

Introduction

The GBA is the sectoral body representing the Boards of Governors (Managing Authorities) of the 50 Voluntary Grammar schools in Northern Ireland. The GBA provides policy information, advice and support for members, as well as representing their views to the Department of Education, politicians, policy makers, media and other educational stakeholders.

The GBA Executive Committee members are drawn from the Boards of Governors of their constituent schools. Co-opted members are added as and when required, bringing additional professional skills, experience, and expertise to the work of the Committee.

The GBA is the representative body for over 750 governors serving on the Boards of Voluntary Grammar schools. As the only sectoral organisation to represent school governors in Northern Ireland, we welcome the opportunity to input into the Department's review of governance.

The headings in this response follow the format of the School Governance team's review paper.

Skills

The role of a school governor is entirely voluntary and unpaid with the overall objective of improving the educational experience of the pupils at the school. Governors are responsible for a wide variety of tasks and statutory obligations including setting the strategic direction of the school, recruitment of staff, monitoring and scrutiny of spending, as well as school improvement.

To support these functions within a school it is vital to have a Board membership which is comprised of diverse, complementary skills, and experience.

It is important to note that governors in Voluntary Grammar schools have additional responsibilities compared to those in controlled or maintained school settings. These enhanced responsibilities will include:

- as the employing authority the Board is responsible for the employment of teaching and non-teaching staff within the school. They are responsible for supporting and holding staff to account
- maintenance of school premises
- responsibility for all insurance within the school
- procurement

- financial management and publication of audited accounts
- capital grant aid and build programmes. Category B Voluntary Grammar schools are entirely responsible for funding any capital programmes within their schools. In addition, there are a number of category A Voluntary Grammar schools that receive 85% funding from the Department of Education and are responsible for financing the balance of any capital costs.

There is a requirement for Boards to be compliant with their legal obligations, policies, and for procedures to be effective. It is essential that governors are supported in these areas through the provision of robust guidance and training.

Governor skills should support the delivery of the key tasks outlined above. The GBA considers that the following attributes and competencies are helpful to the operation of the Board (please note that this is not an exhaustive or ranked list):

- experience of working in an education/youth work setting
- human resources knowledge
- financial and legal knowledge
- business planning
- leadership
- community knowledge
- communication skills
- project management
- estate management

The GBA agrees with the feedback received by the School Governance team from pre-survey engagement that governors should have 'softer skills' in areas such as:

- teamwork
- problem-solving
- time management
- critical thinking
- decision-making
- organisational
- collegiality
- stress management

Each Voluntary Grammar school will vary in terms of governor numbers and composition as well as Scheme of Management. It is vital that the Department collaborates with schools regarding the auditing of skills they require on the Board and, where possible, address any skills deficit through the DE appointment process. A skills audit should be conducted by each Board every two years.

Recruitment

Reconstitution of Boards of Governors in Voluntary Grammar schools is not synchronised with controlled or maintained schools. Therefore, resourced campaigns will need to take place which will coincide with each recruitment cycle.

It is imperative that Boards reflect wider society which means we must examine and develop ways to increase the diversity of the composition of Boards e.g., gender balance, ethnic communities' involvement, age profile of governors and develop mechanisms which will target under-represented groups.

Potential promotion opportunities:

- Print Media. Advertising. Also features such as - *About my Job* in Irish News and Belfast Telegraph will allow opportunity to profile governors
- Websites – prominent links on DE, EA, CCMS and sectoral organisation websites. Explore effectiveness of websites such as *Inspiring Governance* <https://www.inspiringgovernance.org/> which links skilled volunteers with governor vacancies and replicate if appropriate.
- Engagement – Professional organisations and companies e.g., IoD, CBI, CIPR, Law Society, RICS, Chartered Accountants, PWC, EY, Marks and Spencer's. Encourage them to profile governor opportunities and the development of transferrable skills amongst membership and employees.
- Engagement- Community and Voluntary Sector – NICTU, NICVA, NICEM
- Social Media – Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok – video campaigns, dedicated pages, sponsored posts.
- Business in the Community promotes volunteerism – look at synergies there.
- Explore merits of engaging PR firm to develop a campaign.
- Use on-line real-life examples of governors, their experience and skills, to attract new applicants.

Vetting

The GBA is supportive of enhanced mandatory Access NI checks for all DE appointments. This will support safeguarding and child protection in schools.

The advantages of enhanced checks include:

- details of spent and unspent convictions from the Police National Computer
- cautions, informed warnings and other non-court disposals from the Police National Computer
- information held by the Disclosure and Barring Service (for positions in regulated activity)
- information held by the police that is relevant to the role applied for

Other appointing authorities should consider enhanced checks on all appointments and re-appointments. As governors are volunteers this service should be free of charge.

Appointment Term

The GBA notes that public appointments usually have a two-term limit and in general the GBA is supportive of this although there must be flexibility for operational purposes. For example, Category B Voluntary Grammar schools have a unique context (as set out in the skills section on P1).” With estate planning and financial controls being very complex and planning up to 20 years ahead e.g., replacing school buildings, a two-term limit would restrict the business of the school.

Ideally, other nominating bodies will follow this best practice guidance as advocated by the Commissioner for Public Appointments. However, as noted in the case of Category B schools there may be legitimate business and educational reasons why this may not always be the case.

Conflicts of Interest

The GBA is supportive of the practice of recording existing and potential conflicts of interest.

A conflict not listed can include governorship on another Board of Governors in a neighbouring school.

Development of a model conflict of interest policy would be a useful guidance document for schools and would be welcomed by the GBA.

Advice and Guidance

The GBA believes that *Every School a Good School – A Governor Guide* needs to be annually updated. It would be helpful if the guide would give more support to the role and responsibilities of the Chair and defining each governor type e.g., teacher representative or parent.

The Chairperson of the Board of Governors and the Principal should be encouraged to develop an agenda that recognises potential conflicts of interest for teacher representatives. They should also meet with teacher representatives, following their appointment, to help support them and be clear in defining their role as a governor in accordance with the Scheme of Management.

As the representative body for Boards of Governors, the GBA is best placed to offer specific guidance and support to governors of Voluntary Grammar schools. We would not support an EA/DE 'Link Officer' approach as this could cause indemnification issues.

Training

Provision of more sector specific training modules is required. As previously stated, governors in Voluntary Grammar schools have additional responsibilities such as the employer function and therefore generic training may not be appropriate. The GBA has already supplied an online resource to assist with the training of governors in our member schools. We would welcome the opportunity to engage and develop more sector specific training to support the Boards of Governors in Voluntary Grammar schools. The importance of governor induction and on-going development should be reflected in training modules.

If training is to return to a face-to-face format, it should have introductory modules to coincide with the various reconstitution dates. Consideration should be given to making some training modules compulsory e.g., safeguarding, financial management, recruitment and selection as well as the Board's part in the ETI Inspection process.

On-going training should emphasise the governors' role in how Boards set, monitor, and evaluate the strategic direction of the school.

Communication

The GBA is the only sectoral organisation with a monthly newsletter with advice and information for our school governors. The GBA will work with DE to ensure that our network is receiving relevant and timely guidance, information, and advice.

Governors have to deal with a wide range of confidential communications and documents. As the Department will be aware the EA has established working groups to help deliver EdIS. To ensure that communications are secure in this digital age consideration should be given to adding school governors to the email system under the new EdIS services.

We also host an Annual General Meeting for governors of our member schools, when attendees receive relevant training, guidance, and support as well as talks from guest speakers on relevant educational issues.

Code of Conduct

The GBA would welcome the opportunity to contribute to a model conflict of interest policy as we believe a guide on accepted behaviours would be helpful. Guidance is required on the mechanism for removing governors from Boards when, on very rare occasions, there is unprofessional behaviours.

Working Relationships

Effective governance is a key component of leadership and management of a school, especially true of the Chairperson and school Principal roles. Strong relationships between school leaders and governors are essential for ensuring that schools thrive. Weak or adversarial relationships can lead to vulnerable decision-making and ultimately, a school not reaching its full capacity.

The PRSD process can test the relationship between a school leader and a Board of Governors. It is imperative that Governors are provided with adequate training and support for this role, including external, impartial validation of the process.

DE can support these relationships through the provision of guidance and quality training.

Meetings

Principals or Bursars often serve as secretaries to the Board of Governors. It is important that they are supported in this role through the attendance of a minute taker and/or business manager (where resources allow this).

Challenges & Support

The GBA acknowledges the vast array of skills brought by governors to facilitate the operation of our member schools. Governors deliver their skills and talents on a volunteer basis to ensure the provision of a quality education experience for children and young people. We do not believe that governors need more oversight from DE or EA. From the outset of appointment, we should be

equipping governors with the necessary knowledge to support and grow in their new role. This must include regularly updated guidance, relevant and regular training as well as the provision of model policies.

Learning from Covid

The GBA welcomes the facilities for online training and meeting. However, we value the ability to be able to meet face-to-face which can lead to a better and more interactive level of engagement. We would support the use of both online and face-to-face meetings and training going forward.

Scheme of Management Review

As representative organisation for Governing Bodies, the GBA would have to be involved with the Scheme of Management Review. Any review of Schemes of Management also requires the participation of Trustees, Transferors and school owners.

The GBA notes the comments regarding EU and Boarding matters contained in the survey response document. The GBA urges the Department to engage with [Boarding NI](#) on policy matters relating to Boarding Departments.

Governor Self-Assessment

Self-assessment is a useful tool for Boards. As you will be aware the Area Planning process has recommended that Board of Governors also regularly review the sustainability of the school and there may be synergies with these self-assessment processes. Consideration should be given to a 360-review assessment on the effectiveness of the Chair and the Board on a biennial basis.

Recruitment

In Voluntary Grammar schools the Board of Governors is the employer of all staff. Therefore, it would not be appropriate for school leaders to be responsible for the governor appointments process. There is a clear conflict of interest if school Principals were responsible for the appointment of governors. It would not be compatible with the Nolan Principles of Openness and Integrity.

Conclusion

The core function of the Board of Governors is to ensure clarity of vision, ethos and strategic direction while sensitively holding the headteacher to account for the educational performance of the school and its students and the performance management of staff, while overseeing the financial performance of the school and ensuring value for money is achieved in financial matters.

Governors work with the headteacher and senior leadership team to drive the strategic development of the school and raise standards of achievement.

To affect such a pivotal and vital role the governing Board should have an ethos of high expectations of everyone in the school community, including high expectations for behaviour, progress and attainment of all pupils, and for the conduct and professionalism of both staff and governors.

The GBA has worked to improve the quality of school governance in Voluntary Grammar schools and has built up a level of experience and expertise in assisting schools toward good governance practices and standards. The review of school governance by DE is timely and to be welcomed. The GBA looks forward to participating in the next stages of the review and to contributing positively to this important work in the interest of schools, students, and their communities.