

## **CHAIR OF GOVERNORS**

The quality of school governance now plays an increasingly significant role in overall Ofsted inspection judgments.

In particular, under the revised Ofsted framework, the role of the chair of governors is seen as pivotal to the successful leadership of any school. Not only does a good chair of governors work in close partnership with the headteacher for the benefit of all pupils, but also he or she holds the management team to account for the performance of the school.

A recent publication by the National College for Teaching & Leadership (NCTL) summarises the key roles of chairs of governors of state funded schools. It is entitled 'The role of the chair of governors in schools and academies'. These role descriptions are equally applicable to the chairs of governing boards of both maintained schools and academies.

The following summary is based on the NCTL document, which is recommended by the DFE. Also recommended are the National Governors' Association (NGA) Chair's Handbook and the NCTL chair of governors' leadership programme.

### **The role of the chair of governors in schools and academies**

After a general introduction, the publication has five main sections which identify and describe in detail key aspects of the role of chair of governors. Each section is followed by a comprehensive checklist.

The publication also makes use of case studies as further illustration of the points being made. At the end, there is an extensive index of key contacts and resources where additional information and guidance can be obtained.

### **Summary of main themes**

In its introduction, the publication says that an effective chair of governors is one who:

- Works with the headteacher to promote and maintain high standards of educational achievement.
- Ensures that the governing board sets a clear vision, ethos and strategic direction for the school.
- Together with the governing board, holds the headteacher to account for the educational performance of the school and its pupils, and for the performance management of staff.
- Ensures oversight of the financial performance of the school and effective use of resources.

The NCTL goes on to say in the main sections of the publication that a successful chair of governors has five key functions:

- Leading effective governance
- Building the team.
- Relationship with the headteacher.
- Improving the school.
- Leading the business.

### **Introduction – a timely reminder to all governing boards**

Initially and crucially, the authors of the publication remind schools in the general introduction that the chair of governors is ‘first among equals’ but has no individual power.

The governing board is a corporate entity and its power and authority lie with the governing board as a whole. On occasions, the chair may need to take swift individual action in an emergency, but any such action must be reported to the whole governing board at the earliest opportunity.

The NCTL goes on to state that chairs of governors must manage their time effectively and that carrying out the tasks that are peculiar to the role should generally only take up no more than 20 days a year. Chairs are in fact advised to take time with the headteacher and other governors to set priorities upon which he/she should then concentrate.

The implication is that if chairs are taking much more time than this to carry out their duties, it is probably either because:

- The exercise of the role of chair has strayed from being a strategic one to becoming overly involved in the operational aspects of running a school.
- and
- The chair and governors are attempting to micromanage the day-to-day running of the school which is in fact the responsibility of the senior leadership group.
- or
- The chair is failing sufficiently to delegate or share responsibilities and tasks with other members of the governing board.

## **Main sections**

### **Leading governance**

The chair of governors must:

- Assume responsibility for driving school improvement.
- Understand the school thoroughly, to include knowledge of its strengths, weaknesses and areas for improvement.
- Ensure the clarity, vision and strategic direction of the school.
- Make sure the governing board is fulfilling all its statutory duties.

Effective governance requires:

- A governing board that has a good mix of skills, knowledge and experience, and has a strong commitment to the school and its pupils.
- Governors who have an understanding of their strategic role and of their accountability.
- A chair that ensures that communications are good and that meetings are well organised in such a way that everyone contributes and is heard.
- Methods of sharing the workload so that the governing board operates as a corporate entity.

If the school is a maintained one, then the chair needs to be fully familiar with statutory guidance and advice from the DFE.

Chairs of academy boards must be equally familiar with the law relating to academies in general and, in particular, with the provisions of their own academy's articles of association and funding agreement.

### **Building the team**

Shared responsibility, wide delegation and the good use of individual skills are the hallmarks of a successful governance team.

The chair must make it clear exactly what is expected of governors and ensure that there is a regular governor skills audit.

It is important continually to look at succession planning as governors come and go and also to work to retain and attract new governors with the appropriate skills as needed. Careful promotion of equality and diversity is necessary when recruiting governors in order to reflect as closely as possible the social mix of the community served.

Regular self-evaluation measured against Ofsted criteria should be an on-going process for all governing boards. The NCTL recommends that each governing board develops a tailor-made code of practice, perhaps based on the 2013 National Governors' Association model.

### **Relationship with the headteacher**

There should be a strong and visible working relationship between the headteacher and the chair of governors. The chair must offer challenge, support, advice and encouragement, making sure that there is robust and vigorous performance management of the headteacher.

Regular meetings and contact are important, but these can take several formats and need not be on any fixed basis, although many schools do in fact have weekly meetings between headteachers and chairs.

Virtual meetings are another way of conducting business that does not necessarily mean convening a formal meeting. The publication reminds readers that chairs do not have many individual or specific decision-making powers, but they do have to ensure that the governing board as a whole carries out statutory duties, such as performance management.

The relationship between the headteacher and the chair should not be such that other governors feel excluded; care needs to be taken to ensure that all governors know and have links with the headteacher.

### **Improving the school**

The governors need to ask themselves a range of questions about issues related to school improvement including:

- How well the school is held to account for pupil improvement.
- The quality of the teaching.
- The quality of the curriculum.
- How effectively and efficiently the school's resources are being deployed.

The importance of regular and systematic governor self-evaluation is reiterated in this section.

The publication insists that governors need to understand data such as:

- The Ofsted school data dashboard.
- The DFE performance tables.
- RAISEonline.
- Fischer Family Trust data.
- The headteacher's reports.
- Pupil voice.
- Parental surveys.
- Progress against performance targets.

- The school's test or examination results etc.

### **Leading the business**

The DFE has high expectations of governing boards and their role in school improvement and accountability. It aims to give them greater freedom in how they constitute and operate to meet those expectations.

New regulations and guidance on school governance, introduced by the DFE in September 2013, require the appointment of a clerk. The guidance redefines the role of that clerk in advising governing boards on the nature of their duties, statutory responsibilities and functions.

Governing board meetings should have a formal agenda. Minutes of the previous meeting and additional papers should be sent out at least seven days in advance.

Chairing a meeting is a key skill. Chairs can choose to operate in different ways with varying degrees of formality. The essential elements are to ensure that all members have the opportunity to contribute and are listened to, that discussions are open and honest and that decisions are fair and transparent.

### **Ofsted**

When Ofsted inspects a state funded school, it will look very carefully at how well the school is led and governed. The role of the chair of governors is very important in ensuring that the governing board is always well prepared for its functions and efficacy to be scrutinised.

The following list covers the main areas that chairs of governors should have up-to-date and to hand. He/she should ensure that:

- There is a list of governors' level of availability to meet with inspectors.
- All data is together, up-to-date and accessible.
- The chair can understand and interact with the data, and identify the issues it raises.
- All the statutory policies and documents the school should have in place are up-to-date, including the single central record.
- The school website is compliant with legal requirements.
- All required governor training is up-to-date (eg designated safeguarding, SEN and other governor roles).
- The chair has a good overview of performance management and that is up-to-date.

- The school involves governors in regular self-evaluation.
- The chair is aware of the general strengths and weakness of the school.
- The school can demonstrate that at least some of the governors have done financial benchmarking.
- The governors can identify the specific use and impact of pupil premium funding.
- The governors have effective communications with stakeholders.
- Staff receive professional training and career progression opportunities.