Lessons in Teamwork

How School Governing Bodies Can Become More Effective
The Audit Commission

... promotes proper stewardship of public finances and helps those responsible for public services to achieve economy, efficiency and effectiveness.
Summary

This paper is for governors, headteachers and everyone concerned with the management of schools. It has been prepared by the Audit Commission and the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) to suggest ways in which governing bodies can work more effectively. The advice given in the paper is supported by examples of good practice. In addition, each section ends with a set of questions designed to help governing bodies identify their strengths and weaknesses. These are drawn together as a checklist for action in a pull-out centre section.

The most effective governing bodies are those which:

♦ agree the distinctive roles of the governing body and the headteacher;
♦ work together as a team, fostering a supportive, yet constructively critical, relationship with the headteacher;
♦ improve their knowledge and experience through regular training;
♦ develop their awareness of the community served by the school;
♦ keep themselves informed about standards of teaching and pupil achievement, using comparisons with other schools to put their own school’s performance into context.

The quality of leadership provided by the chair, the contribution of the headteacher and the administrative support provided by the clerk all help to determine whether the governing body makes an effective contribution to the life of the school. The work of the governing body will run smoothly if meetings are carefully planned with clear agendas that give appropriate priority to the most important issues. Matters that require more detailed consideration can be left to committees, which will be able to devote more time to them.

In the rare cases where governing bodies are in disarray local authorities, school inspectors, Diocesan Boards, and in the case of grant-maintained schools the Department for Education and Employment, the Welsh Office and the Funding Agency for Schools can all assist by responding to problems at an early stage and ensuring that appropriate help is made available.

In addition, senior officials and governor support staff at 15 LEAs were interviewed. The paper also draws on previous work on school governance by the Audit Commission and OFSTED.

Structure of this report

This report is divided into chapters, which consider in turn four issues which impact on governors’ effectiveness:

♦ defining the role;
♦ working practices;
♦ accountability; and
♦ influencing performance.

The final chapter makes suggestions about helping schools where the governing body seems to be breaking down.

The aim should be to develop a culture of cooperation and trust within the governing body
Defining the role of the school governing body

Overview

1. The main aim of the governing body is to maintain and improve its school's standards of education. Its work can be divided into five key areas (Diagram 1):

- **Steering**: agreeing the aims and values of the school; setting a policy on the curriculum, including any requirement for special education needs; setting budgets and approving school development plans; responding to inspection reports and publishing a post-inspection action plan.

- **Monitoring**: making sure that the school adheres to its policies, budgets and plans; keeping informed about the quality and standards of education in the school, including pupil achievement.

- **Executive**: taking direct responsibility for recruitment of senior staff and some disciplinary matters, while recognising the headteacher's responsibility for managing the school; contributing to the admissions policy and appeals system.

- **Accountability**: making sure parents are kept informed about what is happening in the school and that their views are taken into account.

- **Support**: supporting and advising headteachers, for example by giving financial management advice.

2. Individual governors usually do not have time to make a significant contribution in all these roles, but the governing body as a whole should fulfil all five roles. Responsibility for making decisions rests with the governing body as a whole.

3. There is no single correct division of responsibilities between governing bodies and headteachers. The Department for Education's *School Governors: A Guide to the Law* contains a useful chart showing the various tasks governing bodies and headteachers are required to perform in law, and a similar guide is produced by the Welsh Office for governors in Wales. But the way in which responsibilities are divided in practice will depend to some extent on the experience and wishes of the people involved. It is essential that both the headteacher and the governing body agree their respective responsibilities and review the effectiveness of these arrangements from time to time (Example 1).

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*Diagram 1
The different roles of governing bodies

The main aim of a governing body is to maintain and improve the standards of achievement in its school.*
Example 1
Defining boundaries between the roles of governing bodies and headteachers

The allocation of roles between governing bodies and headteachers will vary from school to school. One school's arrangement is described below.

There is no suggestion that this division of roles is applicable to all schools – it will not be suitable or sufficiently comprehensive for many. But it demonstrates how a headteacher and governing body managed to define their respective roles in ways with which they were both comfortable.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of responsibility</th>
<th>Governing body’s role</th>
<th>Headteacher’s role</th>
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</table>
| School aims and plan   | With the headteacher to:  
  – agree aims and values for the school;  
  – approve and set priorities in the plan;  
  – monitor how the plan is implemented. | Preparing costed proposals for the school development plan that are consistent with aims and priorities set by the governing body. Implementing the approved plan and reporting progress to the governing body. |
| Curriculum             | Setting policy and ensuring that it reflects statutory requirements. Monitoring the implementation of policy by the headteacher; including at least annual consideration of the standards achieved by pupils. | Determining and organising the detailed curriculum and assessment arrangements, including the use of resources, in line with the policy set by the governing body and by legislation. Monitoring the day-to-day delivery of the curriculum, including standards of teaching and learning. |
| Staffing               | Deciding the staffing structure and numbers. Appointing the headteacher and deputies and agreeing how their work will be appraised. Making arrangements for a panel for disciplinary hearings and an appeals committee. | Taking delegated responsibility for all other appointments and promotions in line with the governing body’s policies. Managing staff in accord with governing body policy including pay and conditions, staff appraisal, development and discipline. |
| Finance                | Receiving, amending and approving the budget. Approving the annual accounts and setting limits on the use of any surpluses (virement). Monitoring expenditure. | Managing the budget within guidelines set by the governing body. Ensuring financial procedures are correct and secure. |
| Charging               | Setting policy. | Implementing policy. |
'Governing bodies can take positive steps to improve their understanding of their own role, as well as their knowledge of how their school is run and the wider context of education policy'

4. Governing bodies can take positive steps to improve their understanding of their own role, as well as their knowledge of how their school is run and the wider context of education policy by organising the following:

♦ induction packs and courses for new governors;
♦ visits to the school to see how it is run in practice;
♦ briefings and training courses;
♦ information and professional advice services from outside agencies;
♦ joint discussion forums with governors from other schools.

Induction

5. New governors normally receive a pack containing the school's articles of government and a copy of School Governors: A Guide to the Law. Some schools produce a more helpful and comprehensive set of induction materials (Example 2). This should be extended by including the latest OFSTED inspection report when this is available. Many new governors also attend induction courses.

Example 2
Providing induction packs for new governors

A county primary school assembled its own induction pack for new governors. It included:

♦ the school prospectus;
♦ its admissions policy;
♦ a copy of the last annual report;
♦ the headteacher's most recent termly report;
♦ school policy statements;
♦ the current staff list;
♦ a list of governors, with pen portraits;
♦ the timetable for the next year's governors' meetings;
♦ terms of reference for all committees;
♦ briefing notes for governors from the LEA;
♦ a map of the school;
♦ a policy statement about visits to school; and
♦ procedures such as fire drill rules.
Visits to schools

6. Visits to schools need to be planned carefully to minimise disruption and to ensure that staff and pupils understand why the governors are visiting (Example 3). It can be helpful for individual governors to focus on a particular class, year-group or subject.

Training

7. The training that governors receive is often haphazard. Governing bodies should take a systematic approach to governor training and discuss it regularly. This gives governors an opportunity to report back on the courses they have attended. Other governing bodies link training more directly to matters they know they will be expected to deal with (Example 4, overleaf). Governing bodies should set aside a small budget for their training.

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Example 3
Planning school visits by governors to avoid wasted time and misunderstandings

A number of schools have made formal arrangements for governors’ visits. This makes the best use of time and avoids confusion about the purpose of the visit. In one school the procedures state that:

♦ visits will usually be made in connection with the school development plan and scheduled in advance;

♦ the purpose of the visit will be agreed with the headteacher;

♦ curriculum coordinators may liaise with the governor to provide guidance or information;

♦ any feedback from the visit will initially be given to the headteacher;

♦ the visit will be reported to the governing body, for example to raise its awareness of the way a particular part of the curriculum is being taught, or any staffing or budgetary issues that arise;

♦ the headteacher will keep staff fully informed about visits and any resulting feedback.
A number of governing bodies and headteachers regularly share their experiences with others through forums.

Example 4
Planning training

A governing body examined the overall school development plan and identified the points that would involve governors. They then drew up a specific development plan for the governing body. This set a timetable for discussing particular issues, linked to an informative programme of visits to the school.

Another school took a different approach. The intended training for governors was identified in the school development plan, alongside that of staff. The necessary resources were earmarked. The effectiveness of training was evaluated after an agreed period so the plan could be reviewed.

Information and professional advice services

8. As well as undertaking formal training, governing bodies should have access to a range of information, advisory and support services provided by LEAs and Diocesan Boards. In some cases these are paid for by the retained part of the authority’s education budget, but increasingly schools are themselves contracting in to such services or paying for them from their own budgets. Many LEAs send a newsletter to all their governors to help them to keep up to date with developments and publications. This is much quicker and simpler than routing information through the headteacher or chair of governors. Governing bodies of grant-maintained schools can obtain information and support from the Grant-Maintained Schools Centre. Services can also be bought in from local colleges and others. Governing bodies need to examine the cost and quality of such services with some care.

Joint forums

9. A number of governing bodies and headteachers regularly share their experiences with others through forums, which bring together several schools within a single LEA; administrative support is often provided by the authority. The Grant-Maintained Schools Advisory Committee also arranges joint meetings for governors and headteachers of grant-maintained schools.

10. Forums can help governing bodies to set the issues facing their own schools in a wider context and to foster links with other schools in the same area. They also provide an opportunity to discuss local and national policy, often with senior education officers or politicians.
Key questions

Questions for governing bodies

1. Do we have a written agreement setting out the respective roles of the governing body and the headteacher?

2. What induction, training and other information do we provide for new and existing governors? Do we have a small budget for this?

3. Do we have a programme of governors' visits to the school? Do we organise these properly, for example encouraging governors to develop a special interest in a particular class, year-group or subject?

4. How do we keep ourselves up to date with developments in education?

5. Do our governors attend meetings of a local governors' forum? If not, how can we join one or set one up ourselves?

Questions for the LEA

1. Do we send newsletters and other briefings to governors to keep them informed?

2. Do we support governor forums in our area?
Management Paper

Lessons in Teamwork

Working practices

11. Governors volunteer their time freely and it is important that it should be used as effectively as possible. This depends on:
- well organised meetings;
- a clear lead from the chair;
- planned agendas;
- reliable reports and information;
- an effective committee structure;
- good quality advice and administrative support.

Meetings

12. Governing body meetings should aim to strike a reasonable balance between informality and structured discussion. An approach that is too formal may silence governors who are not used to taking part in formal meetings. On the other hand, excessive informality may lead to unfocused discussion with the result that the governing body fails to monitor the school's performance and suggest ways of improving it. It may also inhibit the governing body from confronting difficult issues. A wholly uncritical approach does not help the headteacher to identify and resolve problems.

13. Decisions should normally be reached by consensus, although occasionally a formal vote will be needed. Once decisions have been taken, all governors should respect them and give them their backing outside the meeting.

14. Some governing bodies agree a time limit for their meetings which can be extended only by general agreement. This reduces the risk of governors taking poor decisions as a result of fatigue or a desire to get a late-running meeting over with.

15. A few governing bodies draw up an annual fixture list of meetings. An annual programme can be used to plan discussion of a regular cycle of issues, for example:
- Spring term: admission numbers; budget;
- Summer term: annual report to parents; review of progress on the development plan;
- Autumn term: analysis of exam results; updating the development plan.

16. Governing bodies that prepare an annual plan for meetings and identify the issues to be raised encourage governors to contribute to decision making at an early stage, reducing the risk that they have to 'rubber stamp' proposals because there is not enough time to change them.

17. The chair gives the lead in determining the governing body's style and maintaining a good working relationship with the headteacher. The chair can set a good example to other governors by asking fair but challenging questions of the headteacher, offering courteous advice and avoiding intrusion into areas which are the headteacher's responsibility. Sometimes the headteacher may need the advice of the chair in a difficult matter that technically does not require the governing body's endorsement. The chair should be careful not to imply that the governing body as a whole endorses a particular course of action.

18. The chair should ensure that every governor has ample opportunity to make a contribution. It is his or her job to prevent meetings being dominated by one or two governors and to make sure that the meeting arrives at a consensus. A quiet word of advice to an over dominant governor outside the meeting or a word of support for more retiring governors to encourage them to take a more assertive stance can help to ensure that a fair consensus is achieved.

19. Most chairs cope well with their role and give their headteacher valuable support. However, the job is demanding and time-consuming. That is why a number of governing bodies have decided to set a limit on the number of years for which the chair can be re-elected. This can ensure a periodic injection of fresh energy and thinking at the top.
Agendas

20. A clear agenda will help to ensure that meetings run smoothly. All the items to be dealt with should be listed and described clearly. It is unhelpful if important issues are raised without warning under headings such as 'headteacher’s report' or 'any other business'. The governing body will work more effectively if it controls the content of its agendas, so that standard agendas provided by the LEA are tailored to meet the body’s own needs. It is also important for all governors to be aware of how and when they can get items on to the agenda.

21. Background papers are more likely to encourage discussion if they are brief and contain clear summaries and recommendations. They should also be circulated well in advance of meetings to give governors time to think about the issues they raise. Governors will be able to deal with items more efficiently if they know whether they are being asked to reach a decision or simply take note of information.

22. The chair should ensure that time is allocated to items on the agenda according to their importance. This should help to avoid the governing body spending disproportionate time on more minor issues.

23. A helpful approach introduced by some schools is to circulate governors’ information bulletins containing routine information and news about the school. This avoids taking up time at meetings on giving routine information.

Reports and information

24. The headteacher is the main source of information for governing bodies. He or she can help governors to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their school by including comparisons with other schools in reports and explaining them clearly. One source of comparison is the Audit Commission’s report *Adding Up the Sums*, which gives information about costs in different schools (Example 5, overleaf). Examination league tables and the results of statutory testing will also help governors to judge standards in their schools.

25. Headteachers’ termly reports should look ahead as well as review past achievements and should forewarn governors of issues coming up or problems still to be dealt with.

26. Most governors are already conscious that excessive requests for information can involve the headteacher and other staff spending time which could otherwise be spent on teaching or managing the school.
Comparative data, published by the Audit Commission in *Adding Up the Sums*, can be used to review:

- the proportion of time teachers spend on preparing lessons and other activities where there is no contact with pupils ('Non-contact time');
- secretarial, clerical, financial and bursar's time paid from school budgets ('Administrators' hours');
- end-of-year balances on the budget;
- headteachers’ pay;
- the number of deputy headteachers;
- the proportion of time spent teaching by the headteacher and deputy head(s);
- delegated budgets and grants (the average delegated budget share per pupil received by LEA schools and the grants received by grant-maintained schools);
- average expenditure patterns in locally-managed schools (including sums allocated for pay, books and maintenance); and
- average points on the pay scale at which teachers are appointed (indicating the extent to which schools are relying on recently qualified teachers).

Committees

27. Most governing bodies find that committees are an effective way of handling business that cannot be dealt with in their termly meetings. They allow time for governors to analyse problems in more detail and help to bring school staff and others (for example community agencies) into the discussion. Sometimes committees have powers delegated to them by the main governing body (Example 6).

28. Effective committee work depends on:

- clear terms of reference or delegated powers;
- regular meetings;
- clear agendas and minutes;
- succinct reporting back to the governing body; and
- confidence that decisions will usually be endorsed by the governing body without the need for further debate.

29. Some schools have committees open to all governors and keep them informed of the times of meetings and the business to be considered. This kind of openness encourages trust, even if few governors other than those who are members of the committee attend.
Example 6

Setting up effective committee structures

A secondary school, whose use of committees had previously been limited to disciplinary panels, wanted to reduce the workload on its governing body. Structures adopted by other local schools were studied and three standing committees were established:

♦ Personnel and Finance: exercising all the governing body's powers with financial or staffing implications, except approval of the annual budget;

♦ Curriculum: given a monitoring and advisory role to review curriculum aims, monitor the delivery of the National Curriculum and act as a complaints committee on curricular matters; and

♦ Premises: monitoring the maintenance and cleaning of the buildings and advising on health and safety issues.

The governors agreed terms of reference, specifying the membership and co-option powers of committees, the quorum for each committee, meeting frequency, delegated powers, agendas, minutes and other clerking arrangements. It was decided that committee reports to the governing body should be informative but deliberately brief.

The governing body also established a coordinating committee of the chair, vice-chair and the committee chairs to resolve any areas of overlap and serve as a consultative group for the headteacher.

30. Some schools use working groups as an alternative to committees. They are set up for a specific purpose and for a limited period; for example they might be set up to review the school's policy on discipline and behaviour. They are able to examine the relevant issues thoroughly without adding permanently to the committee structure. Even so, like committees they need clear terms of reference and proper procedures for reporting back to the governing body.
Procedural advice and administrative support

31. Administration of meetings, including the preparation of agendas and minutes, is normally undertaken by the clerk to the governing body. In some governing bodies one of the governors or the headteacher acts as clerk and takes the minutes, but this effectively excludes them from much of the debate. The governing body will function more effectively if the clerk is not a governor.

32. Whoever performs the role, it is important that clerks receive training and support. Some of the most effective clerking we found was in schools where the LEA or Diocesan Board provided clear briefings for clerks at the start of each term covering the items governing bodies were obliged to consider and any other important issues they would need to discuss. Governing bodies may want to consider whether their own clerks receive comparable support, while LEAs and Diocesan Boards which do not provide support should consider doing so.

33. Headteachers are increasingly taking on the job of providing procedural advice and of warning governing bodies about proposals which may be improper or illegal. This means, of course, that in addition to their other responsibilities, they have to keep abreast of educational law. Although headteachers are usually the governing body’s chief adviser, governing bodies and headteachers may prefer occasionally to seek external advice, particularly if there might be some conflict of interest for the headteacher.
Checklist for action
Questions for governing bodies
and those who support them

Please pull out and copy

In their management paper *Lessons in Teamwork*, the Audit Commission and OFSTED identified questions for governing bodies and those who support them to ask themselves in order to identify ways of increasing their effectiveness.

These questions have been drawn together in this pull out checklist to be used to stimulate discussion, to help identify the issues that are a priority and the person who should take the lead in addressing them.
### Defining the role of the school governing body

#### Questions for governing bodies

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#### Questions for the LEA

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### Working practices

#### Questions for governing bodies

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Questions

7 Do we receive enough comparative information about other schools?

8 Do our committees and working groups have terms of reference, meet regularly and report back properly? Do we resist the temptation to go back over the ground again in detail?

9 Have we made sensible arrangements for the two clerking tasks of administration and providing the governing body with legal and procedural advice?

Accountability

Questions for governing bodies

1 Does the information in our annual report satisfy legal requirements?

2 Does the report compare the past year’s achievements with our planned targets and set out our aims for the future?

3 Is the report friendly and interesting to read and does it encourage parents to attend and contribute to the annual meeting?

4 Do we conduct the annual meeting in a way which encourages all parents attending to participate?

5 Do we keep in contact with parents through a newsletter or some other means?

6 Do we make sure parents are aware of our response to any matters raised at the annual meeting?

7 Have we reviewed our financial arrangements against the standards described in Adding Up the Sums and Keeping Your Balance?

Influencing performance

Questions for governing bodies

1 Do we bring our knowledge of the wider community served by the school to bear on our decisions?

2 Does the trust exist between ourselves and the school staff to allow an open discussion of strengths and weaknesses?

3 Are we well enough informed to play an active part in monitoring and improving standards of education?
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<td>4 Do we exert influence over the content of the school development plan?</td>
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<td>5 Do we monitor progress against the plan?</td>
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<td>6 Are we taking the necessary action when spending and other targets in the development plan are missed?</td>
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**Problems and some solutions**

**Questions for governing bodies**

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<td>1 Are we showing several of the signs of a governing body which is in difficulty?</td>
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<td>2 Do we welcome new recruits and involve them immediately in our work?</td>
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<td>3 Do we have good relations with local groups so that we can identify candidates for co-option?</td>
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<td>4 Do we occasionally discuss how we work as a team?</td>
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<td>5 If we have territorial disputes, have we and the headteacher discussed this self-critically?</td>
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<td>6 Are we all agreed on the need to stand by the governing body's decision?</td>
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<td>7 Are we able to get external support if we think that we have problems as a governing body?</td>
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**Questions for organisations that support governing bodies**

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<thead>
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<td>1 Do we have any schools with the symptoms of a breakdown in good governance?</td>
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<td>2 Do we monitor governor attendance and vacancies at the schools we support?</td>
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<td>3 Have we allocated some of our best volunteers to the exceptional schools where governance is in disarray?</td>
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<td>4 Are we able to help schools to resolve conflict among the governors or between the governing body and headteachers?</td>
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Key questions

Questions for governing bodies

1. Do we all have an opportunity to contribute to discussions?
2. Are we able to question the headteacher and hold him or her to account?
3. Does our chair help to improve our working together as a team?
4. Is all the business on our agenda important? Do we work through it effectively?
5. Do we have control over our own agendas? Can we get items added to the agenda when we need to?
6. Does the headteacher’s report give us an adequate impression of the school’s performance? Does it help us to look forward and to plan our work?
7. Do we receive enough comparative information about other schools?
8. Do our committees and working groups have terms of reference, meet regularly and report back properly? Do we resist the temptation to go back over the ground again in detail?
9. Have we made sensible arrangements for the two clerking tasks of administration and providing the governing body with legal and procedural advice?
Accountability

'Some annual reports... set the previous year's achievements in the context of the targets set in the school development plan and explain the aims and plans for the coming year'

34. Most governors have a strong sense of their accountability to parents and their responsibilities towards the school's staff and pupils. Despite this, many governing bodies could do more to improve the methods by which they account for their activities.

35. The law sets out a number of ways in which governing bodies must listen to the views of parents and keep them informed. These include:
   ♦ publishing an annual report;
   ♦ organising an annual meeting;
   ♦ making the non-confidential minutes of governing body meetings available to parents.

36. Additional methods used by some governing bodies to keep in contact with parents include:
   ♦ newsletters;
   ♦ displaying photographs of the governors in school, so they can be recognised;
   ♦ involving governors more closely in school functions and parents' meetings; and
   ♦ regular open sessions or 'surgeries'.

Annual reports

37. Some annual reports go further than simply presenting the information the law requires governing bodies to publish. They help parents to gain a better understanding of the school's performance by setting the previous year's achievements in the context of the targets set in the school development plan and explaining the aims and plans for the coming year.

38. Parents are more likely to read reports which are written in a clear and accessible style and are enlivened by illustrations – perhaps of children's work. The report provides an opportunity to show the way governors work and how they involve themselves in the school. The report should be frank about any problems or difficult issues that have arisen; encouraging parents to contribute their own ideas will give them a further incentive to attend the annual meeting where they will be able to express their views.

Annual meetings

39. Because attendance at annual meetings is often low, some governing bodies have tried to encourage parents to attend annual meetings by linking them to other, more popular school events. Others have looked at ways of redesigning the structure of the meeting to make it easier for parents to get involved and contribute ideas (Example 7).
Example 7
Involving parents in the annual meeting

The governors of a primary school wanted to make sure that they gave every parent who attended the annual meeting an opportunity to comment on the governors' report and plans.

At the meeting parents were invited to sit in small groups, each of which included a governor. This encouraged contributions from people who might have felt inhibited in a larger gathering.

After the meeting the governors met to discuss the matters raised and to prepare a written response that was sent to every parent.

40. However, low attendance is not disastrous; a small gathering may allow a better quality debate and make it easier for less confident parents to speak their minds. The governing body can encourage further dialogue by sending a note to all parents giving an account of the meeting and setting out its own response to the issues raised.

Example 8
Making financial accountability work well

- Governors see their role as supporting the school, but are able to question priorities for expenditure in open debate with the headteacher.
- School staff discuss plans for the next financial year's expenditure with governors in the autumn or before.
- Governors see the final budget in time to review it and approve it in March or before.
- The headteacher provides regular and simple reports comparing expenditure with budget in a format which the governors have agreed.
- Governors have adopted a scheme for devolving defined responsibilities for day-to-day financial decisions to the headteacher.
- There are formal procedures for ensuring that governors review and decide on major items of expenditure or changes to the budget.
- School staff identify any likely surplus in the budget and consult governors on how it should be used.
- There are sound controls and procedures.
- Financial decisions are recorded.
- The school is audited regularly and the governors and headteacher informed of the outcome.

Governing bodies are recommended, in addition, to establish a register of pecuniary interests for the governors and staff which should be open to inspection.

Surveys

41. Some governing bodies have carried out surveys of parents' views – either to canvass opinion before reaching a decision on a controversial issue or to get a better idea of the strengths and weaknesses of the school.

Financial accountability

42. The Audit Commission and OFSTED have provided schools with guidance on financial management in the reports Adding Up the Sums and Keeping Your Balance. These reports give an outline of good practice in financial accountability (Example 8).
Key questions

Questions for governing bodies

1. Does the information in our annual report satisfy legal requirements?

2. Does the report compare the past year’s achievements with our planned targets and set out our aims for the future?

3. Is the report friendly and interesting to read and does it encourage parents to attend and contribute to the annual meeting?

4. Do we conduct the annual meeting in a way which encourages all parents attending to participate?

5. Do we keep in contact with parents through a newsletter or some other means?

6. Do we make sure parents are aware of our response to any matters raised at the annual meeting?

7. Have we reviewed our financial arrangements against the standards described in *Adding Up the Sums and Keeping Your Balance*?
43. Some governing bodies exert a direct influence over their school’s performance. They are actively concerned with the priorities and targets the school sets itself, with the quality of education it provides and with pupils’ achievements. They recognise that:

♦ they can monitor and improve the standards of education in their school effectively provided they receive the right kind of comparative information (Example 9);

Example 9
Information needed to monitor standards

The governing body of a school reached agreement with the headteacher that he would provide them with a rolling programme of progress reports. These would cover the work of individual departments and the standards they achieved. The governors also considered details of other performance indicators, including:

♦ examination results and teacher predictions;
♦ national assessments;
♦ OFSTED findings;
♦ pupil success in further education;
♦ pupil success in the job market.

These gave the governors a solid basis for discussing their school’s current performance and for setting priorities in the school development plan.

♦ a good understanding of the community served by the school can contribute to more effective policy making (Example 10);

Example 10
Using knowledge of community issues to influence policy

Two governors of a large secondary school were concerned by reports of an increased use of drugs by teenagers. They knew that the school’s draft proposals for a health education policy had given little attention to this issue. They persuaded the headteacher to change the policy and include more teaching about drug misuse. An open evening was organised for parents and pupils to discuss the issues with an expert.
A high level of mutual trust between governing bodies and teaching staff makes it possible to deal openly and effectively with the school’s weaknesses (Example 11).

Example 11

Addressing the school’s weaknesses

The governors of a secondary school were concerned by the apparent weakness of its GCSE results in History and English compared with previous years. Discussion revealed that less favourable results in History had coincided with moving the department to a new location which suffered from high background noise levels. The governors changed their budget priorities to pay for better soundproofing.

The English results were found to have been affected by the ill health of a teacher. The governors recommended additional teaching support and adjusted their budget priorities accordingly.

School development plans

44. Unless they have taken steps to learn about the school, governors will find it difficult to query the headteacher’s priorities or to consider setting their own. They may be reduced simply to rubber stamping the school development plan. Examples of the types of information that help governors to play an active part in planning are:

♦ outline financial forecasts for the next three years or more, based on trends in pupil numbers, staff salaries and the costs of maintaining buildings and resources;

♦ the results of all internal reviews of the school’s work;

♦ any recommendations made by external reviewers, such as the LEA, registered inspectors, HM Inspectorate in OFSTED or OHMCI in Wales;

♦ details of pupil achievements, such as examination results;

♦ comparative data, such as details of reading standards in schools of a similar type and location;

♦ the headteacher’s recommendations for expanding or reducing the school’s activities in particular areas;

♦ the views of parents and the local community on the school’s present and future role.
45. Some governors feel that effective long-term planning is made difficult by circumstances beyond their control, such as:

♦ changes in the National Curriculum;
♦ the number and age breakdown of pupils;
♦ central government spending assessments and funding;
♦ the LEA’s funding formulae;
♦ competition from neighbouring schools and colleges.

46. This has led some schools to prepare costed plans for the coming year only. They feel that time spent on calculations whose basis is liable to change is time wasted. But the impact of changes that do occur will be harder to assess without some form of outline projection of the school’s financial situation (Example 12).

Monitoring plans

47. Having approved a school plan, the governing body should monitor its implementation. One governing body has improved its monitoring by giving each of its committees responsibility for reporting on a key element in the development plan. The minutes of the governing body meetings include brief details of these reports enabling parents to see what improvements have been made.

Example 12
Using outline financial projections in development plans

Two schools prepared outline five-year financial projections. These were based on projections of current trends including changes in pupil numbers, the cost of staff salaries and patterns of essential spending on fuel, buildings and equipment.

In one school governors soon discovered that falling pupil numbers and projected increases in staff salaries meant that the school’s income would cease to cover its expenditure in less than two years. This led them to launch a fundraising initiative and to postpone the appointment of a deputy headteacher.

In the second school the governors responded to projections of a rising pupil roll by bringing forward plans for a building extension. The school was able to introduce the associated curriculum and staffing changes smoothly.

48. Effective monitoring will not help the school unless the governing body is prepared to act on its findings. Governing bodies that identify the need to reduce or increase spending early are in a strong position to plan cuts or expansion that minimise disruption to pupils’ education.

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The NAO has published guidance on strategic planning and budgeting in its report Value for Money at Grant-Maintained Schools, and OFSTED have reviewed action plans in the report Planning Improvement.
Key questions

Questions for governing bodies

1. Do we bring our knowledge of the wider community served by the school to bear on our decisions?
2. Does the trust exist between ourselves and the school staff to allow an open discussion of strengths and weaknesses?
3. Are we well enough informed to play an active part in monitoring and improving standards of education?
4. Do we exert influence over the content of the school development plan?
5. Do we monitor progress against the plan?
6. Are we taking the necessary action when spending and other targets in the development plan are missed?
49. Most governing bodies work well, but occasionally governing bodies get into severe difficulties. The warning signs are:

♦ long-term vacancies;
♦ a poor attendance record by individual governors;
♦ going through the motions at meetings without addressing the responsibilities of a governing body;
♦ conflict between governors and the headteacher;
♦ too few governors making a significant contribution, allowing individuals or small groups to become dominant;
♦ failure to respect and abide by decisions.

50. Some of these problems may be eased by a clearer understanding of the governors’ roles, training, sound leadership and teamwork. These have been discussed in previous chapters. However, success will still greatly depend on being able to recruit governors with the necessary commitment, calibre and motivation.

Recruitment and retention

51. Recruitment should be considered regularly by governing bodies – not just when vacancies are imminent. The best recruiting advertisement is the way the existing governing body conducts itself. A governing body will find it easier to recruit if:

♦ its work is visible and effective;
♦ it is seen to value the contribution of all its members;
♦ it welcomes the involvement of parent and teacher governors;
♦ it involves parents in the school;
♦ it has efficient procedures.

52. The first few meetings that a new governor attends can be critical. Chairs need to ensure that they are given opportunities to become involved and contribute fully in discussions. Involving them in the work of committees is a useful way of doing this from the start.

53. The role of governors must be appealingly communicated. Too often the ‘ordinary people’ for whom this type of public participation was designed undervalue themselves. They may wrongly suppose, for example, that schools only want people with skills such as accountancy or personnel management. It cannot, therefore, be stated too often that ‘someone like you can do it’ and that what is really needed is someone who understands that education matters and that schools are worth his or her commitment. Thought should be given to pre-recruitment briefing, since attracting people with a prospectus that either underestimates the commitment required or overestimates the difficulties is pointless.

54. Governors should always be on the lookout for suitable members to co-opt. A governing body that has forged good relationships with local community organisations will be in a stronger position to co-opt.

55. Where a school’s catchment area does not generate enough committed volunteers, the bodies responsible for appointing governors have a crucial role to play. They need to select their best volunteers to serve in these schools.
Territorial disputes

56. Tension within governing bodies and with the headteacher can, within limits, be used creatively and lead to a better understanding of the issues. But in some cases it leads to a breakdown of trust, which often attracts public attention. The difficulties of governing bodies in this situation most often relate to the inability of the headteacher and chair to work together. But problems have also arisen where a governing body has been determined to make radical changes to the school with more haste than is practicable or where the staff are entrenched against necessary change.

57. Where tensions exist between the headteacher and the governing body over demarcation lines, both sides must be mercilessly self-critical. Headteachers may need to recognise that they could be preventing the governing body from playing its full, legitimate part in the life of the school and trying to keep too much power for themselves.

58. Likewise, governors may need to acknowledge that perhaps they are taking too much on themselves. They may be interfering in the running of the school or have inadvertently upset teachers by keeping themselves aloof and by devoting too little time to staff concerns. In their eagerness to instigate change, they may also have forgotten to say positive things about the school as well as being critical. The first step towards restoring diplomatic relations in these circumstances is for governors to think carefully about occasions when they may, perhaps innocently, have overstepped the mark.

59. Training coordinators can help governing bodies in this situation by organising opportunities for the governors to spend time with the headteacher discussing their respective spheres of responsibility and activity. Such training should involve the entire governing body to ensure that everyone is made aware of his or her role as part of the team.

Poor teamwork

60. Recognising that a problem exists may often be half the solution. One of the best things that governing bodies can do is to place 'teamwork' on the agenda for the first meeting of each school year – making it possible to debate shortcomings without personalising them. Discussions could also include:

• ways to ensure that all interest groups within the governing body are represented at decision-making meetings;
• whether work can be shared better to achieve a fairer allocation of tasks between individual governors; and
• the relationship between the headteacher, governors and their chair (preferably before the latter is elected).

The aim should be to develop a culture of cooperation and trust within the governing body.
Unclear or unsupported decisions

61. Much confusion can arise from poor chairing at meetings. However, the headteacher will often be in a position to clarify the proposals and issues being discussed, and individual governors can insist on having adequate time to reflect on any decisions. Decisions should always be recapped – preferably by the chair – so that everyone is clear about what has been agreed. But if the outcome is critical or sensitive, there should be general discussion to agree a minute that clearly states what is to be done, who will do it, by when and reporting to whom.

62. Remedying the problem of governors who publicly disown decisions after they have been taken requires more than an occasional appeal for greater unity. It depends on regularly emphasising the fact that responsibilities are corporately exercised and that team loyalty is essential—even taking precedence over the particular role of a parent or teacher governor and loyalty to their particular group.

Help from outside

63. Sometimes governing bodies can benefit from outside help in resolving their problems. Some LEAs provide a 'director's representative' to help governors analyse and resolve destructive behaviour. Other schools have found that group training sessions with an experienced facilitator can help them confront the problems of poor teamwork identified above.

64. Occasionally, a governing body's concerns about educational standards stem from a lack of confidence in the headteacher's ability. If so, it can be helpful to seek a second opinion about the appropriate course of action. This advice may be provided by the LEA or Diocesan Board. Governors of grant-maintained schools can seek advice from the Grant-Maintained Schools Centre.
Key questions

Questions for governing bodies

1. Are we showing several of the signs of a governing body which is in difficulty?

2. Do we welcome new recruits and involve them immediately in our work?

3. Do we have good relations with local groups so that we can identify candidates for co-option?

4. Do we occasionally discuss how we work as a team?

5. If we have territorial disputes, have we and the headteacher discussed this self-critically?

6. Are we all agreed on the need to stand by the governing body's decision?

7. Are we able to get external support if we think that we have problems as a governing body?
Questions for organisations that support governing bodies

1. Do we have any schools with the symptoms of a breakdown in good governance?

2. Do we monitor governor attendance and vacancies at the schools we support?

3. Have we allocated some of our best volunteers to the exceptional schools where governance is in disarray?

4. Are we able to help schools to resolve conflict among the governors or between the governing body and headteachers?