

Corporate governance

The Combined Code on Corporate Governance contains 14 Principles of Good Governance applicable to listed companies. The paragraphs below together with the report on Directors' remuneration set out on pages 80 to 86 describe how these Principles are applied within GKN.

The Board and its committees

The GKN Board currently comprises seven executive and five non-executive Directors and reflects a blend of different ages, experience, backgrounds and cultures. The roles of Chairman (which is a non-executive position) and Chief Executive have been split since 1997 and there is a clear division of responsibility between the two. In the opinion of the Board, all the non-executive Directors are independent of management and free from any business or other relationship which could materially interfere with the exercise of their independent judgement.

The Board normally meets ten times a year, two of which are on the sites of subsidiary or joint venture companies. Comprehensive briefing papers on items for consideration are circulated to each Director one week prior to a Board Meeting. During 2000, the Directors' overall rate of attendance at Board Meetings was 97.7%.

Each of the Directors ordinarily retires by rotation once every three years. (Shareholders will be asked at the forthcoming AGM to approve an amendment to the Company's articles of association so that Directors will be required to retire by rotation at least once every three years.)

Specific responsibilities have been delegated to the following Board Committees:

Executive Committee

Comprises the executive Directors and the Chief Executive GKN OffHighway Systems & AutoComponents under the chairmanship of the Chief Executive. It normally meets monthly. The Committee oversees the activities of the Group, decides how the various risks facing the Group are to be managed and approves major human resource policy issues including management development and training.

Chairman's Committee

Comprises the non-executive Directors and the Chief Executive under the chairmanship of the Chairman. It normally meets before Board meetings and is a forum for the Chairman and the Chief Executive to brief the non-executive Directors.

Audit Committee

Comprises the non-executive Directors (except Dr Klaus Murmann) under the chairmanship, since 1 January 2001, of Roy Brown. Throughout 2000 the Committee was chaired by Sir John Parker. It meets three times a year and more frequently if required. The Committee examines the process of financial reporting within the Group and reviews changes in Group accounting policies. It also reviews annually the Group's system of internal control and the processes for monitoring and evaluating the risks facing the Group. The Committee reviews the scope and results of the audit with the external auditors and the terms of reference and results of the work of the internal audit department. It is also responsible for ensuring that an appropriate relationship between GKN and the external auditors is maintained.

Remuneration Committee

Comprises the non-executive Directors under the chairmanship, since 1 January 2001, of Sir John Parker. Throughout 2000 the Committee was chaired by Sir Bryan Nicholson who retired from the Board on 31 December 2000. It meets periodically as required. The Committee is responsible for approving the terms of service and setting the remuneration of the executive Directors and the Company Secretary in accordance with a remuneration policy which is approved annually by the Board.

Nominations Committee

Comprises the non-executive Directors and the Chief Executive under the chairmanship of the Chairman. It meets periodically as required. The Committee assesses and recommends to the Board candidates for appointment as executive and non-executive Directors of the Company and as Company Secretary. It makes recommendations to the Board on its composition and balance and as to the appropriate processes for the appointment of the Chairman of the Board. It also reviews proposals for changes in responsibilities of Directors.

Shareholder communications

Meetings between Directors, senior management and major institutional shareholders are held periodically in accordance with GKN's investor relations programme and when required in relation to particular issues. Shareholders attending the AGM are invited to ask questions during the meeting and to meet with Directors after the formal proceedings have ended.

In its annual and interim reports, AGM trading statement, results presentations and City announcements generally, GKN endeavours to present an accurate, objective and balanced picture in a style and format which is appropriate for the intended audience. The Company's website (www.gknplc.com) provides financial and business information about the Group.

Internal control

The Board attaches considerable importance to the Group's systems of internal control and risk management. It acknowledges its responsibility for them and for the regular review of their effectiveness.

The Board's policy is to have systems in place within the GKN Group which optimise the Group's ability to manage risk in an effective and appropriate manner. The Board has delegated to the Executive Committee responsibility for identifying, evaluating and monitoring the risks facing the Group and for deciding how these are to be managed. There is a standing agenda item at every Executive Committee meeting to enable members of the Committee to advise if any material internal control issues have arisen or any significant new risks have been identified.

Continuing processes are in place for all parts of the Group to assess the major strategic, commercial and financial risks to which their operations are exposed and the way in which they are monitored, managed and controlled. These processes are summarised in a 'risk map' reviewed annually by the Audit Committee. Each year all Group businesses are required formally to review their business risks and to report on whether there has been any material breakdown in their internal controls. Companies also have to confirm annually their adherence to statutory and regulatory obligations as well as with internal policies on matters such as competition law, employment law and ethics. Risk profiling is widely undertaken to identify accidental risks and highlight action required to mitigate such risks.

In implementing its policy on managing accidental risk, the Group pursues a systematic integrated loss prevention approach to safeguard people's health, the environment, an uninterrupted supply to its customers, its assets and its earnings, under the auspices of a Group Loss Prevention Council. The Council formulates and recommends Group loss prevention policies and acts as a steering group for loss prevention activities across Group operations.

The Group's systems are designed to manage rather than eliminate the risk of failure to achieve business objectives, recognising that any system can only provide reasonable and not absolute assurance against material misstatement or loss.

Corporate governance continued

The Review Process

The Board reviews the effectiveness of the systems of internal control and risk management on an ongoing basis by:

- considering the strategy of the Group at both Group and divisional level and, within the framework of this, approving an annual budget and medium-term projections. Central to this exercise is a review of the risks and opportunities facing each business and the steps being taken to manage these;
- reviewing on a regular basis operational performance and updated forecasts for the current year. Comparisons are made with budget and the prior year and appropriate action plans put in place to optimise operational and financial performance;
- retaining primary responsibility for acquisition and divestment policy, and the approval of major capital expenditure and financing arrangements. Below Board level there are clearly defined management authorities for the approval of capital expenditure, major contracts, acquisitions, investments and divestments, together with an established framework for their appraisal, which includes a risk analysis, and post-implementation review;
- receiving regular reports on the Group's treasury activities, having approved the operating policies and controls for this function;
- performing an annual review of the Group's pension fund arrangements and insurance and risk management programmes;
- receiving annual reports, following their review by the Executive Committee, on environmental, health and safety matters as they relate to the Group's operations. The Executive Committee also reviews interim reports on health and safety performance;
- reviewing twice yearly management development and succession plans. The Executive Committee also reviews management development issues three times a year; and
- receiving regular reports from the Audit Committee on whether the systems of internal control and risk management are operating effectively.

The Audit Committee, which has independent access to the external auditors and to the internal audit function, is responsible for reviewing the ongoing control processes. It achieves this by:

- reviewing and approving the terms of reference and major findings of the internal audit department. The work of this department is risk-based and its purpose is to review and test the systems, controls, processes, procedures and practices across the Group. Its head, who reports directly to the Group Chief Executive, has access to, and regular reviews with, the chairman of the Audit Committee. There is an established process to ensure that the recommendations of the department are implemented, and all its reports are seen by the relevant members of the Executive Committee;
- reviewing reports from management and external and internal auditors on the effectiveness of the systems of internal control and risk management. In particular, in advance of the announcement of the Group's results for each year, it reviews a summary of the annual detailed divisional reports on their business risks and internal control processes; and
- discussing with management the resolution of control issues raised by Board members or in reports reviewed by it.

The Board has reviewed the effectiveness of the Group's systems of internal control and risk management during the period covered by this annual report. It confirms that the processes described above, which accord with the guidance on internal control published in September 1999 by the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England & Wales, have been in place throughout that period and up to the date of approval of the annual report.

Compliance with the Combined Code

In addition to the 14 Principles of Good Governance, the Combined Code also contains a Code of Best Practice with 45 detailed provisions. Other than in relation to two of these provisions, GKN was in compliance with the Code of Best Practice throughout 2000, the two exceptions being:

Recognised Senior Non-Executive Director

The Board does not consider it necessary to identify a single senior non-executive Director, in addition to the Chairman, to whom concerns can be conveyed. The chairmen of the Audit and Remuneration Committees, whose names are given on page 76, are both senior non-executive Directors and either may be approached in circumstances where investors feel it inappropriate to contact the Chairman or the Chief Executive.

Notice Periods

The Board does not consider it appropriate at this time to adopt the objective of setting notice periods in executive Directors' service agreements at one year or less for the reasons given in the report on Directors' remuneration on page 86.

The auditors' responsibilities with regard to their review of the Company's compliance with the specified provisions of the Code of Best Practice and in relation to the annual report generally are set out on page 41.