy and consider key evidence sources.
	Is training and development a focus of appraisals?		Opportunity to introduce positive focus on training and development
	Do appraisals take into account feedback, including from governors and staff?		No process for involving governors. Opportunity to review governor engagement and decision making to ensure board is satisfying its duties to SPHs.
	Are appraisal meetings adequately documented?		No audit trail of previous meetings. Opportunity to strengthen documentation in line with college wide system.
	Are governors adequately trained?		No skills assessment in place. Opportunity to review training needs.

Issue	Checklist prompt	Strengths	Area for improvement
	Does the GP support governors in the appraisal process?	GP experienced and keen to improve systems	Opportunity to involve GP in resetting future practices.
	Do you have a remuneration committee that deals with SPH and GP remuneration?	Remuneration committee has appropriate terms of reference	Chair of Corporation chairs remuneration committee contrary to adopted AoC remuneration code. Appraisal documentation for all SPHs needs to be approved by corporation.
	Does the college have a clear policy on SPH pay?	Clear SPH pay policy which includes performance as a relevant factor to be considered.	Clarify links between performance appraisal and pay.

## Action plan

Area for Improvement	Action - What	Action - When	Action - Who
Process – design a clear transparent and fair evidence led process	Commission a report to board that proposes adoption of a SPH appraisal process in line with best practice and the college wide system, including the cascade of college objectives/KPIs.	2 months	GP in consultation with chair and Principal

<b>Area for Improvement</b>	<b>Action - What</b>	<b>Action - When</b>	<b>Action - Who</b>
Process – implement revised process	Implement agreed changes. Identify and undertake training and development needs for governors	Immediately following adoption of revised process	Chair (and SPHs as appraisees)
Pay, progression & professional development	Appoint new chair to remuneration committee. Review compliance with remuneration code and clarify links between appraisal and pay.	ASAP	GP report to board



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