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# Introduction

The work of school governors is important and worthwhile, but it is increasingly demanding. A good set of governors can make a considerable difference to a school. Where governors perform poorly, the school suffers.

Recent legislation and government policies have moved the main focus of responsibility away from local authorities towards the Department for Education on the one hand and school governors on the other. This shift is intended to create a greater local voice and to raise standards. It lies behind the policy to create academies and free schools. It has added to the responsibility placed upon governors. The ‘Leadership and Management’ of schools is one of four main sections in the new inspection framework, and governors can expect to be interviewed by inspectors. Governors have an important role in ensuring that standards of teaching and attainment are high, and they are expected to be rigorous in their monitoring of targets and results. Some local authorities issue governors with a list of questions that they should be asking of themselves and of the head teacher. Boards of governors are asked to complete self-evaluation forms as a tool for keeping a check on their own performance as well as that of the school as a whole. Although the government has pledged to reduce the bureaucracy and paperwork, it doesn’t always feel like that. In fact, the call upon governors’ time can feel quite demanding, and it is not totally surprising that some schools find it difficult to recruit governors.

The most important thing for governing bodies is to ensure that they keep their eyes on what really matters – their responsibility for providing the best education possible for the children in their school. And that is certainly a most worthwhile endeavour. As this book will seek to show, it isn’t just a matter of reading endless papers.

Some of the most significant work of governors has to do with relationships – with one another, with the head teacher, with staff, with

parents, with the community, with the children. Good relationships are at the heart of good governance. In these relationships the role of school governors has been widely described as that of ‘critical friends’: ‘critical’ because governors are not there to collude with the head teacher and staff, nor to be simply ‘pally’. Their task is to exercise an appropriate but quite rigorous monitoring role which examines critically what is being done and what is proposed to be done both in terms of the ongoing attainment and achievement of the school, and also at the strategic level. ‘Friends’ because governors are there to provide support and encouragement to the school, and to act as ambassadors for the school.

Governors have a responsibility for maintaining appropriate confidentiality. They should discuss robustly in their meetings but should equally speak with a united voice once decisions are made. They are unlikely to think that there is nothing that can be improved in their school. They should never think that improvement is not possible.

### **The governing body as a critical friend**

- Recognises and celebrates the achievements and strengths of the school
- Knows where there are weaknesses and where the school is not performing as well as it should be
- Gives support and encouragement in bringing about improvements
- Is fully involved in plans for developments and improvements
- Maintains the balance between support and challenge.

Being a good school governor is not easy. There are policies to be drawn up and revised, and there are personnel issues that can cause considerable headache and heartache. Matters of curriculum and data tracking can appear daunting to those who have little direct experience in education. Trying to be responsible about school budgets will tax the minds of those who don’t feel at home with accounts. These are just two reasons

why there is a whole body of governors and it is not left to just one or two individuals. Different people bring different expertise and experience, and much can be offered by those who view things from a business perspective or from the viewpoint of the local community. Parent governors make a particular contribution, although at times there can be tensions between the two roles of parent and governor.

What this book attempts to do is to provide some information and guidance to help the school governor fulfil this important, demanding and worthwhile role. It does not attempt to be exhaustive and, with the best will in the world, with the education scene changing as rapidly as it does, events may overtake it. The book offers indications of where further information can be gathered. It recognises that governors are often very busy people whose time is offered on a voluntary basis. As desirable as lots of training and reading might be, that is not always realistic, hence the book keeps things reasonably brief. Along with chapters on particular topics, there are presentation outlines for suggested training sessions (see Appendices 1-4). These should be read in conjunction with the relevant chapters of the book, especially Chapter 4.

As a retired diocesan director of education and current chair of a couple of church schools, my experience has been gained through involvement with Church of England schools, and some of what is said will be directly addressed to those who are foundation governors in church schools. But in practice, a great deal of a governor's responsibility is common to all. Hopefully there will be something here for every school governor.

School governors are the unsung heroes of our education system.<sup>1</sup>

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1. *The Importance of Teaching: The Schools White Paper 2010*, p.71.

secular, and culturally and religiously diverse, when the voice of secularism is increasingly strident and there are marked sensitivities about human rights. In such a setting, church schools seek to be educationally excellent, distinctive in their ethos and inclusive in their attitudes. It is a tall order, and governors, especially foundation governors, play a key role in realising these aims.

The Church of England currently educates more than one million children in its schools.

### **Academies and free schools**

Education has long been a political hot potato. Every elector has had experience of schooling so it becomes one of the key issues in election manifestos. Families are understandably concerned that children receive the best education they can, and this puts pressure upon governments to meet their aspirations. Successive governments have sought to raise standards of education and in particular to tackle the disparity between the best and the weakest schools. The reasons for the introduction of the comprehensive school system were not only educational but also social, and they reflected the political philosophy of the Labour party of the time. The selection system was felt to be damaging and to lead to a continuing elitism that reflected not only academic ability but also social standing. In general, it remained true, however, that pupils in schools in the more socially deprived areas achieved less than those in more affluent areas. As measured by free school meals, this is still true.

School inspectors have existed since 1837, but the number and their role was expanded by the 1902 Education Act, with inspection falling largely under the auspices of the local education authorities. This changed to a national system in 1992 when the Education Act of that year established Ofsted. The inspection system was charged with assessing how schools were doing and, as well as identifying outstanding schools, inspectors judged some to be unsatisfactory or failing. It was judged that too many fell into the latter category, and ways were sought to

bring about change. While individual schools were supported by their local authority to improve, it was the school system itself that came under scrutiny.

In the 1970s, some authorities introduced the three-tier system, with pupils attending first schools to the age of 9, then middle schools until the age of 13 before going to upper schools. This was felt to provide more suitable transition points and it gained many advocates.

The introduction of the National Curriculum in 1988, setting out the required curriculum for both primary and secondary schools, was a further attempt to ensure an improvement of standards. Among other things, it established key stages at the end of which pupils would be tested. The key stage 2 test came when children reached the age of 11. This meant that in a three-tier system, half of the key stage was covered in a first school and half in a middle school. There was a similar split between the middle and the secondary schools for key stage 3. This divided responsibility and accountability for key stages, together with research evidence that showed that children were disadvantaged by having three changes of school in the three-tier system, led to its gradual abandonment in all but a few authorities by the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The Blair government looked for ways to improve 'failing' secondary schools and, building on the idea of the city technical colleges, in the year 2000 academies were established. Antony Adonis, later Lord Adonis, provided much of the thinking and driving power behind this move.

As charities, or under the umbrella of educational trusts, academies are independent of local authority control and are directly funded by central government. The rules for academies have varied over time, but initially sponsors of academies were required to provide up to 10 per cent of the capital costs as well as a substantial financial 'endowment' as a way of ensuring that the academy had additional resources. The government put considerable funding into the building programme.

Academies follow the National Curriculum core subjects but have greater freedom over the rest of the curriculum, and they are inspected

by Ofsted. They are not restricted to normal school hours or term arrangements and, more controversially, academy governors are not required to employ staff under nationally agreed terms and conditions.

The proponents of academies claim that the greater independence, changes in management and governance, innovative learning and teaching and greater motivation have resulted in better results and improved standards. Critics feel that these are still early days.

David Cameron's coalition government with its Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, sought to expand the academy programme by encouraging all outstanding schools to become academies and to partner less successful schools (Academies Act 2010). Primary schools, as well as secondary schools, have been encouraged down this route. In the sixteen months between May 2010 and August 2011, the number of academies rose from 203 to 1070, and the intention is for most secondary schools to become academies.

Behind the government's enthusiasm for academies, it is possible to see a desire to reduce, if not eliminate, the power of local authorities. Cuts in funding to local authorities have meant that services previously offered have had to be reduced or curtailed. There is now an open marketplace in which commercial companies offer educational services ranging from improvement programmes to professional development, from IT services to human resource expertise. Governors 'buy in' services at the best price and for the best value. With their greater independence, governors also bear greater responsibility – not least financially. Small schools and governing bodies do not have the capacity to become academies on their own, and 'umbrella' structures are being created to overcome this.

The Church of England has in general been supportive of the academy programme – not least because in the early years it was seen as a way of playing a significant role in improving the education of children in deprived areas. Some dioceses have created 'umbrella' trusts to help their schools become academies, especially in rural areas where schools are small, and to ensure that there is guaranteed church

representation at trustee as well as at governor level. One structure being encouraged is that of ‘academy chains’ linking a number of schools together. Where the church is involved in such chains, or is in joint ‘sponsorship’ of academies with a non-church organisation, it is important that its distinctive contribution is clearly included in terms of both governance and ethos.

The Church has been less positive about the other strand of Michael Gove’s programme – the free school. Drawing upon the experience of Scandinavia and the United States of America, free schools share many of the freedoms of the academies. They have been established in response to local initiative and demand, often by groups of teachers or parents seeking a school that offers an alternative to the provision already in existence. The free schools feed into the desire for choice but not necessarily into a locality’s need for places. Critics suggest that the result of this could be that existing local schools may be made unviable by spreading available children across too many schools. Proponents argue that in a culture of choice it is up to individual schools to prove they are providing the quality of education that parents are seeking for their children and that competition helps ensure a general rise in standards.

It should be noted that the terminology of governance for academies has changed from that used previously, on account of the charitable company structures of academies. Academies have ‘members’ (roughly equivalent to what would have previously been known as ‘trustees’) and ‘trustee directors’ (equivalent to what would have been ‘governors’ previously). It is vital that governors of a school investigating the possibility of becoming an academy take legal advice from lawyers well versed in the law concerning academies.

## **Partnerships and federations**

Since the Education Act of 2002, arrangements of collaboration and partnership between schools have come within the scope of statutory

or a drop in finances) forces the issue upon them. Local authority and diocesan websites normally offer helpful information about the process involved in entering into a formal collaborative arrangement.

Federations, like marriages, are normally more likely to be successful where partners are not forced together. They require careful planning and the development of good relationships and trust between staff members and governors. A formal agreement is required that sets out the overall ethos and vision for the federation, and provisions are needed to ensure that each school retains its individual identity, financial arrangements (although budgets remain formally separate), governance structures and staffing protocols. Consultation with staff, governors and parents are essential. Federated schools are normally inspected separately.

Government policy encourages outstanding schools to federate with 'weaker' partners so that good practice can be shared most effectively. However, this can lead to heads of outstanding schools feeling that in doing so their outstanding 'status' could be endangered if any of their outstanding teachers are placed in the 'weaker' school. It is important that there is a clear and agreed philosophy of viewing the resources of all schools in a federation as deployable throughout the federation. The responsibility of the head teacher and the governors of the federated schools is to ensure that the organisational arrangement develops excellent education across the federation. This requires care and a high degree of commitment to the federation from all stakeholders. The danger is that 'weaker' or 'smaller' schools in a federation are seen to be, and feel themselves to be, the inferior partner.

### **The Church School of the Future Review**

The Dearing Report of 2001 (see above) laid out an ambitious programme and led to a marked increase in the number of church schools, especially secondary, and an increased emphasis on church schools being both distinctive and inclusive. A decade later, not only much remained to be done but the changes introduced by the government

also presented the Church of England with significant opportunities and challenges, posing questions about how its commitment to being distinctive and inclusive would be worked out in the new educational scene. The Review published in March 2012 aimed ‘to offer a coherent picture of recent policy changes and their implications’.<sup>3</sup>

The Report reaffirmed its understanding that church schools stand at the centre of the Church’s mission and declared that having ‘created a strong and distinctive “brand” of schools’ it must not allow that ‘brand’ to be diluted or compromised. It called for ‘a wholehearted commitment to putting faith and spiritual development at the heart of the curriculum and ensuring that a Christian ethos permeates the whole educational experience’. It recognised that the government has school improvement at the heart of its policies and that the Church supports the drive for excellence and effectiveness, not simply because the government says so but because ‘the enabling of every child to flourish in their potential as a child of God, is a sign and expression of the Kingdom’.<sup>4</sup>

The need to establish new and improved partnerships, not least ecumenically and with the local church and incumbent, was seen to be important, and the particular challenges faced by small rural schools was acknowledged. With the difficult economic situation faced in the years post 2007, it was recognised that it is the vulnerable and the marginalised groups within communities that can suffer most. ‘If the Church is serious about transforming society, its school system is the principal arena within which to express its intention.’<sup>5</sup>

In the light of the 2010 Academies Act and its commitment to bringing all schools into the academy programme, the Church has had to respond not only with advice on the technical issues involved in conversion but also in its determination not to allow the change of status to ‘compromise or undermine the things that support and

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3. *The Church School of the Future Review* (March 2012), from the foreword by Dr Priscilla Chadwick, Chair of the Review Group.

4. *Ibid.*, p.3.

5. *Ibid.*, p.9.

maintain the distinctive character of Church of England schools'.<sup>6</sup> While underperforming schools will be directed to become academies with an external sponsor, it has been agreed that in the case of church schools, the Diocesan Board of Education will be the sponsor. This will have considerable implications for the resourcing of DBEs as they take on this responsibility.

The position of religious education has given rise to considerable concern. Its exclusion from the English Baccalaureate and the exclusion of any consideration of religious education from the current revision of the National Curriculum is likely to damage its status as a subject, even if the statutory requirement is retained. Funding reductions will affect the provision of locally agreed syllabuses for religious education and the training of specialist teachers will be reduced.<sup>7</sup> The Review group had received concerns about the quality of religious education in its schools, both of teaching and learning. In the light of all these concerns, Chapter 3 of the report sets out how such issues might be addressed.

On the curriculum in general, the Report had this to say: 'The approach to the curriculum needs to be developed in a focused way in the new educational context, by working with partners to create a model that takes seriously the Christian foundation in relation to pedagogy, content and school organisation.'<sup>8</sup>

Much of the work will need to be done in discussion between the National Society and the government, but it is also clear that with the reduction of the role of the local authority, the lines of responsibility and accountability lie between the school and its governors, the DBEs and the Secretary of State.

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6. *Ibid.*, p.12.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

8. *Ibid.*, p.17.

APPENDIX 5

# Document checklist (see chapter 8)

POLICY	To be reviewed	Date reviewed	Next review
Accessibility plan	Every three years		
Admissions arrangements	At least every seven years		
Central record of recruitment and vetting	Live document		
Charging and remissions policy	Governors to determine		
Complaints procedure	Governors to determine		
Data protection policy	At least every two years		
Freedom of information publication scheme	Governors to determine		
Governors' allowances	Governors to determine		
Governor and committee meeting minutes and papers			
Health and safety policy	Governors to determine		
Home-school agreements	Governors to determine		
Instrument of Government	Governors to determine		
Performance management policy	Annually		
Premises management	Regular risk assessment		
Publication of equality information and objectives	Every four years, published annually		
Register of business interests	Governors to determine		
Register of pupils	Live document		
School behaviour policy	Governors to determine		
Sex education policy	Governors to determine		
Special educational needs policy	Governors to determine		
Staff discipline, conduct and grievance	Governors to determine		
Teachers' pay policy	Annually		

## APPENDIX 6

# Checklist for the chair

Relationship with head teacher	Confident in this area	To be developed
1. Respect and mutual trust		
2. Challenging as well as supportive		
3. Giving leadership without complete reliance on head		
4. Building trust and cooperation between head and governors		
<b>Relationship with other governors</b>		
1. Trust among all governors		
2. Contributions of all are encouraged and valued		
3. Recruitment and induction of new governors are effective		
4. All governors encouraged to undertake appropriate training		
5. Communication is open and effective		
6. Confidentiality maintained as appropriate		
7. Awareness of the limit of chair's powers		
8. Knowing what to do in an emergency		
<b>The work of the governing body</b>		
1. Preparation of agendas with head teacher and clerk		
2. Ensuring school improvement is a priority		
3. Ensuring meetings are held regularly and appropriately		
4. Ensuring all are able to contribute at meetings		
5. Decisions are clear and recorded		
6. Governors understand their roles and responsibilities		
7. All governors are aware that decisions are corporate and of their collective responsibility		
8. The governing body delegates effectively		
9. Any conflict and differences are resolved through negotiation		

The work of the governing body (continued)	Confident in this area	To be developed
10. Committees and individuals are aware of procedures for reporting to the full governing body		
11. Relevant information and evidence are available on which to base decisions and action		
<b>Development of governing body's strategic view</b>		
1. Enabling governors' involvement in developing and reviewing the school's vision statement, aims and values		
2. Enabling open and honest debate about strengths and weaknesses		
3. Enabling the agreement of improvement targets that are challenging and realistic		
4. Enabling the governors' involvement in school's self-evaluation		
5. Enabling the governors' involvement in strategic planning		
6. Ensuring governors have a clear sense of development priorities		
7. Ensuring that governors are involved in monitoring and evaluating progress		
8. Ensuring that governors are represented at meetings with others in the school community and beyond		
<b>Ensuring accountability</b>		
1. Ensuring that the head teacher and senior leadership team are challenged and supported		
2. Ensuring that the school is held to account for its standards		
3. Ensuring that the governors have appropriate information on school performance from all relevant sources		
4. Ensuring that performance objectives are based on school improvement needs		
5. Ensuring that the governing body evaluates its own contribution to the life of the school and to school improvement		
6. Ensuring that the governing body and school communicate well with parents, the community and other stakeholders		

## APPENDIX 7

# Useful websites

It is not possible to give an exhaustive list of useful websites, but here are some of the most obvious. Local authority and diocesan (Anglican and Roman Catholic) websites will provide further information on resources and training that governors will find helpful. The websites indicated below provide resources and information on a wide range of subjects and offer downloadable resources.

Academies	<a href="http://www.iaa.uk.net">www.iaa.uk.net</a> <a href="http://www.antiacademies.org.uk">www.antiacademies.org.uk</a>
Church of England	<a href="http://www.churchofengland.org/education">www.churchofengland.org/education</a>
Department of Education	<a href="http://www.education.gov.uk">www.education.gov.uk</a>
Governors	<a href="http://www.direct.gov.uk">www.direct.gov.uk</a>
A guide to the law	<a href="http://www.education.gov.uk/b0065507/gtti">www.education.gov.uk/b0065507/gtti</a>
Inspections	<a href="http://www.ofsted.gov.uk">www.ofsted.gov.uk</a> for SIAS inspections see the National Society
Methodist Church	<a href="http://www.methodist.org.uk">www.methodist.org.uk</a> (see Education Commission)
The National Society	<a href="http://www.churchofengland.org/education/national-society.aspx">www.churchofengland.org/education/ national-society.aspx</a>
Roman Catholic Church	<a href="http://www.catholiceducation.org">www.catholiceducation.org</a>
Values	<a href="http://www.christianvalues4schools.org.uk">www.christianvalues4schools.org.uk</a>