

External Review of Governance



Governor Services

Providing comprehensive support for clerking, training and development

Bolton Council

External review of governance

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Foreword

School governance has changed rapidly over recent years and the role of school and academy governance has never been so pivotal in ensuring the improvement of educational performance and opportunities for all children.

Governing and Trust boards are made up of people from a variety of backgrounds who can contribute their skills and experience to what is one of the most important voluntary roles in schools and academies. Through their strategic leadership, boards are key to improving performance and ensuring that resources are used effectively so that every child has the best possible education.

The framework for inspection reflects the importance of governance and, through inspection, Ofsted have identified that evidence indicates that there is a relationship between effective governance, the quality of leadership and management, and the quality of provision and pupil achievement.

Whilst being a governor or trustee can be a rewarding experience, we are all too aware of the increasing demands and responsibilities of the role. Although there are many sources of information and advice available, the Bolton Governor Services Team provides accessible local services to allow all governors, trustees and leaders within the Bolton Family the opportunity to access good quality guidance and support in order to strengthen strategic leadership and accountability in schools and academies.

The Service recognises the time and commitment given by individuals to this important voluntary role and therefore endeavours to provide support and guidance to assist wherever possible. The programme of External Review provided by the Bolton Governor Services Team will not only provide validation of the work of the board but also highlight any areas for improvement and recommend appropriate action where necessary. Information about the external review process and the programmes available to governing and trust boards are detailed further within this booklet.

External validation

External validation allows for a judgement to be made following a scrutiny of the systems and practices in place drawn from evidence presented to a reviewer or assessor. Through self-evaluation, governing and trust boards can make a judgement of their own or their school's performance; however, an external perspective is also useful and can be seen as having 'fresh eyes' on a particular situation or task in hand.

Having someone external from the board to assess their own practices or performance can highlight strengths and also potential areas for improvement which may have been missed. Validation can also back up statements made by the school and board and can reassure governors and trustees that they are on the right path for improvement.

What is a review of governance?

An external review of governance looks at how well a governing or trust board is operating within its strategic core functions. An external reviewer works with the chair of the board, head teacher/principal and a selection of governors or trustees to improve the performance of the board.

The review is offered as support to improve and develop governance and should not be seen as an additional inspection. It is seen as good practice to engage external validation on a regular basis to ensure improvement and stability. The review will help the board identify strengths and weaknesses together with priorities for improvement and development, and provide support on what steps to take. The review will also provide advice and guidance in order to assist to move governance from an Ofsted Inspection rating of 'requires improvement' to at least 'good'.

A Review of Governance will help the governing or trust board to:

- Be more skilled, focused and effective;
- Be more aware of the freedoms that it has to work in different ways;
- Be clear in its vision for the school or academy and how, together with the school leadership team, it can achieve this;
- Be confident that it has a clear delineation of roles and responsibilities;
- Have the right number of skilled and committed governors to meet the needs of the school or academy.

Why request a review?

Governing and trust boards do not need to wait for an Ofsted inspection recommendation to seek a review. A review of governance can be arranged at any time to improve the effectiveness of the work of the board.

A governing or trust board will receive a recommendation for a review of governance if an Ofsted Section 5 Inspection finds that governance is weak in a school judged to require improvement, or that leadership and management is graded as 'requires improvement'.

In some cases, where a school or academy has been judged as 'requires improvement', later monitoring visits may also result in a recommendation for a review of governance. The issues that Ofsted have identified in boards include:

- Governors or trustees not ambitious about expectations;
- lack of a 'critical friend' approach;
- over reliance on information from the head teacher/principal;
- lack of systematic visits to school;
- lack of engagement with school development planning;
- limited role in monitoring, and none of it 'independent';
- limited understanding of data and school quality.

If an Ofsted inspection report recommends a review of governance, the monitoring inspector will expect it to be undertaken in a timely manner.

It is important to bear in mind that a governing or trust board can choose whoever they want to conduct a review of governance; however, it is highly recommended that they ensure that the reviewer has a good understanding of governance and has successful experience of leading governors and school improvement.

The Bolton Governor Services Team provides experienced officers who have a wealth of experience of working with governing and trust boards on matters of school and academy governance. The Service keeps abreast of all developments affecting governance and works with external partners such as Ofsted, The Department for Education, The National Governors' Association and The National Co-ordinators of Governor Services, in order to provide the most relevant and up to date advice and support.

Principles and protocols of the review

The Bolton Governor Services Team would recommend that when a review of governance is conducted, the following principles and protocols are followed:

Principles

- The review is offered as support to improve and develop governance and will begin with a review of a governing body's or trust board's current situation. It is not intended as an additional inspection but is about helping the board to address the issues that could have been raised during an Ofsted inspection. However, where applicable, the review is linked to and built on the Ofsted report and evaluation criteria so that the board is able to understand its strengths and weaknesses and the basis upon which it will be judged in subsequent monitoring visits and inspections.
- The review is based around a process of externally supported self-review.
- The review is manageable in terms of time and process.
- The reviewer leading a review should be able to evidence a track record of supporting schools in improving governance.
- The review should be sufficiently flexible to take account of the differing needs, contexts and size of schools and trusts.
- The review should be robust and comprehensive and provide clear evidence-based recommendations about how governance might be improved in order to support the required improvement in school performance.

Behaviour and protocols

- The reviewer will aim to build confidence and capacity.
- The review should be based on trust and mutual respect.
- All parties should respect confidentiality and encourage transparency.
- Reviewers will use their experience and skills to assist the chair of the board and the governing or trust board to identify appropriate priorities, solutions and actions.
- Where possible, the governing or trust board feels ownership of the outcomes of the review.

Review options

The extent of the review will be agreed between the reviewer and the governing or trust board depending on the level of support required. Whilst initially each review will be undertaken as a 'core review', it may be appropriate for additional support to be purchased as necessary. The programmes of support available are detailed below. Information on costs can be gained via the application proforma or by contacting the Governor Services Team directly.

Please note that charges may vary for federations and multi-academy trusts depending on the complexities of the governance arrangements. These can be discussed with the reviewer prior to the review taking place.

Model A – Core review (default model)

This model follows the steps listed on pages 10 to 11 of this booklet.

A copy of the External Review of Governance folder and materials, including self-review and resource documentation will be provided as part of the core review.

Review Timeline: 1 - 4 weeks

Model B – Core review plus two additional elements

This model includes the core review plus the following two elements:

- Meeting with other governors or trustees – for example, chairs of committees or local boards to discuss how the governing or trust board functions and what might help it be more effective, this may include a development session based on the recommendations of the review
- Observation of a full governing or trust board meeting, or a committee or local governing board meeting to support the chair in exploring ways in which the board or trust can work more effectively.

Review Timeline: 4 - 8 weeks

Model C – Enhanced review

This model includes the core review, the additional elements listed in Model B, plus a three or six month monitoring meeting with the chair and head teacher/principal to evaluate the implementation and effectiveness of the board's action plan, in terms of overall improvement of the board. A concise evaluation letter will be provided by the reviewer as evidence of the progress made by the board and any further recommendations as part of the action plan.

Review Timeline: 3 - 6 month after publication of report

Core review programme (model A)

A copy of the External Review of Governance folder and material, including self-review and resource documentation will be provided as part of the core review. The content and process of the review will be based on sound and relevant documentation, including:

- Framework for External Review of Governance (National College for Teaching and Learning)
- Criteria for the Effectiveness of Governance, based on the Quality of Leadership in and Management of the School (Ofsted School Inspection Handbook)
- Twenty Key Questions for Governors / Twenty One Questions for Multi-Academy Trusts (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Education Governance & Leadership)

The content of the review and self-review process will be based around the key areas of vision, ethos and strategic direction; accountability; financial probity and effective governance practice.

The expected steps of the core review programme are as follows:

1. Initial discussion

The appointed reviewer, chair and head teacher/principal to have a preliminary conversation to provide an overview of the process involved.

2. First meeting

The reviewer will meet with the chair and head teacher/principal (and another governor or trustee and/or member of the leadership team as appropriate) to:

- discuss the context and needs of the school
- explain the principles and protocols of the review
- explain the content, process and timeline of the review
- discuss the self-review process for the governing or trust board
- agree dates for receiving information from the school or trust and for the initial face-to-face meetings
- identify the key focus areas for the review
- presentation of external review materials

3. Gather documentation

The reviewer will have access to relevant documentation provided by the school to prepare for the self-review session. This is likely to include:

- Recent Ofsted report
- School Prospectus
- Governor or trustee membership details
- Instruments of government / memorandum and articles of association
- Minutes from full governing board meetings

- Governance and delegation structures
- Head teacher's / principal's reports
- The school development plan
- The school or academy development plans and self-evaluation documentation
- Current governing or trust board self-evaluation and action plans
- School or academy data reports
- Reports from governor or trustee visits
- Governing or trust board skills audit returns
- School or trust website

4. Meet other governors or trustees

The reviewer is likely to want to have conversations or meet with as many other governors or trustees as possible. This will help the reviewer assess the capacity of the board, its strengths and areas for development.

5. Self-assessment by governors or trustees

Following the meetings with governors or trustees, there will be an expectation that they will collectively undertake a self-assessment of the review materials. This will enhance the facilitated self-review session with the reviewer.

6. Self-review session and areas for improvement

Once the external review process is complete, the reviewer will produce a concise report (which will be in draft at this stage). The report will outline the board's strengths and areas for development and the actions required to address these. The self-review session will be undertaken at an agreed time, where the draft report will be available and the reviewer will highlight areas of significance and key areas for development from the report together with the actions required. Governors or trustees will have a chance to discuss the areas as part of the session.

At the end of the self-review session the report will be finalised and provided to the board for action.

7. Next steps

Once the review is concluded, it will be up to the governing or trust board to implement the agreed action plan, drawing on external support as appropriate. By mutual agreement the review could contain some further support from the reviewer to assist the board in its development. Charges for additional support would be negotiated between the board and reviewer.

For schools and academies judged to be 'requiring improvement', Ofsted monitoring visits will include the following points and will comment on the effectiveness of the review and the evidence of impact on the quality of governance:

- discussions about the action plans from the review
- evidence of progress in improving governance
- evidence of progress in improving the leadership and management of the school

Review outcome and action plan

It is expected that the core review will lead to a concise report. Included within the report will be an indication of where, in the reviewer's opinion, there are areas of strengths and areas of recommended development within the governing or trust board.

Any areas of recommended development would then form the basis of an action plan for the board. It will be the responsibility of the board to implement the action plan, utilising any additional support as necessary from the Governor Services Team.

The governing or trust board may feel it appropriate to incorporate additional elements as part of the overall review process or to undertake an enhanced review to provide for further supported monitoring. Details of this can be found on Page 9 of this booklet and can be discussed with the reviewer at any time.

Application information

Enquires in respect of undertaking an external review of governance should be made via the chair of the board and/or head teacher/principal.

An initial discussion with a reviewer will determine what level of support is required and the costs involved with the support. A subsequent meeting will then be arranged with the reviewer, chair of the board and head teacher/principal to discuss the principles and protocols of the review in further detail.

Any advice or support will be provided throughout the process from your designated reviewer.

For further information and informal discussion about the process, please contact the Governor Services Team directly on 01204 332104 / 338603 or via email at governor.services@bolton.gov.uk

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