

Academy governing bodies - A strategic approach to monitoring and evaluation

Academy context

Academies are state-funded independent schools and they have greater flexibility than maintained schools. However their key consideration in deciding how to operate, and on what to focus besides their legal requirements, is achieving and maintaining school improvement.

'The Academy Principals' Handbook'

<http://www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/academies/publications/?version=1> includes a section on governance and makes the following point:

'The broad aims and objectives of governance in Academies are no different from that of maintained schools and much of the existing guidance for maintained school governors will be helpful to Academy governors. The main source of information about governance can be found at www.governornet.co.uk. However, it must be emphasised that in some respects, largely legal and structural, Academies are in a different position, and guidance that is aimed at maintained schools must be used with this in mind'.

The Articles of Association for each academy provide explicit information about how the governing body should be constituted and how decisions should be made.

The Ofsted document *'Academies. Supplementary guidance for section 5 inspection of academies'* <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/Ofsted-home/Forms-and-guidance/Browse-all-by/Education-and-skills/Schools/Supplementary-guidance-and-resources> notes:

'The role and influence of the governing body, and particularly the academy sponsor, make governance different in an academy. Time should be set aside to interview the sponsor and/or their representatives'.

HMCI has made it clear that:

'On section 5 inspections of academies, inspectors are required to make a specific judgement on 'The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities'. Inspectors initially use the issues from the school self evaluation form (SEF) and records of the governing body's work to investigate how effectively governors hold the school to account and ensure compliance with legal requirements'.

The wider context

The Ministerial Working Group on Governance reporting in April 2010, emphasised the importance of governing bodies working strategically, not straying into day to day issues. It noted that the 21st century schools White Paper had proposed that governing bodies should:

- a. first, promote the education, development and wider wellbeing of the children on their school's roll
- b. second promote the education, development and wider wellbeing of all children in their area; and
- c. third support the needs of the local community

Strategies such as succession planning, community cohesion and extended services have prepared the way and encourage schools and governing bodies to be 'outward facing'. Ofsted's supplementary guidance for inspecting academies makes the point that '*Inspectors should evaluate the extent of the academy's wider impact*'.

The second key role of governing bodies, to be a critical friend to the school, highlights the importance of monitoring and evaluation, supporting and challenging the headteacher/principal. This is an area most often found wanting by Ofsted inspectors.

'Governing bodies discharge their duties well in the majority of schools. Where they are most effective, they play a full strategic role in guiding and supporting the school's work and providing challenges for further improvement. In schools which are inadequate, governing bodies do not monitor sufficiently well to know the school's strengths and weaknesses, and to be able to hold the leaders to account for its overall effectiveness.'

The third key role, which depends greatly on effective monitoring and evaluation, is to ensure accountability. Governing bodies must interrogate data and study evidence to understand what progress is being made with strategic plans and statutory policies. That enables them to account to all key stakeholders about the performance of the school.

Understanding monitoring and evaluation

It is important to distinguish between the two terms. Governors monitor when they conduct structured visits to the academy, focusing on one or more aspects of the Self Evaluation Form (SEF) and/or the school development plan (SDP). They gather evidence to inform the governing body's judgement about performance in specific aspects of the academy's work. They monitor by studying data and they monitor when they receive reports from the principal, other members of staff and the school improvement partner. **It is important that such reports describe what has been done to progress plans and policies, what impact has been achieved and what evidence exists.** They need to focus on the academy's strategic priorities and statutory responsibilities. Information that belongs in a parents' newsletter should be in the parents' newsletter with a copy provided for each governor. A strategic report will include recommendations about what needs to happen next. It will keep the governing body informed about local, national and even global issues that should impact on the academy's planning.

Judgements about/evaluation of performance must be made on the basis of evidence. Where progress has been better than expected that presents an opportunity to celebrate and disseminate best practice. It is very important not to underestimate the power of praise and recognition in motivating both staff and pupils. Where progress has stalled then governing bodies need to understand why and what action is being taken.

The amount of work involved cannot be handled by the whole governing body working as a group. A team approach, distributing leadership, delegating real responsibility for monitoring different aspects of the academy's work to committees and to individual governors, is essential.

Case study on student voice

A governing body had divided the sections from Sections A and C of the SEF between its members. One governor had a particular interest in ‘the extent to which students contribute to the school and the wider community. She met the member of staff who helped to co-ordinate the work of the school council and she met members of the council.

What she found was that:

- meetings seldom had the same participants because the potential ‘pool’ of members was 78 students
- minutes indicated that although many issues pertinent to student well-being were discussed, few decisions were made and issues were not followed up systematically
- some highly significant projects had been undertaken in recent years but there was no overall strategy
- the key members of the council recognised that they needed training for their role
- there had been no formal recognition of their work by the governing body

What happened next?

- members of the council were encouraged to reflect on what was working well and what could improve the council’s effectiveness. They recommended an alternative, smaller structure where each member will be expected to attend each meeting

Why monitor and evaluate?

The simple answer to that is that every child matters and what happens in school has a profound impact on children’s life chances. The governing body should be central to deciding the academy’s values and vision. It makes decisions that impact on children, staff, parents and carers and the wider community. It should bring a strategic approach to planning, monitoring and evaluating performance to ensure that the values are embedded and the vision achieved.

How do you go about it?

Although the Ofsted Self Evaluation Form (SEF) is not a statutory document it is a key tool used by inspectors when they prepare to inspect an academy. It is an online document, usually completed by the headteacher/principal. The key sections are:

- Section A: Self evaluation. This concludes with a section in which the most important actions for the academy have to be listed
- Section B: Information about the academy
- Section C: Information about compliance with statutory responsibilities

Section A is sub-divided into

- Outcomes
- How effective is provision?
- How effective are leadership and management?
- How effective is the Early Years Foundation Stage

- How effective is the sixth form?
- How effective is boarding provision?

In each of those sections there are questions and boxes to provide relevant information. Above each box are four grades, and the academy has to decide which is most appropriate:

1. Outstanding
2. Good
3. Satisfactory
4. Inadequate

Each section requires information about what has been done, what impact that has had and what evidence exists to support the grade chosen. It is crucial that the information provided is analytical and evaluative, not simply descriptive.

Leadership teams completing the SEF, and governing bodies studying the results should pay close attention to the Ofsted document *'The evaluation schedule for schools'*. This makes clear what Ofsted will evaluate and provides descriptors for each grade in all aspects of Section A.

Section B covers key statistical data about the academy, students, and staff. When complete it provides a comprehensive profile and can help to focus governors' attention on specific aspects of provision and the impact on students, particularly those in vulnerable groups.

Section C lists 30 questions not all of which are relevant to Academies. For example Academies do not have to comply with the Financial Management Standard in Schools (FMSIS) since they are bound by different financial standards. Some questions relate to Early Years Foundation Stage and Primary phase which would only be pertinent in all-through academies. The majority are relevant, relating to the school's statutory responsibilities. They are closely linked to the list of statutory documents and policies listed in Annex 2 of the Guide to the Law for School Governors. Alongside the list of 30 questions are 3 columns in which academies indicate whether each is fully in place, partly in place or not in place.

There are two key tasks for governing bodies. Governing bodies are required to validate the grades suggested by the leadership team and staff in sections A and C, and not simply rubber-stamp them.

They should also ensure that the important actions listed at the end of Section A, arising from the self evaluation process, translate into objectives in the academy development plan. If that document makes clear the success criteria and what will be done to monitor progress then this greatly facilitates monitoring and evaluation by the leadership team and by the governing body.

Key questions to ask

Long lists of activities should prompt the questions from governors such as 'what difference has that made? What evidence have we got to support that view? It is not helpful to simply say 'Prove it'!

Nor is it not enough to look at the academy's standards at the end of Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4. Positive results at those points can mask underperformance. Governors need to drill down to discover whether the 'big picture' is masking poor progress in Key Stages 1 and 3 and/or poor progress by particular groups of children. The governing body needs to

understand how different groups of children are doing and whether every child is making the progress s/he is capable of. A key issue is closing the gap between disadvantaged children and the rest, so the performance of children on free school meals and children in care will need close scrutiny. So too will the performance of children with special educational needs and children of different cultural and ethnic heritage. Gender differentials may be an issue and there may be children who are caring for siblings or parents. All of these factors may impact on pupil progress and each school, working where appropriate with other agencies, needs to take account of difference, to try to counteract disadvantage.

Similarly summary data about attendance, behaviour, lesson observations is of little value. The governing body needs to study trends over time and to ascertain whether some groups of children feature more than others.

The crucial question to ask if underperformance is identified is ‘What are we doing about it?’

A governing body meeting included a presentation by the Assistant Headteacher with responsibility for Targeting, Tracking and Intervention. She described how staff RAG rated (Red, Amber, Green) students’ progress using Fischer Family Trust Data as the minimum benchmark target. Where students were under achieving staff agreed appropriate interventions. The data produced is analysed by gender, SEN, ethnicity, Year Group etc. The Easter conference to support Year 11 students used that data to produce a personalised programme of study for each student.

A member of the governing body attended the final assembly of the conference and noted ‘the excitement and sense of achievement amongst the students present’.

Who evaluates governance?

The short answer to that is Ofsted. Pages 41-43 of the Ofsted evaluation schedule set out the way Ofsted inspectors should evaluate ‘**The effectiveness of the governing body in challenging and supporting the school so that weaknesses are tackled decisively and statutory responsibilities met**’. Rather than wait for the Ofsted perspective many governing bodies use the framework to self evaluate. Some buy in external support to ensure impartiality and objectivity. The grade descriptors in the evaluation schedule provide a good basis for this process. It is important to consider carefully the three strands that inspectors will evaluate:

- how effectively governors help to shape the direction of the academy
- how rigorously governors and supervisory boards challenge and support leaders and managers, holding them to account for tackling weaknesses and further improving outcomes for all pupils
- how well governors, supervisory boards and any joint committee(s) fulfil their statutory responsibilities

and to read through the eleven bulletpoints that indicate the areas where Ofsted will seek evidence. Then a governing body is in a good position to study the descriptors and suggest

a grade that matches its performance. Whichever grade seems appropriate it is crucial to consider each thread of the descriptor to identify:

- what the governing body has done in relation to that issue
- what impact that has had
- what evidence can be cited

A further source of guidance is the supplementary guidance document for inspectors 'The effectiveness of the governing body. This can be found in the a zip file at <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/Ofsted-home/Forms-and-guidance/Browse-all-by/Education-and-skills/Schools/Supplementary-guidance-and-resources>

The annex to that guidance lists examples of questions that inspectors could ask governors in the course of an inspection. Some governing bodies are identifying two or three governors who could be available at short notice, and briefing them on how they could respond. The more strategic and effective governing bodies are discussing three or four questions at each governing body to ensure that all governors understand fully the way to demonstrate the impact of the governing body's work.

Other perspectives

The Ofsted evaluation schedule is not the only way to form a view of the governing body's effectiveness. Including questions in surveys of staff about the impact of the governing body on the academy as a whole and on their work can yield further evidence. If the governing body has strong links with the school council, as in the case study, then students too will almost certainly be aware of aspects of the governing body's work. If the governing body keeps its profile high with parents and carers then they too will have a view.

The minutes of governing body meetings can yield substantial evidence of a governing body's effectiveness. The clerk plays a crucial role in recording probing questions and examples of positive feedback. The minutes can show that a governing body is working strategically or that it is bogged down in minutiae. A well trained clerk is an asset to a governing body and to its committees.

Working towards outstanding

If the process of self-evaluation indicates that governance may be no more than satisfactory then the process outlined above will have highlighted areas where improvement is needed. SSAT has a range of programmes it can offer to individual governing bodies, several governing bodies together, and clerks to support effective governing bodies. For further information contact:

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