

## Report summary

# School governance

Learning from the best

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## The national picture

More than 300,000 school governors in England form one of the largest volunteer groups in the country. Since 1988, school governing bodies have taken on more responsibilities and their role has become more important as schools have gained increasing autonomy. The governing body complements and enhances school leadership by providing support and challenge, ensuring that all statutory duties are met, appointing the headteacher and holding them to account for the impact of the school's work on improving outcomes for all pupils.

The framework for inspection reflects the importance of the role of governors. Inspection evidence tells us that there is a relationship between effective governance, the quality of leadership and management, and the quality of provision and pupil achievement. In 2009/10 governance was good or outstanding in 56% of schools. However, in just over a fifth of the schools inspected, governance was judged to be less effective than leadership. This finding suggests that there is potential in many schools for governors to make an even greater contribution than they do at present to improving outcomes. Her Majesty's Chief Inspector's Annual Report for 2009/10 identifies that:

'Governors are most effective when they are fully involved in the school's self-evaluation and use the knowledge gained to challenge the school, understand its strengths and weaknesses and contribute to shaping its strategic direction. In contrast, weak governance is likely to fail to ensure statutory requirements are met, for example those related to safeguarding. In addition, where governance is weak the involvement of governors in monitoring the quality of provision is not well enough defined or sufficiently rigorous and challenging.'

## Using this report

Governing bodies want to do the very best they can for their schools, pupils and local communities. That is why their members give so freely of their time. This small-scale

report has been written to help governors reflect on their practice by considering the principles and approaches used by some of the best governing bodies.

In November 2010 inspectors visited 14 schools. These were selected from primary, secondary and special schools in varying localities where governance was judged outstanding in inspections conducted in the academic year 2009/10.

No single model of success was seen, but this report identifies some of the key characteristics of these 14 governing bodies that have achieved excellence. Firstly, it illustrates how they go about their work efficiently and effectively. It then identifies the contribution that they and the schools' leaders consider they make to strengthening school leadership. Finally, a number of key questions are offered that governors might want to consider when reflecting on their own effectiveness and their journey to excellence.

## **Key characteristics of effective governing bodies**

- Positive relationships between governors and school leaders are based on trust, openness and transparency. Effective governing bodies systematically monitor their school's progress towards meeting agreed development targets. Information about what is going well and why, and what is not going well and why, is shared. Governors consistently ask for more information, explanation or clarification. This makes a strong contribution to robust planning for improvement.
- Governors are well informed and knowledgeable because they are given high-quality, accurate information that is concise and focused on pupil achievement. This information is made accessible by being presented in a wide variety of formats, including charts and graphs.
- Outstanding governors are able to take and support hard decisions in the interests of pupils: to back the head teacher when they need to change staff, or to change the head teacher when absolutely necessary.
- Outstanding governance supports honest, insightful self-evaluation by the school, recognising problems and supporting the steps needed to address them.
- Absolute clarity about the different roles and responsibilities of the headteacher and governors underpins the most effective governance. Protocols, specific duties and terms of reference are made explicit in written documents.
- Effective governing bodies are driven by a core of key governors such as the chair and chairs of committees. They see themselves as part of a team and build strong relationships with the headteacher, senior leaders and other governors.
- In eight of the 14 schools visited, governors routinely attend lessons to gather information about the school at work. All the governors who were interviewed visit their schools regularly and talk with staff, pupils and parents. Clear protocols for visits ensure that the purpose is understood by school staff and governors alike. Alongside the information they are given about the school, these protocols

help them to make informed decisions, ask searching questions and provide meaningful support.

- School leaders and governors behave with integrity and are mutually supportive. School leaders recognise that governors provide them with a different perspective which contributes to strengthening leadership. The questions they ask challenge assumptions and support effective decision-making.
- Governors in the schools visited, use the skills they bring and the information they have about the school to ask challenging questions, which are focused on improvement and held leaders to account for pupils' outcomes.
- Time is used efficiently by governors because there are clear procedures for delegating tasks, for example to well organised committees. These committees have clear terms of reference, provide high levels of challenge and use governors' expertise to best effect. Systems are in place for sharing information and reporting back to the full governing body. This does not merely reiterate what has already been discussed in detail by the committee but focuses on the key points and decisions.
- The role of the clerk to the governors is pivotal to ensuring that statutory duties are met, meetings are well organised and governors receive the information they need in good time. Consequently, governors come to meetings well prepared and with pertinent questions ready so that they are able to provide constructive challenge.
- A detailed timeline of activities, maintained by the clerk and linked to the school development plan, provides a clear structure for the work of governors and ensures that their time is used appropriately.
- Governors in the schools visited use their external networks and professional contacts to fill any identified gaps in the collective skills of the governing body.
- There are clear induction procedures for new governors which help them to understand their roles and responsibilities and ensure that best use is made of their varied skills and expertise.
- The governing bodies constantly reflect on their own effectiveness and readily make changes to improve. They consider their own training needs, as well as how they organise their work.

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