

Clerking in new contexts: LA maintained schools

Governing without committees

There are no hard and fast rules about committee structures that governing boards need to set up (apart from a committee to consider pay and, in academy trusts, an audit committee). We have been encouraging governing boards to experiment with different committee structures for some time, but we know from our surveys that many of you are reluctant to change committee structures that may have been in place for years while academy trusts often proliferate committees. We suggest in standalone schools, a maximum of two committees is generally enough.

In a 2010 blog, Clare Collins encouraged governing boards to consider doing away with committees completely, but there has not been a rush to do so, until we received three unconnected pieces from schools that have done exactly this.

Cherry Grove Primary School, Chester

Janet Myers, chair of governors and NGA consultant

When the DfE required us to reconstitute before September 2015, we used the review of our governance arrangements to rethink our committees too. Our governing body (GB) had had three committees focusing on premises, finance and staffing, and curriculum and standards but, after much discussion, we decided that we would no longer have committees and instead have one full GB meeting a month.

Our aims were:

- to avoid repetition between meetings
- to allow decisions to be made immediately rather than having to be passed through several committees
- to reduce the time burden on key governors
- to ensure that every governor had an understanding of the full range of GB responsibilities, enabling more informed and rounded decisions
- to ensure rapid turnaround of changes and actions generated at meetings

We determined that 12 governors would be sufficient to perform the functions of the GB, secure the required skills and allow for a training period for new governors. There was some groundwork to do before implementing this new structure, principally reorganising the existing schedule of work to decide what business would be discussed in each of the 12 meetings. We abolished the headteacher's report and asked the head to produce individual reports on specific topics as agreed in the schedule of work.

Questions are underlined in the minutes and answers recorded. Agreed actions are recorded and monitored to completion. A five-minute 'Headteacher's Action' item allows the head to provide a verbal update on any other matters that he wishes to bring to the attention of the GB.

Having run the new structure as a pilot for a term, we unanimously agreed to permanently adopt the 'no committees' model and reconstitute to 12 governors with the headteacher, one staff governor, two elected parent governors and one local authority nominated governor.

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The school was inspected by Ofsted in September 2015 and received a 'good' judgment, up from 'requires improvement' in November 2013. The report says: "Since the previous inspection, the structure and membership of the governing body has changed and the full governing body meets more regularly. Governors have maintained a deep understanding about the quality of teaching and the outcomes for pupils, and have an accurate view of actions needed to secure further improvement."

The headteacher commented: "Nearly all of the evidence required for the Ofsted inspection was in a report produced for the governors. It is important that the work the headteacher does for the governing body helps to move the school forward and is not just an end in itself, and that is one of the benefits of the model we have adopted."

Meriden Church of England Primary School, Solihull

Dr Adam Boddison, chair of governors and chief executive of nasen

In 2014, governors noted that the two existing committees (finance and personnel and performance and standards) were duplicating some areas of work and that decisions made in these committees often impacted or conflicted with each other.

Decision-making needed to be both more streamlined and more holistic, and having to wait a whole term for the next meeting of the full board risked slowing the pace of strategic progress. We agreed to disband the committees in favour of monthly meetings of the full board.

This shift has allowed the school to make accelerated strategic progress. We have relaunched our vision, values and ethos and individual link governors are now attached to all key school and national priorities. Every governor has a different focus for their termly school visit and produces a short report with recommendations.

The board expects a rapid response from the school leadership team in implementing recommendations and the monthly meetings allow progress to be monitored three times as quickly as under the old committee structure. Where a more sustained and in-depth governor input is required, task and finish groups are established for a short period.

The monthly meetings require a professional level of clerking, since there is a constant cycle of circulating papers and producing minutes. We use an annual planner to ensure we fulfil our statutory duties and all business is considered to be relevant for all governors.

For example, in scrutinising the budget and proposing strategic changes to future-proof the financial sustainability of the school, there will inevitably be an impact on teaching and learning, on staffing, on the school community etc. This means that some governors need to be upskilled in key areas, so the governor skills matrix becomes a useful tool for targeting training rather than only used for allocating tasks based on existing strengths.

Lastly, the regular meetings allow for more meaningful support and challenge of the leadership team. The board of governors has up-to-date information about what is happening in the school and so can direct questions more effectively. Where school leaders

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are tasked with producing more data or alternative proposals, they can bring this back to the full board within a few weeks.

Governance without committees requires significant dedication from the board of governors, the headteacher and the clerk, but if done well, it can provide a holistic and effective governance structure that benefits all children at the school.

Springwell Learning Community, Barnsley

Michael Sanderson, chair of Springwell Learning Community, vice chair of Wellspring Academy Trust and vice chair of Barnsley Governors' Association

Barnsley's Social, Emotional and Mental Health special school, pupil referral unit (PRU) and allied services such as Education Otherwise Than At School operated with one principal and a single integrated management structure, from a central base with multiple dispersed units. Governance used to require a school governing body, a PRU management committee and regular liaison meetings with the LA.

When the school and the PRU became academies, as part of the Wellspring Academy Trust, trustees and senior leaders recognised the opportunity to create more effective governance arrangements. Wellspring believes in strong local governance, so the decision was taken to create a local committee of the board of trustees with much delegation. A single committee has responsibility for both academies and the commissioned borough services, collectively named Springwell Learning Community.

We wanted to make sure that the work of those governing the learning community focused on what really mattered, and that meetings dealt with the business in a structured and planned manner through the school year. We still use the language of governing body and governors, but we understand that our role is decided by the board of Wellspring Academy Trust and set out in its scheme of delegation.

The local governing body in turn decided not to have sub-committees but to hold a governing body meeting every half term to deal with the full range of business. Of course, the governing body needs to have panels to deal with issues such as pay review, discipline, etc, but these meet infrequently.

Every governor is linked with a senior leader. At each governing body meeting some of the pairings report on their area of responsibility. These include standards and achievement, safeguarding, finance, dispersed learning and commissioned services. The reports replace the traditional principal's report.

At every meeting a bespoke data dashboard for each academy is interrogated. Once every term, governors meet without a formal agenda for training, as well as self-reflection and wider thinking.

At the end of each school year we review our arrangements to ensure that they are meeting the aims we set for ourselves. Governors and senior leaders, and our trust, are clear that they have led to more engaged and better informed governors, as well as senior leaders better held to account and with a greater understanding of governance.