

Governors in UK Schools – Some general information

Composition

In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, every state school has a governing body, consisting of specified numbers of various categories of governors depending on the type and size of school. Governors are unpaid, but they may be reimbursed for expenses for such as the care of dependants or relatives and travel costs. Under section 50 of the Employment Rights Act 1996, employers must give anyone in their employment who serves as a governor reasonable time off their employ to carry out their governor duties. Employers can decide whether this time off is given with or without pay.

Generally the following categories are applicable:

The headteacher

The headteacher is automatically a governor because of their position as headteacher – sometimes referred to as an 'ex-officio' governor. Headteachers can resign their position on the governing board if they choose, but the role can't be filled by any other staff member. The exception is an acting headteacher, but they have to be appointed to substantively carry out the role of headteacher, according to a representative at the DfE. A part-time acting headteacher doesn't qualify. Their role is to provide information to the governing board as requested. A governing board or committee meeting is the primary forum where the headteacher reports to the board.

Parent governors

Parent governors are elected by other parents in the school. All parents or carers of registered pupils at the school are eligible to stand in a parent governor election.

The DfE defines parents as:

- All natural (biological) parents, whether they are married or not
- Any person who, although not a natural parent, has parental responsibility for a child or young person (this could be a step-parent, guardian or other relative)
- Any person who, although not a natural parent, has care of a child or young person. This means they are the person with whom the child lives and who looks after the child, irrespective of what their relationship is with the child
- Grandparents would only be eligible to be parent governors if they care for the child on a full-time, settled basis or if they are the legal guardian of the child.

A parent governor provides a parent's views to the governing board, but isn't there as a parent representative nor as an advocate for their own child. To learn more about how parent governors balance their roles as governor and parent, read this article.

Staff governors

Staff governors are elected by other staff members. All staff who are employed to work at the school at the time of election are eligible to stand for election as the staff governor. This includes teaching staff, support staff, senior leaders and part-time staff. Staff governors should be elected for the skills they can bring to the governing board, rather than their position within the school. Staff governors bring a unique staff perspective to the governing board, but they don't represent the staff. They're also not there to be held to account by the board. Read this article for more on this important role.

Local authority governors

Local authority (LA) governors are nominated by the LA. LAs set their own eligibility criteria, but the governing board can either accept or reject that nomination based on whether they have the skills required to contribute to the effective governance and success of the school. If the board rejects a nominee, they must explain the reason for doing so to the LA. The LA governor serves as the link between the LA and the school but isn't a political appointee. The governance handbook states that: *“LA governors must govern in the interests of the school and not represent or advocate for the political or other interests of the local authority; it is unacceptable practice to link the right to nominate local authority governors to the local balance of political power.”*

Co-opted governors

Co-opted governors are appointed by the governing board. Anyone is eligible to become a co-opted governor and governing boards are free to decide which skills they're looking for. This can include parents. Staff can also be appointed as co-opted governors, but the number of staff members on the governing board must not be more than 1/3 of the total membership of the governing board (when counted with the staff governor and the headteacher). For example, if you have 12 governors, you can't have more than 2 staff members appointed as co-opted governors. Co-opted governors are appointed by the governing board if it believes they have the skills required to contribute to the effective governance and success of the school. They'll often have specialised knowledge in subjects like; management, HR, finance, data, law, education

Foundation governors

Foundation governors are found in foundation schools with a foundation. There aren't any restrictions on who can be a foundation governor. It is up to

the appointing body to decide who to appoint. This is usually the diocese, the school's founding body, or a trust. There are 2 types of foundation governors:

- Appointed – the appointing body selects them for the governing board
- Ex officio – they're appointed by virtue of their office, e.g. clergy members

Whether appointed or ex-officio, their role is the same. Foundation governors are appointed specifically to "preserve and develop the character of the organisation, including any religious character", according to the governance handbook. They are also responsible for making sure the school operates as required by the foundation's governing documents, including the trust deed where appropriate. However, the handbook warns that foundation schools still need to understand the diversity within the communities they serve, so the board should be awake to the risk of being dominated by one particular mindset, be it faith or something else.

Partnership governors

Partnership governors are similar to foundation governors, but they are in foundation schools without a foundation. The governing body must first try to appoint partnership governors from those nominated by:

- The "appropriate diocesan authority" in the case of a Church of England or Roman Catholic school
- The "appropriate religious body" in any other case
- The parents of registered pupils at the school and "such others in the community served by the school as they consider appropriate" where the school doesn't have a religious character.

Like LA governors, the board still has discretion in whether to appoint nominees. The decision should be based on whether they have the skills needed to contribute to the effective governance and success of the school.

Associate members

Associate members may be appointed by the governing body as members of committees, and may include pupils, school staff, or anyone else who the governing body feel could contribute to its work. Their voting rights are decided by the governing body, and are also limited by law to exclude matters concerning the budget, admissions, pupil discipline and the election or appointment of governors. Associate Members are not governors and are not included in the school's Instrument of Government.

By law, governing bodies meet at least three times every year, as a Full Governing Body, where the ongoing business of committees, the governing body and the school are discussed, reported on and where decisions are taken by a majority vote. Most of the work of governors, however, is done at committee level.

Chair

The Governing Body is led by the Chair, elected by the Governing Body from within its membership, though anyone who works at the school cannot stand for the office. Since 1 September 2003, the term of office for the Chair can be set to more than one year. The Chair is supported in their work by one or more Vice Chairs, who may be delegated certain tasks or responsibilities. Certain tasks, including signing off the school budget, can only be done by the Chair. The process for election of chair and vice-chair and their term of office should be laid down in the governing body's standing orders.

The full Governing Body can remove the Chair and/or Vice Chair by a majority vote of no confidence.

Clerk

The governors are supported in their work by a Clerk to the Governing Body. In many schools this role is combined with that of Bursar or Administrative Officer, although they may also be employed solely in a clerking role. In some areas clerking services may be provided by the Local Education Authority. The Clerk is remunerated for their work.

The Clerk is usually considered an integral part of the Governing Body, although they are not entitled to vote. Their role is primarily one of providing advice and interpretation on the regulatory and administrative framework in which governors work, preparing and distributing minutes and agendas, keeping records and dealing with correspondence.

Responsibilities

The headteacher of the school is responsible for day-to-day management of the school. The role of the Governing Body is to provide strategic management, and to act as a "critical friend", supporting the work of the headteacher and other staff.

Schools generally have a delegated budget to cover salaries, running costs, maintenance and equipment; the Governing Body is responsible for managing this budget. They can decide how many and what types of staff to employ, which equipment to upgrade or replace and what the priorities are for implementing new strategies and initiatives.

Governors must appoint the headteacher, and may be involved in the appointment of other staff.

Governors also have a role in monitoring the school's progress, and in setting annual targets for the school's performance and for the headteacher (and ensuring that the headteacher sets targets for other staff).

Governors must review school exclusions in certain circumstances, and have the power to reinstate an excluded pupil or reduce the term of the exclusion (although not to increase it).

Foundation schools, Voluntary Aided schools and Academies act as their own admissions authorities. In such schools the governing body sets the admissions policy, makes admissions decisions and defends admissions appeals.

Committees

Most Governing Bodies use a committee structure to undertake their monitoring and evaluation roles. Membership and terms of reference of committees must be determined annually. Finance, Staffing, Admissions, Health and Safety, Curriculum and Premises Committees are very common. Other areas covered by committees may include marketing, discipline and management. Many Governing Bodies form working groups to tackle specific problems.

Since 1 September 2003, particular committees can be given delegated powers to make decisions about the school that do not then require any approval by the full Governing Body

Training

Governors and clerks can be offered training and support either by the local authority, by central government or by other organisations.