



# WHAT NEW SCHOOL GOVERNORS NEED TO KNOW

**Governor Support Service**

Children & Young People's  
Department



**2002-2003**

*Community Legal Services*

**2003-2004**

*Transforming Secondary Education*

*Child & Adolescent Mental Health Services*

**2006-2007**

*Positive Youth Engagement*

This booklet is designed to provide new Governors and would be Governors with an overview of what being a School Governor involves. It covers all the essentials in a friendly and accessible style: what Governors are meant to do, what happens in Governor Body Meetings, how Governor Bodies organise their work, how much time you have to put in, and where to go for help or information.

**As a parent governor you are an ambassador for your school in the local community. It is your privilege to publicise your school to all you come into contact with.**

**Many parents ask other parents their views on local schools. You should commend your school while on the other hand not making adverse comments about other schools.**

## What Being a Governor is All About

So you have decided to become a Governor. Or maybe you are thinking about it and want to know what is involved. If you have already taken the plunge you will have joined what is often described as the largest volunteer army in the land – around 350,000 people.

Despite the size of that number, and the fact that Governors have a higher public profile than ever before, the chances are that you do not have more than a sketchy idea of what you have let yourself in for. You will probably have heard of terms like ‘performance management’ and ‘the National Curriculum’, be aware that you are responsible for the spending of the school’s budget, have some idea that school inspections affect Governors, and know that Governors get involved when pupils are excluded from school, but may not know what lies behind these terms and duties.

Because the Governor’s load can sound onerous, first some reassurance. For starters, you won’t be put in the public pillory for something that goes wrong. Governors certainly have considerable responsibilities, but they don’t exercise them as individuals. *It is better to think of ‘the governing body’ rather than a ‘body of governors’ because all governor decisions are corporate and all responsibilities are corporate.* Only by doing something criminal, or stepping wilfully outside your powers, can you incur personal culpability.

What of these responsibilities? They have been subject to a lot of clarification. That is not to pretend that they are crystal clear in everybody’s mind, but there is plenty of guidance, if, as with many things to do with governance, you know where to look. One thing to grasp is:

**You are not expected to be an expert.**

You can, for example, be an active member of the finance committee without having any experience of accountancy.

Following from this, you are not alone! There is a great deal of help on offer, not only from Governors and the Headteacher, but also from the Governor Development Team.

### Drawing the Line

The most fundamental thing about what Governors have to do lies in a definition of what they do not do. **Governors do not manage schools.** Schools are managed by their management, which starts with the Headteacher, and depending on the size of the school, will encompass a number of other paid staff: the Deputy Head(s), Assistant Head(s), Heads of Department, Heads of Year. What Governors are required to do is to oversee the development of the school. Ultimately, all Governor responsibilities come back to this, though the route is sometimes circuitous. Thus, for example:

#### **You do not:**

- Choose the books that should be bought for the library
- Decide which teacher should teach which pupils
- Judge individual teachers

**But you do:**

- Allocate a budget to spend on buying library books
- Decide the number of teachers the school should have, and the balance between different subjects
- Discuss with the Headteacher measures to be taken to improve any subject where the public exam results look poor.

**The three roles: strategic**

Governors have three roles to fulfil. This is setting the general direction of the school, looking at how you want it to develop. For example, if the school was consistently getting disappointing maths results, one strategic decision would be to take measures to improve them. This might mean agreeing with the Head to fund extra training for the staff, allocating money for more books or equipment, or employing an extra Teacher or Teaching Assistant.

Strategic thinking need not always be directly connected with the curriculum. The school may have an unsatisfactory number of instances of poor behaviour or of truancy. It may have neglected after-school sport over the years. It may need to address social problems, or may need to take measure to ensure the integration of increasing numbers of pupils for whom English is not their first language.

Being strategic does not just mean responding to problems or weaknesses. You may decide that you want the school to specialise in a certain curriculum area, or to seek specialist status. Your school may be a faith school, and you would want to ensure that its faith informs the moral teachings of the school. Or you may decide that some radical reorganisation of the school, such as seeking to federate with another school or becoming an extended school, is the way to make a good school even better in the future.

How your Governing Body makes these decisions should be determined by its **mission statement** and **aims and values**. These encapsulate what the Governors and the school staff consider to be special about their school, and where they want it to go. You should have these explained to you shortly after becoming a Governor. They are worth paying close attention to.

- The 'critical friend'
- 'accountability'.

## The critical friend

The term 'critical friend' is very widely used, although not universally liked. The Governing Body is meant to be the critical friend to the school's Headteacher. The second half of the phrase comes first. The Governing Body is meant to be supportive of the Head. As should have been clear from earlier comments, it is the Head who runs the school, who is at the sharp end. The Headteacher therefore has a right to expect the Governing Body to be generally sympathetic, to be there to hear about the difficulties, and to unite with him or her in developing the school as they have agreed.

The critical bit means being willing to question and challenge when things do not look right. The 'critical' does not exist separately from the 'friend': you don't ask about a problem area and then simply say it is up the Head to sort things out; you look together at positive steps that can be taken to improve things in the future. Critical friendship is only achieved by trust and mutual respect. Among your own friends, it is probably from those who are closest to you that you find it easiest to take criticism, and who will only criticise in order to help you.

In order to act as a critical friend the Governing Body needs to establish ways of **monitoring**. Monitoring is keeping an eye on things and seeing whether the decisions you have made are producing the desired results. Some of the strategic decisions will involve setting targets. Monitoring means then asking to see if those targets have been met. It is not just about looking at results on paper. Making a visit to school during teaching hours is one of the best ways of assessing progress, but this only means occasional visits – perhaps once a year.

## **Accountability and the executive role**

Additionally, the Governing Body is accountable to a variety of 'stakeholders' in the school, and at times will exercise executive powers.

The executive powers cover various instances where the Governing Body has to make a decision that directly affects the running of the school: appointing a new Head or Deputy, or deciding on appeals against exclusion (pupils) or dismissal (staff).

Although at first sight these tasks might appear to blur the distinction between the Governor's role and that of the school's management, in practice there are good reasons why Governors, not staff, should undertake them. Some of them belong to the Governors because they affect the strategic direction of the school. For example, making the appointment of a new Headteacher is the single Governing Body decision that will have most bearing on the future of the school. Others are more a matter of justice: a panel of Governors can take an objective view.

**Accountability** is a term that you hear frequently in relation to figures on the public eye. Politicians are supposed to act in the interest of the public that elected them, not in their own interest or in that of some other group. In this way they are deemed to be accountable to the public for their actions, and not only at election times. The principle of accountability underlies everything that Governors do too. You are not elected or chosen just for your own benefit or for that of your child, and certainly not so that you can benefit financially from the post. You are elected as a member of the public, and you are expected to act with their interest in mind all the time. In fact, you are elected or chosen as a member of a particular part of the public (the 'stakeholders'), according to how you became a Governor.

## **Type of Governor**

People (other than Headteachers) become Governors along one of five routes:

- elected by the parents
- elected by the staff
- appointed by the LA
- invited by the other members of the Governing Body
- appointed by the foundation of the school.

The first of these is the most straightforward. Each Governing Body has a number of places reserved for **parents**. Assuming there are more candidates than places, the places are filled by a vote of all the school's parents. Assuming there are more candidates than places, the places are filled by a vote of all the school's parents.

**Members of staff** also have places on the Governing Body. The first staff place is reserved for the Head. He or she has the choice whether to take it up, but the vast majority do. The next place has to be taken by a Teacher. Except on very small Governing Bodies, there will be a third place, which is for a representative of the support staff: Teaching Assistants, Secretaries, Caretakers, etc.

The **LA** also chooses governors, to represent the wider community. These used to be mainly political appointments, chosen by the main parties on the local council, according to their respective strengths. They are now much more commonly people in the community around the school who are interested in the school and want to help it.

### **Categories of school**

There are various categories of state ('maintained') school, with some variation in Governors' responsibilities between them.

- **Community schools** are fully owned and supported by the LA.
- **Community special schools** are also fully owned and supported by the LA, but cater only for children with severe special educational need.
- **Foundation schools.** All community schools (primary, secondary, special) have the option to investigate foundation status. This leads to a change in governance of the school such that the governing body:
  - becomes the employer of the school staff
  - becomes the admissions authority for the school within the requirements of the school admissions code
  - takes on ownership of the school's land and assets.Foundation schools remain LA maintained schools.
- **Foundation special schools** are similar, but cater for children with severe special educational needs.
- The premises of **voluntary aided schools** are owned by an outside body, nearly always the Anglican or Catholic Church, and the schools are partly funded by them and partly by the local authority.
- **Trust schools** are state-funded foundation schools supported by a charitable trust made up of the school and partners working together for the benefit of the school. Any maintained school can become a trust school – primary, secondary or special schools.

Certain sorts of schools have **Foundation** Governors (called in some instances **Partnership** Governors). Many are schools that are supported in part by an outside organisation, which in most cases means the Church of England or the Roman Catholic Church. If your school is described as voluntary controlled or voluntary aided it will have Foundation Governors. Foundation schools have greater independence from the local authority than community schools, most notably in that the premises are not owned by the local authority but by a trust set up especially for the purpose. The trust elects its representatives to the Governing Body – the Foundation Governors.

Each Governing Body has a number of places for **Community Governors**. These are people, again usually from the local community, who have skills or enthusiasm that the other Governors would like to add to the Governing Body.

So all this is the general context of being a Governor. Probably your first question is, what does it entail? Mainly it entails attending meetings.

## How Governing Bodies Work

### The full Governing Body

Governing Bodies work through meetings. This may seem to be an obvious point, as any body of people, whether it is the board of directors of a company or the committee of a village football team, has to have meetings. But the way Governing Bodies conduct their business reveals an important truth. That is: *No Governor has any power on their own.*

It is only as a corporate body that Governors can do anything. However strong their qualities and shining their virtues, individuals are not chosen as Governors in order to perform as glittering soloists; they are chosen for what they can contribute to the Governing Body as a whole.

Therefore individual Governors can only act on their own if authorised by the Governing Body to perform some particular task on its behalf. This even applies to Chairs of Governors, who invariably take on a larger share of work than other Governors; but all the same, except in certain emergencies, the chair has no powers to act without the authority of the Governing Body. As a Governor, you do not even have the right to enter the school without the Head's permission, unless the Governing Body has asked you to do so for some particular purpose (and then courtesy demands that the Head's permission will have been obtained first).

### Conduct of meetings

The meeting is at the heart of what Governing Bodies do because that is the democratic forum where decisions are made. If you think you are not going to be able to make most of the Governing Body's meetings, you should not agree to become Governor.

However, the burden here is not excessive. Each Governing Body has to meet **at least three times a year**. Some Governing Bodies find that they meet twice a term, so as to be able to discuss issues in a timely manner, and to prevent the meetings becoming too long. Two to two-and-a-half hours is the norm for most Governing Bodies, and meetings are usually held in the evenings.

Meetings have to be **quorate** in order to make decisions. The quorum is fixed by law at one half of the serving Governors.



Governing Bodies have to have a **chair** and a **vice-chair**, whom they elect at the first meeting of each academic year (unless the Governing Body has decided to appoint them for more than one year). Any Governor can fill either of these posts, apart from someone employed at the school. Each Governing Body has also to appoint a **clerk**, but the clerk cannot be a Governor. The clerk should be paid for their work. Sometimes the role is filled by the School Secretary, but it can be anybody that the Governing Body thinks can do the job well.

## **Committees**

One or two meetings a term might strike you as being too light a load to match the seriousness of the Governing Body's responsibilities. If you thought so, you would be right. The truth is that the Governing Body is responsible for many areas of activity, and it cannot possibly cover them all in a few hours a term. Instead they are usually tackled by setting up various committees. It is up to the Governing Body what committees it has, but most have separate ones for each main responsibility:

- finance
- personnel
- the curriculum
- health and safety
- special educational needs.

A few, mainly small, schools prefer to handle these matters in full Governing Body meetings, but most choose to set up committees which have the power to make decisions on behalf of the Governing Body, and then report back to it on what they have done.

There are some areas where it is compulsory to delegate the business to a committee set up especially. These are usually to do with hearing appeals:

- on admissions to the school (foundation and voluntary aided schools only)
- from parents against the exclusion of their child
- from members of staff on pay or dismissal decisions.

The area that any other committee is to cover and how the committee is to be constituted – jointly known as its **terms of reference** – are decided by the full Governing Body. It is important that committees report on their actions to the full Governing Body, and the most efficient way of doing this is by submitting their minutes. Each committee should have a clerk, or minute taker. Unlike the full Governing Body, this role can be taken on by a Governor. Committees can have **Associate Governors** on them, with voting rights on most issues. Associate Governors can also attend full Governing Body meetings, but not vote. Becoming an Associate can be a good way of testing whether you would like to be a full Governor.

In order to contribute properly to the Governing Body you will probably be expected to volunteer for one or two committees. This is where you can be guided by your own inclinations and interests. The amount of work and the frequency of meetings vary. For example, the Finance Committee is going to be at its busiest around budget-setting time, in the spring. As a very rough rule of thumb you might expect a committee to meet with the same frequency as the Governing Body – once or twice a term.

### **Working groups**

Governing Bodies can also have working groups or working parties. The difference between these and committees is that they usually meet for a finite period of time only, and deal with a one-off issue. They also have no powers to make decisions on behalf of the full Governing Body, only to make recommendations.

This means that they do not only have to have Governors on them; they can contain other people who have just as much say in those recommendations. An example of where a working party might be set up is to review the home-school agreement, where you want views of non-Governor parents.

### **The role of the Head**

Even Headteachers who decide not to become Governors will normally attend Governing Body meetings. Indeed, a Governing Body would find it practically impossible to function unless the head, or a Deputy, attended the majority of its meetings. You cannot be a critical friend to someone who is not there.

Much of the Governing Body's role involves working with the Head to reach decisions. The Head also has a vital function as your main source of information about the school. He or she will probably liaise regularly with the Chair of Governors, but this does not remove the need to report fully to the Governing Body. Once a term he or she should submit a written report, which will concentrate on what the school is doing to meet the various priorities and targets that the Governing Body has set. This document will be circulated in advance of the Governing Body meeting, with the agenda, and is there for you to study and then ask questions. If there is anything that you are unsure about in the report, the meeting is the time to ask about it and to explore the issue. Moreover, if there are things not covered in the report that you think are important, you should also ask about them.

This brings us back to the meeting. Even if you were so inclined, it would not be right to ask the Head privately about an item in the report (unless it was of purely individual interest) as in asking a question or making a point, you should be sharing the answer with the rest of the Governing Body.

## What Governing Bodies have to Do

As you will have seen from the description of the different committees that Governing Bodies usually have, there are several areas of responsibility. These can be grouped under the headings of curriculum, staff, finance, buildings, health and safety, special education needs, and appeals:

One principle underlies all governing body work:

**The main aim of a Governing Body should be to endeavour to raise the school's standards.**

By standards is meant not only the academic achievement of the pupils, although this is a very important part, it also includes all those things that go into making well-rounded and confident individuals. Thus raising standards can include encouraging the performing arts or increasing the confidence of pupils with special educational needs.

It helps to remember that there is no such thing as a school that is standing still, just as in business standing still means going nowhere. If you are not improving, you are almost certainly getting worse. Schools which achieve good results but which have lost that edge to improve are merely coasting, and some pupils will not be being stretched.

When you are involved in making any decision, however far it may seem from the lessons, it should be made in the context of what is best for the children.

### Curriculum and Special Educational Needs

In the broadest sense the curriculum is all the things that go into the education that the pupils receive in the school. The aim is usually to have 'a broad and balanced curriculum', as it is only this that will meet the needs of all the pupils.

The largest part of the curriculum is covered by the **National Curriculum**. This determines what subjects must be taught at what stage of schooling. All schools in the state sector have to follow its provisions, and Governors are responsible for ensuring that the National Curriculum is taught in their school. In primary schools they have particular responsibility for seeing that literacy and numeracy are taught, according to the National Primary Strategy.

Under the National Curriculum a child's passage through school is divided into four stages, known as **Key Stages**. An important responsibility of Governing Bodies is monitoring achievements at the end of each of these Key Stages. The performance of all children is assessed in national tests at the end of Key Stages 1 (ages five to seven) and 2 (ages seven to 11) – except in Wales, which does not test Key Stage 1 and is dropping the other tests. This is done in a series of tests known commonly as **SAT's** (Standard Assessment Tests). Performance at the end of Key Stage 4 (ages 14 to 16) is assessed through public examinations: GCSEs and GNVQs.

The results for each school are published, and schools are related to each other in league tables (except in Wales). Governing Bodies are involved in setting targets for performance of their schools at the end of Key Stages 2, 3 and 4. In practice the targets will be proposed by the Headteacher after discussion with the Teachers, but the Governing Body, or its curriculum committee, is charged with approving them, or asking for revisions.

The other part of the curriculum that Governors are concerned with is the choice of subjects. This affects secondary schools more than primaries. For example, the National Curriculum specifies that all pupils in Key Stage 3 must study a foreign language, but it does not say which language. The Headteacher will propose the subjects to offer, and the Governing Body makes the decision.

The committee often also looks after **special education needs**. This involves ensuring that the requirements of pupils who have learning, emotional or physical needs are being met by the school.

## **Staff**

The only law affecting the number of staff that a school must have is that Key Stage 1 classes should not have more than 30 pupils to one teacher, except in special circumstances. Other than this the Governing Body decides on how many Teachers and support staff it wants to employ to deliver the curriculum.

Governing Bodies have a key role in making **appointments**. If your school needs a new Headteacher or deputy, the selection procedure is handled by the Governing Body, usually by a panel appointed for the purpose. The final choice of person has to be made by the whole Governing Body, usually after the selection panel has completed the procedure and made a recommendation.

When it comes to other appointments, in England the Governing Body is expected normally to delegate the appointment to the head. Many Headteachers still ask the Governing Body to be involved in the process.

Staffing responsibilities do not stop with making appointments. All schools have **performance management** of staff. This is a system of review and appraisal. Governing Bodies have to draw up a policy for the way that teaching staff will be appraised by the Head or their Line Managers (guidance is provided by the government). When it comes to the Head, the Governing Body itself acts as Line Manager, and each Governing Body is required to appoint two or three of its members to conduct the Head's annual review. An external adviser is provided at no cost to the school.

You are also responsible for setting the **pay** of the Teachers, according to pay scales set nationally each year. Teachers are placed on pay grades, known as spine points, and for their first few years advance up a point annually. Teachers who have been in post a number of years (currently six) advance onto a higher pay level, known as crossing the threshold.

There is some discretion as to where they are placed, and the Headteacher will make recommendations to you about these. Similarly with the pay of the Head and deputy; there are specified levels of pay, but there is also some discretion left to the Governing Body to decide whether to raise its Headteacher a level on the pay spine.

**Dismissal** of staff is fortunately a rare occurrence in schools. If the Headteacher decides to dismiss someone, that person has the right to appeal to a committee of the Governing Body.

## **Finance**

Most decisions that affect the development of your school are going to involve spending money. Each school receives various sums of money annually, most of it from central government via the LA. The actual funding system of schools is complex, but the outcome is fairly simple: each spring you know how much money you are going to have for the next financial year. It is then up to the Governing Body to decide how this is going to be spent.

Most Governing Bodies leave the detailed drawing up of the budget to a Finance Committee, but have the final budget approved by the whole Governing Body. The sums involved can be large – millions of pounds in a big secondary school – which can make budgeting seem awesome. However, the freedom for action is often fairly limited as many items, like salaries, bear costs that you cannot argue about, unless you are planning major change.

Most schools take advantage of the services of an LA officer, who will draft the budget under the various headings, together with the head and other school staff, such as the Bursar or Secretary. So although setting the budget is a very important job, and one that involves making key decisions about the school's future, it does not require you to spend hours trying to balance the books.

Once set, the budget needs monitoring termly or twice-termly – a job for the finance committee. If necessary, the committee can decide to divert sums from one heading to another, as might well be the case if an unexpected expenditure arises, or simply if an estimate was wrong. It is normal to give the Headteacher the freedom to do this up to a specified amount.

## **Buildings**

Sometimes the responsibility for the buildings will be handled by the finance committee, as issues concerning buildings generally incur expenditure.

It used to be a simple matter that for community and voluntary controlled schools any work involving the structure of the buildings was the responsibility of the LA, but with increased delegation of funds from LAs to schools, schools have had to take on more of the structural maintenance. With foundation and voluntary aided schools, all the building costs are borne by the Governing Body, but the budget will reflect this extra responsibility.

Unless you have a new building project, most building work that comes before the Governing Body is the nature of repair and maintenance. It is normal to pay an annual fee to a Buildings Manager, who may be the LA, so after making this appointment Governing Body involvement is usually at the level of approving work to be done, and deciding between competing contractors.

### **Health and safety**

School buildings, and the activities that take place in them (and those carried out off the premises), have to be safe for all concerned. It is the Governing Body's responsibility for ensuring that this is so. Governors themselves do not have to carry out safety checks, but the Governing Body should ensure that regular checks are made by qualified staff. They should also be satisfied that staff are familiar with the routines for reporting problems or accidents. This responsibility can be delegated to a separate committee, or may be given to the buildings committee.

### **Appeals and scrutiny**

We have already looked at the Governing Body's responsibilities in the case of staff dismissal together with other staffing responsibilities. However, this can also be described as a judicial function, because the role of the Governing Body is to act as an impartial judge. This description also fits dealing with **admissions** and **pupil discipline**.

As described earlier, Governing Body involvement in admissions only occurs in foundation and voluntary aided schools. The Governing Body's role in these schools is to administer the admissions process and organise panels to hear appeals by parents of children who have been refused admission to the school (though Governors cannot sit on these panels).

The pupil discipline committee scrutinises all cases of exclusion from the school for five days or longer, including permanent ones, and decides on whether the Head's decision to exclude was fair. This may involve hearing representations from the parents.

It is fairly common, particularly in primary schools, to be appointed to one of these committees for a year and find that it never needs to meet.

## Essential and Further Information

You should be given copies of various documents when you become a Governor. Some of them, such as the school prospectus and a list of staff, are particular to your school, while others are national publications. Of particular note among the latter is a *Guide to the Law for School Governors*. This essential document is published by the DCSF and it contains details of all your legal responsibilities. You will also receive a welcome pack from the Governor Development Team (Governors). This includes your letter of appointment, governors usually serve a four year term of office and a booklet on educational abbreviations.

You can also ring the Governors Team listed below for any help or advice:



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## Support and training

There is a free advice line for Governors in England, funded by the DCSF and supervised by the Governor Associations. It is called Governor line, and can be rung between 9 am and 10 pm on weekdays and from 11 am to 4 pm at weekends. The number is 08000 722181. Website address is [www.governorline.info](http://www.governorline.info)

Each LA has a person or department, depending on the authority's size, who provides support to Governing Bodies. LAs offer training that ranges from induction training for new Governors to detailed matters such as aspects of school finance.

## Your Contribution

Finally, what should you do to add your part to the Governing Body's work?

Well, first and obviously, attend meetings. Indeed, if you miss six months' worth of meetings (which might be only two) without acceptable reason, you may be required to leave the Governing Body. If you really cannot make a meeting, you should submit your apologies and reasons in advance to the chair.

Then join a committee, or two committees. Much Governing Body work is done through committees, and it is only as a member of a committee that you will be able to contribute fully to the work of the Governing Body.

Many Governing Bodies have a system where each Governor is attached to a curriculum subject. If so, discuss the subject with the Teacher/Head of department responsible, and learn what the school's aims are. Arrange with the Teacher and Headteacher to visit the school to see the subject being taught, and report back to the Governing Body.

Even if you do not have a curriculum allocation system you should arrange to visit the school, say, once a year. Most Governing Bodies draw up a rota for school visits, which are always agreed with the Head.

You should also aim to attend school functions, not only plays and concerts (which hopefully you will want to see anyway) but some parents' evenings too, if your school has a policy of having Governors attend these sessions. All Governing Bodies are active in their schools, but without this public presence they are not always seen to be active by the parents.

Lastly, you should be prepared to go on training. This is not a huge commitment, involving days off work. Governor training sessions are usually held in the evenings.

As with most things, the more you put into being a Governor, the more you will get out of it. So this certainly means some commitment of time, and a willingness to learn. However, it needs enthusiasm more than time, and as you come to enjoy the work, the time spent should be a pleasure.

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