

The Essential Guide for School Governors in Gloucestershire

The vital stuff you, as a committed volunteer, need to know to be an effective governor

Compiled by a joint team of Gloucestershire governors, head teachers and Local Authority officials, and endorsed by Gloucestershire Children and Young People's Directorate

It is almost taken for granted that as a committed volunteer you will turn up at school events, prepare for and attend meetings on time, ask questions, challenge assumptions, and generally do all you can to make your school the best it can be. But nobody takes for granted the time and energy involved. Thank you. Your support for the children and young people of Gloucestershire is really appreciated.

This guide assumes:

- You have met with your Head Teacher and are familiar with the general running of the school
- You have been briefed by your Chair and Clerk to Governors on how your Governing Body (GB) operates, its committees, proceedings and protocols at meetings, etc
- You have attended the one-day Initial Training Course For New Governors arranged by Gloucestershire Governor Services
- You understand that you must never operate individually, but always as part of the GB team
- You are fully committed as a member of that team to being a true 'critical friend' to your school, intent on ensuring it is and remains 'the best it can be'

Thereafter you have three clear duties as a governor:

1. **Know what you individually *must* know – and what the GB as a team *may* need to do - to ensure pupils at your school are getting the education they deserve: read and totally digest Section 1 below**
2. **Contribute to the future strategic development of your school: Section 2**
3. **Be aware of the range of detailed Governor Reference works: Section 3**

SECTION 1: What you must know – and what the GB *may* need to do

Two key questions:

A. Is yours a 'good' school educationally?

Three specifics you must know and be involved in:

1. **The School Self Evaluation Form (SEF):** School self-evaluation is a crucial activity which all governors should be involved in – 'where are we now, where is the evidence that supports this, and what we have to do to improve further' – judgements agreed by the GB and recorded in a standardized (Ofsted) format. You must be thoroughly familiar with your SEF, usually through

regular reviews at GB meetings. **Expect to see this document regularly and be thoroughly involved in keeping it updated.**

2. **School Improvement Partner (SIP) Targets:** Each year your SIP (a serving/ recently retired Head or equivalent appointed by the Local Authority [LA]) meets with the Head and representative Governors to agree a set of specific targets for that academic year; and then reports on the achievement of these targets. **Ask for a copy of the last SIP report. Ask for the current list of targets and be thoroughly familiar with them – and contribute actively at GB meetings in monitoring progress/ achievement.**
3. **Ofsted report.** Ofsted will also inspect your school at least every three years (sooner if it has had problems) to provide an independent judgment on overall performance. **Ask for and read thoroughly the latest Ofsted report – and again contribute actively at GB meetings in addressing any weaknesses identified in the report.**

If all the school targets are being achieved, continue to support and enjoy the school and push to make it even better (the best it can be!). Celebrate the successes, and consider if your good practices might be useful to other schools (collaboration between adjacent schools is growing and benefits everyone).

If targets are consistently not being achieved, your GB should consider bringing in LA advice and support (your SIP or the LA will advise on who is available). Not to do so is to ignore the best interests of your local children - the very reason you became a Governor. Have no doubts about the need for your GB to take positive action if it is necessary.

B. Is your school well run?

The level of complaints from parents and the community (genuine complaints, you will quickly learn what is not 'genuine') is a general indicator as to whether the school is properly managed and run. Behaviour, bullying and exclusion statistics are others, and also the routine administration - happy staff, paperwork in good time, end of year accounts clear and convincing, etc. The Ofsted report will also inform you on this. Monitor the overall picture, and ask penetrating questions if in any doubt.

It is not your job to get involved in individual complaints or issues. Governors do not 'run' schools - that is solely the job of the Head. You should therefore never find yourself in the middle of 'how to' issues regarding the way the school goes about its role as an educational establishment, or particularly in any issue involving individual staff or pupils. Remember governors are not permitted to even enter the school without the Head's permission.

It is the responsibility of the GB to prevent (or at least minimise) such complaints/issues by ensuring the school has good, clear policies within which it operates.

There are some 30 mandatory policies, which every GB must publish, ranging from Child Protection and

Pupil Behaviour through to Admissions Policy and Staff Pay. Most are based on model policies provided by the Department for Children and Families (DCSF) or the LA. They should be up to date - ie at least reviewed and re-signed within the past year; and they must be readily available for governors, staff, pupils and parents to refer to on a daily basis. So you have a clear duty here as well:

Ask to see all your school's policies (if not already on your school website, this is an ideal place – try to make that happen). Scan each to ensure they are updated and make reasonable sense.

Pursue any queries with the committee that looks after that particular policy.

It is too late when a serious allegation arises at your school to find that the particular policy covering how it should be investigated is out of date or missing!

If it becomes clear the school is not well run, your first action (as a GB) should be to review and update - and certainly re-advertise - the appropriate policies. If it becomes clear that the policies are adequate, but simply not being followed, then once again your GB has no choice but to involve LA advice and support. Under no circumstances try to involve individual governors in rectifying poor practices internally. Governors are not entitled or equipped to do so, and it could simply result in relationship problems with the Head. Call in the professionals.

School Profile. One final responsibility that will keep you up to date with how your school is performing is the School Profile (replaces the old 'Governors Annual Report to Parents'). This web-based document (www.schoolsfinder.direct.gov.uk) has to be published by the GB at the end of July each year, and is designed to provide parents particularly with a full picture of how the school is performing. You should be thoroughly familiar with your School Profile and contribute to its ongoing development and publication – **read it and get involved as a priority.**

SECTION 2: The Future – Strategic Vision and Direction

Governors are also responsible for 'Strategic Vision and Direction' – ie keeping up with and planning for change to ensure yours will remain a good school into the future. In the short term this is generally achieved by maintaining a 'School Development (or 'Improvement') Plan' (SDP) - in the longer term by perhaps contributing to 'future strategy' meetings. Both will increasingly involve looking beyond school bounds, to the local community and to collaboration with other schools as education moves progressively towards integrated services for children and young people.

Ask to see and remain familiar with the SDP, raise questions at GB meetings on progress and benefits. Try also to keep up with the mass of educational publications and newsletters on offer, and certainly scan governornet and teachernet websites occasionally. Keep yourself up-to-date with what is on the educational horizon generally so you contribute positively to GB discussions and decisions on the future direction of your school.

SECTION 3: Governor reference documents

There is a multitude of reference works that you may need to get into at some stage - but do not be daunted by them, just be aware that they exist if and when you need them:

- 'Guide to the Law for School Governors' (the ultimate 'legal bible' - download from the red box top-right at <http://www.governor.net.co.uk/>)
- DfES (now DCSF) 2000 guidance 'Roles of Governing Bodies and Head Teachers'
- DfES (now DCSF) 2004 guidance 'Governing Schools of the Future'
- National Audit Office 2006 'A Guide for School Governors'
- www.governor.net.co.uk (covers just about everything, right up to date - essential reading)
- Your school may also have produced its own information pack or guide for governors

Your Clerk will assist if you need to get into the detail of any of these for a particular issue or occurrence; and Gloucestershire Governor Services are also specifically established to advise and support with any queries, telephone 01452 425113, or visit www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/governors. Governor Services also provide a range of training programmes for governors, both school based and central courses. Details are available on the website. If yours is a faith school, the diocesan authorities are also an invaluable source of advice and support. The Gloucestershire Governors Association (www.glosgovs.org.uk) and The National Governors Association (www.nga.org.uk) are further useful sources of information and advice.

In summary

1. Know if the educational provision in your school is good (SEF, SIP targets/achievement and Ofsted reports)
2. Monitor and update school policies to ensure the 'running' framework is sound
3. Leave the day-to-day running of the school to the Head
4. Take positive action as a GB if things are not right by calling in appropriate LA professionals
5. Monitor and contribute to the annual School Profile
6. Stay up to date with and contribute to the ongoing School Development/Improvement Plan
7. Stay abreast of developments in education and the longer term implications for your school
8. Be familiar with the reference documents (visit www.governor.net.co.uk particularly)
9. And finally, recognise and celebrate - and enjoy - every success at your school

The different categories of Governor include Parent, Staff, LA Appointed, Community and Foundation or Partnership, every one of them volunteers. Indeed together you constitute one of the country's largest voluntary groups with around 345,000 school governors contributing to strategic development and raising standards of achievement at over 30,000 schools.

Thank you again to all the volunteer governors in Gloucestershire. Your contribution to the education and well-being of the children and young people in our area is invaluable.