

## Oversight of governance at Schools maintained by Birmingham City Council (BCC)

School governors are the most important volunteer workforce in education and have a crucial role in ensuring that every child achieves his or her potential. Every school should benefit from a skilled team of governors which can provide the necessary challenge and support that schools need to improve.

*“We should not underestimate just how vital the role of governors and trustees has become in helping to raise standards. It is also why Ofsted now shines a brighter spotlight on the effectiveness of governing boards, and reports on their performance and their impact in greater detail. In every Ofsted report, inspectors are expected to write a discrete paragraph on the effectiveness of governance and whether it is influencing school performance.”*

**HMCI’s monthly commentary: November 2015**

Effective governing boards (GBs) display the following characteristics:

- Clarity of roles and responsibilities and positive relationships with school leaders based on trust, openness and transparency.
- Asking challenging questions with a focus on core issues; the quality of teaching, holding leaders to account for the progress and achievement of pupils, school improvement and financial diligence, without devoting too much time to marginal issues.
- A good knowledge of the school’s strengths/weaknesses and its data established through regular visits to the school and the curiosity to question beyond what they are being told.
- Systematic monitoring of progress towards meeting development targets.
- Knowledge of the impact of pupil premium on improving outcomes for disadvantaged children as well as how it is being spent.
- Professional chairing and clerking together with a GB that is sufficiently skilled to challenge senior leaders.
- Constantly reflecting on the GBs own effectiveness, with consideration to governor training needs and regularly attending relevant, high quality training,

### Oversight of GBs

The School and Governor Support Service (S&GS) carries out routine oversight of governance at BCC maintained schools. S&GS also works collaboratively with schools, other BCC education services and the Birmingham Education Partnership (BEP) to identify GBs that are in need of targeted support and or additional challenge.

GBs that are in scope for oversight through S&GS may include those judged by Ofsted as requiring special measures or improvement, where school performance and other data indicates vulnerability or where specific concerns have been identified. However, this does

not lead to an assumption of ineffective governance, rather it is a cause for further investigation and subsequent monitoring.

### **Information used in the oversight of governance**

A range of information from various sources is used by S&GS in its oversight of governance at BCC maintained schools. This includes (but is not restricted to) the following:

- feedback from the GB on how it has helped to strengthen governance arrangements, its impact on raising standards, lifting aspiration and the support and training it receives to do this;
- up to date details of governance arrangements that are published on the school's website e.g. membership, attendance, committee structure, register of interests etc.;
- minutes of full governing body and committee meetings;
- the GBs training plan, record of training received by individual governors and the GB as a whole;
- an on-line skills and experience survey;
- the school improvement plan and/or the GBs strategic plan;
- the most recent self-evaluation that was undertaken of the GB's effectiveness;
- the report and action plan arising from the most recent external review of governance that was undertaken at the school;
- the most recent Ofsted report;
- the school's current safeguarding children in education tool (Ofsted Section 5 Inspection /Education Act 2002 / Sec 175);
- intelligence gathered from clerks, through BCC, through BEP and other sources.

### **Assessing the risk of ineffective governance**

Issues affecting each GB are unique to its situation and assessing the risk of ineffective governance is a matter of professional judgement informed by analysis. The methods used to assess the risk of ineffective governance are linked to the following:

- the risk of the GB not meeting its statutory obligations and fulfilling its three core strategic functions: **providing strategic direction; holding the Headteacher to account for the educational performance of the school and the effective management of financial resources;**
- the risk of the GB not tackling significant specific concerns that relate to the school (e.g. finance, human resources, safeguarding etc.) due to a lack of understanding or capacity;

- the risk of the GB not being sufficiently well organised, managed and trained to successfully carry out its responsibilities;
- the risk of GB business not being sufficiently focused on school improvement and holding the leadership to account for the performance of the school;

It is good discipline for all GBs whatever their school's strengths, to review their own effectiveness regularly and there are a range of self-evaluation tools available that suggest suitable questions to help with self-evaluation. S&GS also publishes an audit tool to help GBs review their own effectiveness. For further information email [governors@birmingham.gov.uk](mailto:governors@birmingham.gov.uk)

### **Using oversight to improve governance**

S&GS uses its oversight to help GBs access the support and development that they need in order to improve effectiveness.

This could include (but is not restricted to) the following:

- Identifying structural and operational changes that will improve the effectiveness of the GB.
- Commissioning an external review of governance from a trained National Leader in Governance (NLG) or a quality assured provider from the National Governors' Association (NGA) – implement the action plan arising from the review.
- Commissioning training and development to address perceived gaps in skills and knowledge.
- Engaging the support from the local (district) NLG to develop and improve the working practices of the GB.
- Engaging with the support available to fill governor vacancies and find governors with the key skills needed to drive school improvement.

The impact of this approach will be evidenced by the increased capacity of the GB to effectively support and challenge the school.

### **Intervention**

GBs are responsible for their own improvement and BCC will usually only intervene when evidence shows this is not happening or indicates that the GB does not have the capacity to tackle significant concerns.

Statutory guidance is given by the Department for Education (DfE), on behalf of the Secretary of State, relating the duty on all local authorities in England, in exercising their functions in respect of schools causing concern.

[www.gov.uk/government/publications/schools-causing-concern--2](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/schools-causing-concern--2)

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