

What does the evidence tell us about school governors¹?

Some key findings

- Latest figures suggest that there are approximately between 235,000-350,000 school governors in England with 11% of posts vacant. Vacancies are particularly evident in inner city areas.
- Particular groups are under-represented as governors, including black and minority groups, disabled people, young people, lone parents, those with low incomes, those who are unemployed and business people
- Governing boards can be composed of a core group of committed long serving members and a less active periphery. The core group are even less likely than the governing body as a whole to reflect the local community
- Some research suggests that many governors find it difficult to challenge the head teacher and preferred to work collaboratively with them.
- The majority of schools carry out their governing duties at a satisfactory level (judged by Ofsted inspections to be satisfactory or better). However in 2001/2002, 53% of primary school governing bodies were judged to be 'good' or better, compared to 34% of secondary school governing bodies.
- Recent surveys of head teachers revealed much variation in the perceived effectiveness of governing bodies - approximately one in five were described as 'very effective' but a similar proportion as 'ineffective'
- A consistent theme from the research is that, where they are effective, governors take a strategic role in guiding and supporting the school's work and challenging further improvement
- Evidence suggests that there is a relationship between good governance and pupils' achievements, the quality of teaching, as well as the quality of leadership and management.

¹ This note presents a summary of some of the recent research evidence that could inform the reviews thinking on governors. It is not a comprehensive literature review.

1 Background

The following note presents an overview of research evidence on governors from a preliminary search of key websites and journals; focussing in particular on the effectiveness of governors. The note has been restricted to recently published research (i.e. from the last ten years) and to studies which provided information on their research methods. An initial search of key websites and journal articles suggests that there has been limited research conducted specifically on governors (although they may have been included as stakeholders in research focussed on other topics, however it was not possible to comprehensively examine this for the purposes of this note). Whilst a number of the studies reported in this paper are small scale, and so may not be considered robust in their own right, a number of common themes have emerged across these studies, enabling greater confidence in their findings.

1.1 Policy position

Schools governors have gained an increasing degree of responsibility over the last 25 years. Their role has become increasingly important as schools have gained more independence for their management from local authorities. The government has provided school governing bodies with responsibility for the financial and staffing management of the school and they should have a key role in setting strategic direction, ensuring accountability and acting as a critical friend to the head teacher.

1.2 Metrics

Governing bodies are made up of key stakeholders including parents, staff, the community, the local authority and for particular types of schools they may include foundation governors, or sponsor governors.

Estimates suggest that there are between 235,000² to 350,000 school governor posts in England in 2007 and approximately 11%³ of posts were vacant.

1.3 The role of governors

In addition to the general managerial role, their role can be defined as:

- providing local knowledge
- and a 'democratising' role, through the governing body representing local people in decisions about the local delivery of education (Dean et al, 2007).

The role of governors can be perceived in three ways, as noted above (managerial, 'localising' and 'democratising' i.e. involving local people in local decisions). Recent research which involved case studies of three disadvantaged areas (Dean et al, 2007) found that the governing bodies examined lacked the capacity to fulfil the managerial role (and did not see this as their main function). They also had difficulties in fulfilling the other two roles (localising and democratising) in that they were not found to be representative of their local communities and were not linked up with local activist groups and local policy partnerships. Research evidence from other studies suggests that similar issues have emerged in other areas.

² Internal estimates suggest that there are likely to be approximately between 235,000 and 350,000 governor posts in England.

³ Based on internal data.

The study supported the findings from other research which indicates that some groups were more likely than others to be involved.

- The governing bodies did not reflect the local community or the families using the schools.
- They were over-represented by women, those from professional backgrounds⁴, those who identified themselves as white, older people and they did not all live locally.

Governing bodies were also found to divide informally into two groups; the core group who took on most of the work, and a less active periphery. The active core group were found to be even less likely to reflect the local population than the governing body itself. The fact that the governing bodies were not representative of their communities was not viewed as problematic by most governors; they did not see themselves as representing particular constituencies (Dean et al, 2007). There does not however appear to be consensus on this issue (i.e. the extent to which governing bodies should represent their communities). A recent PwC report on school leadership notes in contrast, that several respondents highlighted the importance of governing bodies being representative of the local communities (PwC, 2007).

1.4 The role of teacher governors

Research has also been conducted into the role specifically of teacher governors (Earley and Creese, 2000). A survey of a random sample of secondary and primary schools in England found that:

- Half of teacher governors were unclear about their role.
- Few had received training about their role (4% had received induction training and 22% from the local authority).

The research revealed some uncertainty amongst teacher governors regarding their role, in terms of whether they were responsible either to the head teacher (as a member of staff) or to the governing body. Many also had a restricted view of their role (in terms of representing staff opinion to the lay governors on the board).

- 91% of survey respondents saw themselves as able to help other governors towards a better understanding of educational issues.

A number of teacher governors also felt however that their position on the governing body was to protect the staff.

- 42% strongly agreed or agreed that their main function on the governing body was to act as a 'watch-dog' for the staff.

Despite this, a majority of teacher governors felt that their contributions were valued by fellow governors (94%) and nearly two-thirds (64%) agreed at the governing body was effective in raising the standards and quality of education provided by the school.

⁴ The findings from research studies differ on the extent to which governing bodies were over or underrepresented by individuals from business/professional backgrounds.

1.5 Governors from a management background

A small scale study conducted in 1997 examined the contribution of business volunteers working in the governing bodies of 40 schools. The research indicated that the governors provided a number of transferable skills. The skills most valued by head teachers and the chairs of governors were general management skills such as problem solving, team-working and decision making rather than specialist skills such as financial planning, strategic planning and marketing. Most of the governors also reported external benefits from the role including gaining insights from the school into their work and company life (Industry in Education, 2007). Some of the benefits cited included, developing a greater understanding and respect for the staff who deliver it and the challenges of education, as well as gains from the personal experience of involvement in the committee with a range of external, lay and political representatives than they would be normally encounter in industry (Industry in Education, 1997).

A recent survey of over 600 business governors (recruited through the School Governors' One Stop Shop (SGOSS)) found that these governors were more likely than the modal governor to undertake key tasks, including chairing committees, taking part in the head teacher's performance management review, appointing new staff and being a member of a pay review panel (Punter at al, 2007). The key skills used by these governors and considered by their head teachers to be of considerable value were: decision making, effective communication, listening and team working. A minority of the governors saw their role as providing information about business (Punter at al, 2007).

2 Barriers to becoming a governor

Research indicates that particular groups are underrepresented as governors; including those from black and other minority ethnic groups, disabled people, young people, lone parents as well as people with low incomes, those who are unemployed and business people (Ellis, 2003). These findings are supported by a recent large scale study (involving interviews in 50 schools and a survey with over 3,200 school leaders) by PriceWaterhouseCoopers (PwC, 2007) which also found some concern amongst respondents about the lack of diversity in the composition of governing bodies.

A DCSF research study (Ellis, 2003) has examined the barriers faced by these specific under-represented groups through a literature review and interviews with a small number of organisations (representing these groups) as well as school governors from each of these under-represented groups. This study found a number of commonly reported barriers to participation in school governance including:

- A lack of time or competing time commitments. Potential volunteers also felt that taking on the role of a school governor would take up more time than they were willing to commit.
- The cost of taking part in terms of lack of reimbursements for expenses was a barrier raised particularly by those on low incomes, the unemployed, lone parents and disabled people.
- Some interviewees felt that the lack of publicity around school governance was a major barrier. In particular they felt that this contributed to continued stereotypical images of governing bodies as dominated by white, middle class and middle aged members of the community.

- Lack of confidence and self-esteem as well as alienation from the education system also prevented some from taking part.
- Interestingly some felt that the attitude of existing governors was a barrier to involvement, in that they were perceived to make judgements about the eligibility of individuals to take on the role.
- Existing governors also highlighted specific barriers including, a lack of knowledge and awareness about governance, and the opportunities for involvement.
- Accessibility issues (in terms of physical access to buildings) were raised as a barrier for people with particular disabilities as well the more general barrier of lack of transport.

3 Recruitment

The research suggests that schools also experience a number of issues in recruiting governors. A small scale study of four local authorities⁵ (two in England, one in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland) examined the view of school governors in these areas (Ranson et al, 2005).

- Interviews suggested that many board members in the 4 local authorities had been 'encouraged' by head teachers to volunteer in the first instance (Ranson et al, 2005).
- This study also found that the boards were composed of a core group of committed and long serving members, however others were more detached and transient in their commitment. 42% had been a governor for more than 6 years.
- Less than one fifth of respondents felt that the role was onerous in terms of the volume of work (15%), the workload complexity (18%) and that the responsibilities and powers were unreasonable (17% and 19% respectively).
- Nearly two-thirds of respondents had concerns about recruiting new members and 47% had concerns about retaining existing members. Despite this, most said that they would continue as existing board members (71%).
- A 2002 internal Ofsted report notes that some of the reasons for recruitment problems were related to the work that governors reported they liked least, including long meetings, the time commitment and large amounts of paperwork.
- The issues that governors reported they liked most included, involvement with the schools and pupils, gaining knowledge and understanding about the school and getting an overview of how the school was managed.

A recurrent theme from the research was the difficulty schools experienced in recruiting governors with the necessary skills for the position (PwC, 2007). Fourteen percent of head teachers surveyed said that their governing body was ineffective because they were inexperienced/lacked skills and knowledge (PwC, 2007). Sustainability and attendance of governors was also considered to be a problem, particularly for smaller schools and those in rural areas (PwC, 2007). This may be due to workload issues, in that just under half of governors responding to a recent survey said that they worked more than 100 hours a year (46%) (PwC, 2007). Governors in rural areas were also more likely to work over 100 hours (49% compared to 44% in urban areas) (PwC, 2007). There were however mixed views regarding whether governors should be paid of their work, with some respondents supporting this, and others emphasising a volunteering ethos.

⁵ The local authorities were selected for their different levels of civic involvement.

A relatively large scale survey to governors recruited from the business community (by 'Governors' One Stop Shop') indicated in contrast that most found their work as a governor to be manageable in terms of the time involved and the scheduling of work around their paid job (Punter et al, 2003). Their principal motivation was that of "putting something back in the community" or "making a contribution". A majority of business governors also felt that supporting the head teacher was one of the things they found particularly satisfying in governance (71%), as well as being invited to use their skills (71%) and being welcomed by the head teacher (84%) and fellow governors (70%).

4 Effectiveness

4.1 Are governors effective?

The latest Ofsted annual report (Ofsted, 2007) summarises evidence from nearly 7,000 inspections conducted in 2006. Ofsted are required to make judgements on how well the school's governing body fulfils its responsibilities. In 2006/07 Ofsted concluded that the majority of schools' governing bodies carry out their duties well.

A 2003 Ofsted report on Leadership and Management (Ofsted, 2003) draws together evidence from school inspections and surveys. It is important to note that the findings are not drawn from a nationally representative sample (which limits the conclusions that can be drawn from the research). The study found:

- 54% of primary schools' governing bodies (inspected in 2001/02) were judged to be good or better at fulfilling their statutory duties. This compares to 34% of secondary schools' governing bodies (inspected during this same period) that were judge to be good or better at fulfilling their statutory duties.
- 72% of secondary schools' governors were judged to have a good or better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the schools. In primary schools this figure was lower, at 62%.
- 64% of secondary schools' governors had a good or better role in shaping the direction of the school. In primary schools' schools this figure was 55%.

A recent survey of head teachers (PwC, 2007) found much variation in the effectiveness of governing bodies (approximately one in five described their governing body as very effective and a similar proportion described it as ineffective).

4.2 What makes an effective governing body?

- A consistent theme across the research evidence is that where they are effective, governors undertake a strategic role in guiding and supporting the school's work and challenging further improvement.
- In addition, recent research suggests that effective governing bodies were viewed as such because they communicate well, are supportive of the head, take a pragmatic approach and demonstrate commitment to the role (PwC, 2007).
- Monitoring, self evaluation and strengthening leadership were key factors to the improvement of schools causing concern, especially those in special measures.

Approximately half of schools subject to special measures appointed a new head teacher; they also commonly improved governance and subject leadership. Internal figures suggest that in a small number of cases (75 in April 2008) the governing body had been replaced by interim executive boards.⁶

- The findings from the Ofsted annual report (Ofsted, 2007) suggest there is a relationship between leadership and management of key staff and the effectiveness of governing bodies. In 90% of schools where leadership and management was excellent or very good, governing bodies were also judged to be at least good at fulfilling their responsibilities.
- Significantly in schools which are judged to be 'inadequate', governing bodies failed to hold leaders to account for its overall effectiveness and did not adequately monitor the school to know its strengths and weaknesses (Ofsted,2007).

A 2002 Ofsted report (Ofsted, 2002) provides some indicators about the type of activities that effective governors may be involved in.

- Where governors contribute well to shaping the direction of the school, they are often involved in the development of the school improvement plan.
- Governors with a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the school gather information from a range of sources including reports, data analysis from senior managers and subject co-ordinators, presentations from staff as well as visits to the school.

In 2002, Ofsted found that a common criticism of governors was their failure to meet statutory requirements (more commonly for secondary than primary schools). This was most frequently in relation to the act of collective worship in secondary schools, to aspects of the National Curriculum as well as health and safety issues and sending the annual report to parents⁷.

The report found however that in some schools where leadership and management is good, governance was weak. This failure was found to be due to a number of factors including governors not being well informed about the day to day running of the school, over dependency on the head teacher to provide information on how the school is performing, failure to meet one of its statutory requirements (such as lack of strategic management and forward planning) and/or a lack of training and so the governing body was unaware of its responsibilities.

A recent report also supports these findings. A survey of head teachers suggests that those governing bodies which were perceived to be ineffective were described as inexperienced, had insufficient skills and knowledge as well as provided a low level of practical assistance (PwC, 2007). The governors themselves in the above study felt that they could better support leaders of the future through training (23%) and through an improved or closer working relationship with their head teachers (PwC, 2007).

Case studies of schools in 4 local authorities across the UK (Ranson et al, 2005) found some evidence that governors were able to play an important scrutiny role to support schools that

⁶ The 2002 Education Act gave LEAs and the Secretary of State the option to replace a governing body for a temporary period with an interim executive board for schools causing concern.

⁷ Governors are no longer required to send an annual report to parents of the school.

had been failing. Four schools in the sample had been recognised as failing through external inspection (in terms of professional leadership, lay governance and authority management). The study examined schools where the local authority intervened to reconstruct the governing body to ensure that they had the 'social capital' of volunteers from public services and local commerce.

- The new governors introduced standard setting, targeting and monitoring and used their networks to lever decisions and resources from the authority.
- This study also found case study examples of schools where governing bodies and school boards reinforced the quality of leadership at the school. For example the head teacher at one school mobilised the Board to lobby on behalf of the school particularly for resources from the authority but also to mobilise support with parents, as well as to support development/initiatives in the wider community.

4.3 External factors and governor effectiveness

An internal Ofsted report on the work of governors from 2002 which draws together evidence from inspections, reports and visits to schools in 1999-2001 has found that:

- Governors in areas of socio-economic advantage (measured in terms of the proportion of pupils taking up free school meals) were effective more often than other schools. Overall the quality of governance was found to decline as the proportion of FSMs rises.
- The study found that where governance was good, standards of attainment were likely to be higher than in other schools. The behaviour of pupils, the quality of teaching and the leadership and management of schools were also more likely to be good.
- Grammar schools were found to have the highest levels of effective governors. Over three-quarters of these schools were found to have good or better governance, and no school had unsatisfactory governance.

There were also a number of exceptions to the findings above; in that where there is good governance this does not guarantee that a school is successful. It should also be noted however that there are a number of factors can interact to make some schools more effective than others. Schools in advantaged areas for example generally have less difficulty in recruiting teachers; pupils may have more access to educational resources at home, and parents of pupils in these areas are more likely to provide enhanced educational opportunities for their children. The report found that schools in inner city areas in particular had difficulty in recruiting the full number of governors (vacancy rates in these areas were 30% compared to the national rate of 5-10%).

A small scale study (in 3 disadvantaged areas) (Dean et al, 2007) found that governing bodies can make a valuable contribution to the development of schools, however in the case study areas they also found that there were difficulties in retaining governors with the time and expertise for the complex tasks involved.

5 The dynamics of the governing body

5.1 How governing bodies work

A recent report has examined school governing bodies in three socially and economically disadvantaged areas in England (Dean et al, 2007). The case studies included interviews with 100 respondents linked to 14 schools in the three areas. The study found:

- Many governors found it difficult to challenge the head teacher, and some simply offered uncritical support.
- Most governors preferred to work collaboratively with head teachers for common goals.
- Governors often did not feel able to challenge decisions made by local authorities.
- Governors did however have a strong sense of acting in the interests of the school and their pupils. Their support for head teacher was therefore conditional on the head also acting with regard to this 'common interest'.
- Some governors reported that they had worked with head teachers who had limited their access to information to minimise the opportunities for effective challenge.

- A significant minority (22%) of teacher governors (from a random survey of such governors) also reported that they were excluded directly or indirectly from discussions of particular issues (frequently from personnel and salary issues) (Earley and Creese, 2000).

A random sample survey of teacher governors in secondary and primary schools conducted in 2000 found that over one third of respondents felt that their governing body was dominated by the head teacher (38%) or the head and chair of governors (35%), fewer felt that the governing body was dominated by the chair of governors (24%) (Earley and Creese, 2000).

The research also noted that some teacher governors felt that there were conflicts of loyalty, in terms of speaking out in the presence of the head teacher, their 'boss'. Approximately one-quarter of governors may have felt this way; as 24% of those surveyed said that they felt inhibited by the presence of the head. The majority of teacher governors however reported (79%) felt that they were able to express freely and honestly the views of their teacher colleagues. Interviews also indicated that some chose to discuss potentially divisive issues with the head teacher before the meeting.

5.2 Size of governing body

An initial search of key databases and research available online suggests that little research has been conducted on the most effective size of governing bodies. A recent large scale study by PwC found that some stakeholders queried the size of some governing bodies relative to the proportion of staff and pupils in schools (with some suggesting that they should be smaller and more strategic). A number of respondents also highlighted the advantages of grouped governance (i.e. federated) arrangements, in terms of the benefits for the recruitment of head teachers and neighbourhood renewal to meet the needs of the ECM agenda (PwC, 2007).

5.3 Collaboration and governing bodies

A recent evaluation report of the Federation programme (Lindsay et al, 2007) (whereby a group of schools formally work together to raise standards, promote inclusion and build capacity between the schools) provides some evidence on governors' views and involvement in the scheme. As part of the federation programme schools can choose to implement joint governance arrangements. Most of the federations in the study were categorised as forming 'non statutory' or 'soft governance' federations. Rather than establish a single governing body to cover all the schools, most commonly the federations in the evaluation had their own governing bodies, with a joint governance/strategic committee with delegated powers. Or for 'non statutory' federations, schools continued to have their own governing body, with joint governance arrangements involving a strategic committee but without delegated powers.

The report noted that this may indicate that while schools involved in the pilot felt that there were advantages to collaboration to achieve economies of scale, and share knowledge and resources, ultimately they valued their independence and powers of autonomy.

- The study also found that governors, particularly the chairs of governing bodies, were key to the setting up of the federation, however after this point the role of the governing bodies was often fairly limited (particularly with 'softer' federations). Four out of 5 chairs of governors were involved in the decision to federate.
- Most federation schools retained their own budgets (however a single budget was required for hard federations). The federation's approach to pooling resources was an important factor in its likely sustainability after funding ceased.
- A key factor for the success of the federation was leadership and collegiality. The study found that federation directors and head teacher along with the chair of governors were the key personnel to provide leadership.
- In terms of outcomes, most head teachers and chairs of governors judged the federation to have been somewhat or very successful in raising achievement (although only a quarter of both groups rated it as very successful).
- Whilst there was no evidence of a statistically significant improvement in pupils achievement at Key Stage 2 or 3, at Key Stage 4 there was a significantly higher proportion of pupils gaining 5 A*-G and a higher contextual value added outcome.

5.4 Governance in Academies

The fourth annual report from the evaluation of academies (PwC, 2007) has found that in contrast to previous years (when governance arrangements were found to be relatively immature) in the last year many academies were increasingly focussed on the skills and structures of their governing bodies. The research found that:

- Governors' responsibilities have been more closely aligned with school processes such as the curriculum, discipline committees and SEN and exclusion panels.
- Academies were also effectively using their flexibility to co-opt governors with particular expertise (including finance, human resources, legal and business management).
- Collectively governed academies had also gained additional benefits in terms of curriculum development, professional development and collegial networks.
- However in a small number of academies, whilst principals and parents sit on the local governing body, they did not sit on the central governing board.

- The final report from the evaluation (due in the summer 2008) will examine how a number of academies include pupils as associate members of governing bodies as well as the impact on governance of local authorities co-sponsoring academies.

6 Parents' views about governors

A large scale survey of parents and carers was conducted in 2003 to examine their involvement in their children's education. Parents who 'did not feel very involved in their child's school life' were asked about the ways in which they would like to be more involved in school life. Virtually none of these parents spontaneously reported that they would like to become a parent governor (only 2 out of over 1,200). A similar survey conducted in 2007⁸ asked parents about who they would contact in schools. This indicated that:

- 10% of parents would contact governors if they wanted to 'have a say or change something about how the school was being run'. This compares to 70% who would contact the head teacher and 18% who would contact other teachers. Women were more likely than men to say that they would contact governors.

⁸ This report is published today, 7th May 2008.

7 References

Dean, C., Dyson, A., Gallannaugh, F., Howes, C and Raffo, C. (2007) Schools governors and disadvantage. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Earley, P and Creese, M. 2000. Walking the Tightrope? The Role of Teacher Governors. School Leadership and Management, Vol, 20. No. 4.

Ellis, A. (2003) Barriers to Participation for Underrepresented Groups in School Governance. DFES Research Report RR 500.

Industry in Education (1997) Business and Industry Governors: A Case for Promotion?

Lindsay, G., Muijs, D., Harris, A., Chapman, C., Arweck, E. and Goodall, J. 2007. School Federations Pilot Study 2003-2007. DCSF Research Report RR015.

Ofsted, 2002. Internal Report. The Work of School Governors.

Ofsted, 2003. Leadership and Management – What inspection tells us.

Ofsted, 2007. The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Children's Services and Skills 2006/2007.

PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2007. Independent Study into School Leadership. DCSF Research Report RR818A.

PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2007. Academies Evaluation: 4th Annual Report. DCSF Research Report RW005.

Punter, A., Adams, J. and Lang, J. 2003 Governors recruited from the business community by the School Governors' One-Stop-Shop (SGOSS): *A report profiling the nature and experiences of this cohort and an analysis of the factors affecting their retention in post.* University of Hertfordshire.

Punter, A., Adams, J. and Kraithman, L. 2007 *Adding Value to Governance: an evaluation of the contribution made by governors recruited by the School Governors' One-Stop-Shop to their schools' governing bodies and to their own development.* University of Hertfordshire.

Ranson, S. Arnott, M. McKeown, P. Martin, J. and Smith, P. 2005 The Participation of volunteer citizens in school governance. Educational Review, Vol. 57, No. 3. August, 2005.