

School governance

Learning from the best

School governing bodies are responsible for the conduct of maintained schools in England. The quality of their work is a matter of considerable importance. The aim of this small-scale report is to help all governing bodies to become excellent by showcasing examples of highly effective governance that is strengthening leadership and contributing to improved outcomes. The report looks at the principles and practices that contribute to outstanding governance in 14 schools and reports what outstanding governing bodies, and the headteachers of the schools they serve, contribute towards their effectiveness. Case studies from each of the schools visited are included to reflect something of the character of the governing bodies and how they have approached aspects of their work.

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The national picture

More than 300,000 school governors in England form one of the largest volunteer groups in the country. Since 1988, school governing bodies have taken on more responsibilities and their role has become more important as schools have gained increasing autonomy.¹ The governing body complements and enhances school leadership by providing support and challenge, ensuring that all statutory duties are met, appointing the headteacher and holding them to account for the impact of the school's work on improving outcomes for all pupils.²

The framework for inspection reflects the importance of the role of governors. Inspection evidence tells us that there is a relationship between effective governance, the quality of leadership and management, and the quality of provision and pupil achievement. In 2009/10 governance was good or outstanding in 56% of schools.³ However, in just over a fifth of the schools inspected, governance was judged to be less effective than leadership. This finding suggests that there is potential in many schools for governors to make an even greater contribution than they do at present to improving outcomes. Her Majesty's Chief Inspector's Annual Report for 2009/10 identifies that:

'Governors are most effective when they are fully involved in the school's self-evaluation and use the knowledge gained to challenge the school, understand its strengths and weaknesses and contribute to shaping its strategic direction. In contrast, weak governance is likely to fail to ensure statutory requirements are met, for example those related to safeguarding. In addition, where governance is weak the involvement of governors in monitoring the quality of provision is not well enough defined or sufficiently rigorous and challenging.'⁴

Using this report

Governing bodies want to do the very best they can for their schools, pupils and local communities. That is why their members give so freely of their time. This small-scale report has been written to help governors reflect on their practice by considering the principles and approaches used by some of the best governing bodies.

In November 2010 inspectors visited 14 schools. These were selected from primary, secondary and special schools in varying localities where governance was judged outstanding in inspections conducted in the academic year 2009/10.

¹ *The 21st century school: implications and challenges for governing bodies*, Department For Education, April 2010; www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DCSF-00351-2010.

² A guide to the law for school governors sets out the statutory requirements relating to governing body responsibilities; www.education.gov.uk/schools/leadership/governance/b0065507/gttl.

³ Inspections carried out between 1 September 2009 and 31 August 2010.

⁴ *The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2009/10*, Ofsted, 2010; www.ofsted.gov.uk/Ofsted-home/Annual-Report-2009-10.

No single model of success was seen, but this report identifies some of the key characteristics of these 14 governing bodies that have achieved excellence. Firstly, it illustrates how they go about their work efficiently and effectively. It then identifies the contribution that they and the schools' leaders consider they make to strengthening school leadership. Finally, a number of key questions are offered that governors might want to consider when reflecting on their own effectiveness and their journey to excellence.

Key characteristics of effective governing bodies

- Positive relationships between governors and school leaders are based on trust, openness and transparency. Effective governing bodies systematically monitor their school's progress towards meeting agreed development targets. Information about what is going well and why, and what is not going well and why, is shared. Governors consistently ask for more information, explanation or clarification. This makes a strong contribution to robust planning for improvement.
- Governors are well informed and knowledgeable because they are given high-quality, accurate information that is concise and focused on pupil achievement. This information is made accessible by being presented in a wide variety of formats, including charts and graphs.
- Outstanding governors are able to take and support hard decisions in the interests of pupils: to back the head teacher when they need to change staff, or to change the head teacher when absolutely necessary.
- Outstanding governance supports honest, insightful self-evaluation by the school, recognising problems and supporting the steps needed to address them.
- Absolute clarity about the different roles and responsibilities of the headteacher and governors underpins the most effective governance. Protocols, specific duties and terms of reference are made explicit in written documents.
- Effective governing bodies are driven by a core of key governors such as the chair and chairs of committees. They see themselves as part of a team and build strong relationships with the headteacher, senior leaders and other governors.
- In eight of the 14 schools visited, governors routinely attend lessons to gather information about the school at work. All the governors who were interviewed visit their schools regularly and talk with staff, pupils and parents. Clear protocols for visits ensure that the purpose is understood by school staff and governors alike. Alongside the information they are given about the school, these protocols help them to make informed decisions, ask searching questions and provide meaningful support.
- School leaders and governors behave with integrity and are mutually supportive. School leaders recognise that governors provide them with a different perspective which contributes to strengthening leadership. The questions they ask challenge assumptions and support effective decision-making.

- Governors in the schools visited, use the skills they bring, and the information they have about the school, to ask challenging questions, which are focused on improvement, and hold leaders to account for pupils' outcomes.
- Time is used efficiently by governors because there are clear procedures for delegating tasks, for example to well organised committees. These committees have clear terms of reference, provide high levels of challenge and use governors' expertise to best effect. Systems are in place for sharing information and reporting back to the full governing body. This does not merely reiterate what has already been discussed in detail by the committee but focuses on the key points and decisions.
- The role of the clerk to the governors is pivotal to ensuring that statutory duties are met, meetings are well organised and governors receive the information they need in good time. Consequently, governors come to meetings well prepared and with pertinent questions ready so that they are able to provide constructive challenge.
- A detailed timeline of activities, maintained by the clerk and linked to the school development plan, provides a clear structure for the work of governors and ensures that their time is used appropriately.
- Governors in the schools visited, use their external networks and professional contacts to fill any identified gaps in the collective skills of the governing body.
- There are clear induction procedures for new governors which help them to understand their roles and responsibilities and ensure that best use is made of their varied skills and expertise.
- The governing bodies constantly reflect on their own effectiveness and readily make changes to improve. They consider their own training needs, as well as how they organise their work.

Going about the work

Knowing their schools

1. Knowing their schools well was fundamental to the success of the effective governing bodies visited. They expected good quality information through detailed, regular reports supported by data analysis. This helped them to shape the direction for the school and hold leaders to account. Pupil progress data and information about the quality of teaching were seen as crucial when considering proposals and making strategic decisions.
2. All the schools visited provided their governors with a detailed breakdown of information about attainment, including examination results. Minutes of governing body meetings in one secondary school, for example, recorded how these were discussed in relation to gender, special educational needs, different groups of pupils and subjects.

3. Headteachers and staff with particular areas of responsibility systematically provided information to governors in focused, detailed reports. At one special school, subject leader reports followed a common format. It included sections on: recent actions and developments; achievement and standards; personal development and well-being; the quality of provision; leadership and management; and overall effectiveness and efficiency.

In a secondary school, individual governors were linked to different aspects of the school's work, such as attendance and behaviour. These aspects had been identified as needing improvement. In addition staff absence levels were high and this was challenged by governors. Consequently, as well as receiving regular reports from the responsible member of staff, the link governor also received monthly staff and pupil attendance figures. Governors supported the employment of a number of permanent cover supervisors as one means of addressing issues. Pupils pointed out that, as a result, there were fewer supply teachers and reported that this had improved behaviour in lessons.

4. In all the schools visited, staff made presentations to governing bodies and governors, who were then able to ask questions, seek clarification and identify what further information might be required for proposals to be more robust.

In order to be kept fully up to date, the chair of the governing body at a secondary school asked to be included in the circulation of the minutes of senior leadership team meetings. The information in these minutes gave the chair a clearer perspective of school issues as they arose, the action taken, progress being made, and the impact and outcomes. The chair referred to some items from these minutes in questions at governing body meetings. This helped to give all governors a greater insight into the effectiveness of the school.

5. These effective governing bodies did not rely solely on what school leaders and members of staff told them. They sought information from external experts on issues such as the analysis of data, finance, personnel, special educational needs and school improvement. This included, for example, support from their school improvement partner on interpreting performance data. Governors used this external support to gain new perspectives on information provided by the school so that they were confident that their understanding of the school's performance was accurate.
6. Governors also visited their schools to talk to staff and pupils and to see the school in action. They used a range of formal and informal visits, including attending school events, conducting 'learning walks' and visiting classrooms. Crucially, effective practice involved a shared understanding of the purpose of the visit, how it was to be conducted and how it was to be reported back to the governing body and school leaders.

Governors in a primary school adopted a policy for visits which highlighted governors' legal responsibilities and strategic roles, the purpose of the visit, how visits should be arranged and what governors should do after the visit had been completed. This included reporting arrangements using an agreed proforma.

The governors of a special school made paired visits every term. They looked at a particular theme which was linked to the priorities identified in the school development plan, such as information and communication technology. A report was written for other governors on the outcomes of their visit. In this way, all the governors understood the progress being made and where there were barriers to overcome.

7. In eight of the 14 schools visited, governors routinely attended lessons to gather first hand information about the school at work. One secondary school, for example, had governor open days three times a year. On these days, pairs of governors visited lessons to talk to pupils and gain a better understanding of their experience of school. Importantly, protocols were explicit and made it clear to staff and governors alike that the visits were not to judge the quality of teaching, because that was the role of the headteacher and the leadership team. Rather, they provided governors with a broader understanding of the context for their work and helped inform their strategic decisions.
8. All the governing bodies worked to build productive relationships with parents. Typically, they used the views of parents, pupils and the wider community as another source of information to shape their questions and inform discussions. In one primary school, for example, the governing body designed an annual questionnaire for parents, collated responses and provided parents with feedback. In addition, the governors consulted parents and pupils on a range of issues during the year if the need arose. In another primary school, the governing body received reports from the school council and visited the school regularly to meet with pupils in Key Stage 2. In a third primary school, pupils were invited to attend governing body meetings. In one secondary school, pupils were represented on one of the governor committees, where they presented their ideas and views about the school.
9. All the governing bodies in the schools that were visited sought a range of good quality, regular information from a variety of sources to ensure that they had an accurate understanding of the school's strengths and areas for development. This information included:
 - concise, focused reports from the headteacher, heads of departments and subject leaders
 - external reports, for example from the school improvement partner, consultants and accrediting bodies
 - presentations from school staff, pupils and external experts
 - internal performance monitoring information

- internal and external analyses of national tests using both benchmarking and comparative information
 - school self-evaluation reports
 - formal and informal visits to the school
 - questionnaires
 - discussions with parents, pupils and staff.
10. They used the wide range of information they had to help shape the direction of the school by ensuring that the development plan reflected the right priorities and was monitored systematically and effectively.
11. The outstanding governing bodies did not shy away from asking questions and confidently sought further information, explanation or clarification as part of their monitoring and decision-making processes. Two key factors underpinned this confident and productive questioning. First, they had a positive relationship with the headteacher and senior leaders. Second, they had an absolutely clear understanding of their different roles and responsibilities.

In one secondary school for example, governors asked four key questions when considering new initiatives and evaluating their impact:

- What will be different for pupils?
- What will be different for parents?
- What will be different for staff?
- What will be different for partners?

12. Using information to help shape the direction of the school through a cycle of planning, monitoring and evaluation was common to all the governing bodies visited.

The governing body of a secondary school received subject reports and asked questions such as:

- What systems are in place to enable learning from the success of this course?
- How are teachers supported outside their own specialism?
- How do we know that a resource bank is the best way of supporting teachers outside their specialism?
- How will this department decide on their main focus for improvement next year?
- How do we know that the criteria for deciding are robust?

Supporting school leaders

13. Governors were proud to be part of their schools and saw themselves as advocates for the pupils. Schools were supported very effectively by governors

who acted as their champions in the local and wider community, often promoting the school's interests and successes at a local and national level.

The headteacher of a special school heard that a nearby outdoor pursuit facility that was run by the local authority was to be closed. A recent survey, carried out by the governing body, indicated that some parents were not satisfied with the current out-of-school provision on offer. Together the headteacher and governors explored the feasibility of taking over the facility and approached the local authority with plans. They were successful and are in the process of improving the quality of the facility.

14. Governors brought a wide range of skills and expertise that they used effectively to support school leaders. For example, governors with experience in personnel used their skills and knowledge to support school leaders dealing with a range of staffing issues. These included supporting leaders who were managing incidents of staff underperformance, addressing high levels of staff absence or reducing staffing levels.
15. Financial expertise was used to support school leaders to make difficult resourcing decisions. There were examples in the schools visited of how governors supported the school to secure improved or additional accommodation and resources.

Governors of a special school produced a business case for a new building project based on current and projected pupil numbers. This demonstrated the potential savings that could be made by the local authority by not placing pupils with special educational needs in schools outside the local authority area. Agreement was reached with local decision-makers and the school building is now completed.

16. There were other examples of governors supporting school leaders in appointing excellent teachers, including providing training on recruitment, using relevant workplace skills, and being part of staff appointment panels.
17. Governors in the schools visited were committed to making sure that all school staff, including the headteachers, were provided with opportunities for relevant professional development. They recognised the benefits of professional development for both the individual members of staff and the work of the school. For example, in a secondary school governors supported professional development that helped the school to retain high-quality members of staff.

The headteacher of a secondary school was initially seconded to the post for six months following an inspection which judged that the school required special measures. Governors supported the new headteacher in taking action to improve the quality of teaching and to reduce the deficit budget quickly. The school made rapid progress and was judged as outstanding in its most recent inspection. The headteacher was appointed as the substantive post-holder and began to support two other schools.

Governors fully endorsed this work with other schools because in their view it both helped other schools and enabled them to retain their excellent headteacher. The headteacher stated that the passion the governors demonstrated for their school, and the support and challenge they provided, had also motivated him to stay.

18. Teachers valued the interest that governors showed in their work, which they explained helped to maintain high levels of staff morale. For example, governors who were linked specifically to particular departments, or aspects of a school's work, developed a positive relationship with the member of staff responsible and gained an in-depth knowledge of particular areas of the school's work.
19. Positive relationships between the headteacher, the chair of governors and the clerk to the governors were essential to school leaders in feeling supported. These positive relationships were based on open, honest dialogue, a clear understanding of their different roles and responsibilities and a shared commitment to securing the very best provision and outcomes for the pupils.

Providing challenge

20. All of the outstanding governing bodies visited struck the right balance between supporting leaders and providing constructive challenge, which holds school leaders to account for the quality of the school's provision and its impact on outcomes for pupils. There were three key elements to getting the balance right:
 - understanding their role and how it complements but differs from that of the headteacher
 - using the knowledge and experience they bring to enhance leadership
 - asking pertinent questions based on the information and knowledge they have about the school.
21. A high level of challenge was particularly evident at committee level in the schools visited. Governors served on committees where their knowledge and expertise could be used to best effect. Their expertise, understanding of the school's context, and the school performance information that they received enabled them to ask pertinent and insightful questions.

Following regular reports from heads of department in a secondary school, the governors asked a range of questions about each department, including:

- Is it a contradiction to say that leadership and management are strengths while reporting several areas of inconsistency in the subject?
- Would there be such inconsistencies if the leadership was stronger?
- What does the department consider to be the main factor for the improvement in results this year?

- Could we learn more about the direct impact of our specialism on the motivation and achievements of students?
- Are there any examples of the impact of this subject on the rest of the curriculum?

Governors skilfully used information from different sources to shape their questions and test out the accuracy of their understanding of the school's performance. For example, the governing body of a primary school received reports on the outcomes of lesson observations and analyses of pupils' work written by the school leaders and the school improvement partner. They considered these outcomes when looking at data on pupils' performance and raised questions.

22. All the governing bodies in the schools visited systematically monitored the school's progress towards meeting the agreed targets in the school development plan. An example in one primary school involved teams of staff and governors linked to each priority in the plan. Monitoring progress was commonly undertaken as a regular item at committee meetings. Although a wide range of evidence informed discussions at these meetings, governors asked for more information where it was needed, for example before agreeing to a proposal presented by senior leaders. The ultimate question governors came back to was, 'What difference is this going to make for the pupils and how will we know?'

How governors' questions challenge leaders and hold them to account was evident in a special school. The governors asked the subject leader what baseline evidence was available before an initiative to improve writing was introduced. They explained that this would be necessary to show impact and that pupils were making better progress.

23. There was evidence that governors in the schools visited also challenged each other. For example, if discussions strayed into operational matters then governors, often the chair of governors, chairs of committees or Trust governors, stepped in to steer the conversation back to a strategic focus.

Working efficiently

24. In all the schools visited two factors were key to ensuring that the governing bodies worked systematically and effectively to meet their statutory duties. These were the role of the clerk to the governing body and the delegation of work, for example to a number of core committees.
25. The role of the clerk to the governing body was pivotal to the smooth operation of the governing body. As well as fulfilling administrative duties, clerks were a source of guidance and advice for the governing body. Skilful clerks in the schools visited ensured that governors' time was used efficiently and effectively by:

- regularly keeping governors up to date with any changes in legislation or requirements
 - circulating minutes and papers for meetings in good time so that governors were well prepared for discussions and questions
 - acting as a source of advice and support for governors, particularly new ones
 - providing a link between the governing body and the local authority governor services
 - disseminating information from other sources such as the Department for Education
 - ensuring that action points from meetings were recorded and followed up
 - arranging visits and meetings, and notifying governors of relevant school events
 - preparing a plan or timeline of governor activities throughout the year and helping the chair to ensure that this schedule was reflected in the agenda for meetings.
26. A clear job description for the clerk supported their effectiveness. It ensured that the role, responsibilities and lines of accountability were understood. This was particularly useful where the clerk had another role in the school, for example as the headteacher's personal assistant. Typically, clerks also received regular training and briefings from local authority governor support services.
27. Strong teamwork between the headteacher, the chair of the governing body and the clerk was crucial to efficient working. Positive, open relationships, trust, integrity and absolute clarity about their complementary but different roles underpinned this teamwork in all the schools visited. The leadership and management skills of the chair, with the support of the clerk, enabled meetings to run efficiently, stay focused on the agenda and allowed all governors to contribute. As a result, governors, particularly those who were new, felt that their views were valued equally.
28. The delegation of work to committees, with clear terms of reference and clarity of purpose, was crucial to ensuring that the work of the governing body was managed well, matched to the needs of the school and distributed to involve all governors appropriately. For example, in a primary and a special school visited, committees were aligned to the school's key priorities in its development plan and reduced in number to just two.
29. Committees were typically seen as the 'engine room of governance' where in-depth discussions, challenging questions and thorough debate of proposals took place. The skills and knowledge of the chair of a committee were crucial to their success. For example, in one special school, the chair of one of the committees had considerable previous experience of school governance before taking on the role.

30. All the governing bodies had a systematic approach to monitoring and evaluating the progress being made towards meeting targets. Typically, the review of the school development plan was a standing agenda item either for committees, the full governing body or both. Headteacher and staff reports included information about progress with the plan. The information was concise and made readily accessible to governors, for example through a traffic light system of coding. Governors were not only provided with graphs, charts and commentary but were also given an analysis of what the information meant and what questions it raised, and proposals about the next steps to ensure that progress was maintained.
31. Importantly, effective reporting by committees to the full governing body meant that time was not spent unnecessarily reiterating what had already been discussed. One secondary school stated that as a result no governing body meeting lasted more than an hour and a half, and some were concluded in an hour.

Engaging others

32. Governing bodies in the schools visited engaged extensively with parents and the wider community to promote the schools' work.

A secondary school was looking to replace traditional homework with individual learning projects. Governors questioned how this proposal would contribute to maintaining or improving standards and ensure that pupils were challenged and supported to achieve well. The school leaders were asked to provide committee governors with more detailed information about the initiative, an explanation of what skills pupils would develop, and information about how the initiative was going to be monitored and evaluated by the school. The more detailed understanding of the proposal that they gained enabled them to respond to questions raised by parents they spoke to at the school or met in the community.

33. Governors communicated with parents in a variety of ways, both formally and informally, so that they could gather their views about the effectiveness of the school. Governors were then able to use this as one of the many sources of information through which they could provide leaders with challenge and support.
34. Typically, governors met parents at the start and end of the school day and when they attended school events such as assemblies, open evenings and award ceremonies. These informal opportunities to talk helped parents to know who governors were and something about their role. Governors gained a first-hand understanding of what parents felt that the school did well and what they felt could be improved. For example, in one special school governors attended the half-termly coffee afternoons for parents of each class to meet with them and hear their views.

In a special school, there was a governor section on the school website which explained the role of the governing body, who the governors were and what committees they served on. This contributed to the school's ethos of transparent leadership and kept parents informed about the school's governance arrangements. The website was designed and set up by an ex-parent governor who was a community governor and had particular skills in information and communication technology (ICT). In another secondary school, governors made presentations about their work on parents' evenings and open days.

35. Questionnaires were commonly used to gather parents' views. Governing bodies in the schools visited were either provided with an analysis of questionnaires that had been designed by the school's senior leaders or developed their own questionnaire for parents. The governing body of one primary school, for example, wrote a letter to parents who responded to their questionnaires so that the parents knew that their views had been heard. If their views could not be acted on, an explanation was given. In a special school, governors compared the results of an annual survey with the results from previous years and saw this information from parents as a 'barometer'. They looked closely at the parents' comments rather than just adding up the numbers of positive and negative responses. They acted on the comments where possible and responded, either in writing or through discussion, to parents who wrote a comment individually.
36. All governors shared information with school leaders from the wider community.

Local shopkeepers had indicated to a governor of one secondary school that there were concerns about the behaviour of some pupils in the community. These concerns had not been raised with the school directly. The governor reported back to the headteacher who addressed the situation in several ways. For example, members of staff were sent to monitor the problem areas and there was a focus in assemblies on the importance of good behaviour beyond the school. As a consequence, behaviour improved and the school received thanks from local shops and the bus company. This response has strengthened relationships between the school and the local community.

37. These outstanding governors used their business and wider community links to support the learning experiences of staff and pupils, which included securing additional resources and arranging visits for pupils. For example, in one secondary school, an ICT company was one of the Trust partners.⁵ This

⁵ A Trust school is a state-funded foundation school supported by a charitable Trust made up of the school and partners working together for the benefit of the school. More information can be found at www.education.gov.uk/schools/leadership/governance/guidetothelaw/b0065507/gttl/trust-schools/definition-trust-school.

company was able to provide bespoke training in ICT for pupils and staff. In a primary school there were good links with the local church. The vicar was a governor and had encouraged members of the congregation to become volunteers at the school.

38. There was evidence that governors promoted the work of the school by encouraging links with different organisations. For example, a governor of a special school was also a member of a local support group for parents of children with autistic spectrum disorder. The school ran training events on special educational needs for teachers in the locality. Some sessions were provided by specialist external experts. Free places on these courses were offered to members of the support group as a direct result of this link. As a consequence, the work of the school was held in high regard and local families and their children had been provided with additional support advice.

Strengthening leadership through governance

Making a difference

39. These effective governing bodies strengthened leadership by:
- providing an external view and asking questions which challenged school leaders, encouraged alternative solutions to be found or tested proposals before they were adopted
 - having high aspirations for pupils, staff and the wider community
 - approving and monitoring priorities, ensuring policies were focused on the key priorities of teaching and learning, and increasing the pace of improvement
 - supporting the development of leadership potential within the school through effective training and development opportunities
 - using their skills, expertise and external networks to complement those of the school leadership team in improving provision and outcomes for pupils
 - supporting the appointment and retention of the best staff and actions to address underperformance. For example, in two of the secondary schools, governors participated in all senior and middle leadership appointments. One primary school included a governor on the appointment panel for all posts.

Recruitment, induction and training

40. Over half of the governing bodies in the small sample had a full complement of governors at the time of the visits. Five of the remainder had a parent vacancy and one had a local authority vacancy. In one of the schools the governing body had been replaced by an interim executive board (IEB) when the school

was judged to require special measures in 2007.⁶ In December 2009 the school's capacity to improve was judged to be good and governance outstanding. At the time of the inspector's visit, the IEB was implementing a transition plan to move from an IEB to a full governing body.

41. No difficulties were reported in recruiting governors in 11 of the 14 schools visited. Those with vacancies were confident that they would be filled. The headteacher of a special school saw changes of governing body membership as positive, bringing in new ideas, skills and expertise. Two secondary schools had experienced difficulties in recruiting parent governors. One reason for the difficulty was that parents felt that they did not have the time to commit to the role. In one of these schools, the size of the governing body had been reviewed and subsequently reduced from 18 to 14, including five parent governors. The number of committees was also reduced to two and the length of meetings restricted to no more than one and a half hours.
42. Typically, governors used their external contacts and networks to encourage others to put themselves forward to be governors. Governors who had initially become parent governors often remained on the governing body, for example as a community governor, when their term of office expired and they were no longer eligible to be a parent governor.
43. All new governors in the 14 schools visited received some form of induction. Typically new governors were given an induction pack which provided information about the school and explained the roles and responsibilities of governors. In some cases, this information was given to prospective governors to help them decide whether or not they wanted to become governors.
44. Attendance at training for new governors, for example, provided by the local authority, was another common feature of the induction process. In two cases, this had been provided in common with other local schools to avoid the difficulties encountered by some governors in travelling long distances across a local authority area.
45. More than two thirds of the schools visited held formal meetings for new governors with the headteacher, clerk and the chair of governors to support their induction. Typically these meetings took place before the new governor attended a governing body meeting. It helped to ensure that the new governor understood the protocols and procedures and had an opportunity to ask any questions. Over half of the 14 governing bodies allocated a mentor or buddy to new governors.

⁶ An IEB is appointed by a local authority to govern a school that is causing concern. It is a small, focused group with at least two members appointed for the full period which it is expected to take to turn the school around. More details can be found at: www.education.gov.uk/schools/leadership/governance/guidetothelaw/b0065507/gttl/concern/ieb/provisions.

46. Governors in the schools visited undertook training, depending on their other commitments as well as the timing and location of training events, to update their knowledge and skills. In addition to induction training, governors undertook training on subjects such as special educational needs and the use of RAISEonline data.⁷ Typically, training was provided by the local authority. In one special school, governors who found it difficult to attend training events in the evening were exploring e-learning opportunities.

Governing body self-review

47. All the governing bodies visited challenged their own performance in addition to that of the schools. Robust debates about the effectiveness of governance were common. Where there were opposing views, issues were discussed fully and additional information sought, including from external experts.
48. The effectiveness of the governing body structures and committee membership was reviewed routinely. In one primary school, for example, the committee structure and individual governor responsibilities were reviewed annually.

In one secondary school, all governors attended a 'leading together' training event with the senior leadership team. The programme was run by the local authority and involved attending three joint sessions. As a result of this programme, governors identified that they needed to build stronger links with the staff and pupils by acknowledging more overtly what was working well. Subsequently, the nomination of members of staff and pupils for recognition of their achievements was discussed regularly. A personal letter from the chair of the governing body was sent to all those recognised in this way.

49. Half of the governing bodies visited had either been supported by local authority materials and/or training, or had used Ofsted's grade descriptors for governance to guide their self-evaluation. Eleven governing bodies had sought advice from the local authority governor support services and school improvement partners to improve their practice. Two governing bodies had used their process of self-review to develop a specific action plan for their own development.
50. In just under half of the schools, the effectiveness of the governing body was reviewed regularly and included a clear evaluation of the effect of their decisions on the outcomes for pupils. One secondary school, for example, had identified a day to meet with another governing body of a similar school to compare and benchmark their practice. A question these governing bodies specifically reflected on was, 'What difference have we made?'

⁷ RAISEonline provides interactive analysis of schools' and pupils' performance data. www.ofsted.gov.uk/Ofsted-home/About-us/FAQs/RAISEonline2.

51. In another secondary school, the expertise and skills brought by the Trust of tackling underperformance in other schools provided the governing body with a clear structure and framework for improvement. This framework helped the governing body to manage its work efficiently by keeping focused on its core business and not straying into operational and peripheral issues. Experienced governors modelled effective questioning which helped to build other governors' skills and confidence. Governors described how they asked for advice and further information when needed and saw the value of sharing best practice and learning from others.
52. In a special school visited, governors had embedded arrangements for self-review of the effectiveness and impact of the governing body. At their annual 'Away Day', they formally reviewed progress since the last review meeting and set priorities for the long and short term. Governors reviewed the terms of reference and purpose of each of the committees and made changes if appropriate. At each meeting the chair of the governing body and chairs of the committees always asked two questions: 'Why are we doing this?' and 'What are we trying to achieve?'

Questions that governors might want to consider

53. The schools visited demonstrated the strong commitment that governors made to their schools and how willingly they gave of their time. They strived for the very best for the pupils and communities that they served. In reflecting on their own effectiveness, other governing bodies might wish to consider asking themselves some key questions. The questions below are offered as a starting point to help governors reflect on the important work that they do.
 - How do we understand our roles and responsibilities and how they differ from those of the headteacher and senior staff?
 - What do we know about the achievement of pupils and the quality of teaching in the school?
 - How do we know that the information we have about our school is robust and accurate?
 - How do we provide the right balance of professional support and challenge for the headteacher and senior staff to help them improve the school's effectiveness?
 - How do we use our time efficiently?
 - How do we make best use of the skills and expertise of all members of the governing body?
 - How do we know that the governing body is as effective as possible and could we do things better?
 - How do we review our own performance regularly?
 - How do we plan our training and development?

- Do we consider what might be needed when governors leave? How do we ensure we still continue to have the necessary skills and knowledge?
- How do we ensure that members of our governing body are prepared to step into important roles such as the chair of the governing body and chairs of committees?

Notes

In November 2010 inspectors visited 14 schools (five primary, six secondary and three special schools). These were selected from primary, secondary and special schools in varying geographical locations where governance was judged outstanding in inspections conducted in the academic year 2009/10. The governance judgement, prior to the most recent inspection, varied in the 14 sampled schools from inadequate to outstanding so that the governance journey to sustaining excellence could be explored.

During the visits in November 2010, inspectors held discussions with a range of governors, including the chair of the governing body and chairs of committees, the headteacher and the clerk to the governing body. Other meetings were included where appropriate, with pupils, senior leaders and the school improvement partner. Documentation considered included minutes of governor meetings, terms of reference, reports to and by governors, and governor handbooks. The main emphasis in making the visits was to collect evidence about what makes governance outstanding.

Further information

Publications by Ofsted

Twenty outstanding primary schools: excelling against the odds (090170), Ofsted, 2009; www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/090170.

Twelve outstanding secondary schools: excelling against the odds (080240), Ofsted, 2009; www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/080240.

Twelve outstanding special schools: excelling through inclusion (090171), Ofsted, 2009; www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/090171.

Websites

Further information about the role of school governors can be found at:

Department for Education

www.education.gov.uk/schools/leadership/governance/guidetothelaw/b0065507/gttl/concern/ieb/provisions.

School Governors' One-Stop Shop

www.sgoss.org.uk.

National Governors' Association

www.nga.org.uk.

Annex: The governing bodies, their context and some approaches taken

Boyne Hill Church of England Infant and Nursery School, Windsor and Maidenhead

The school is located in a multi-ethnic community. A substantial proportion of the pupils use English as an additional language. The governors have a high profile in the school; they are well known to staff, pupils and parents and operate as a close-knit team.

A clear, shared view of their roles and responsibilities, and high expectations of their effectiveness have been developed and established during the past five years. The governing body used its wider networks to recruit new governors from the local community. This shared view and active recruitment were key factors in sustaining outstanding governance.

A well-managed and efficient committee structure made the best possible use of time. The delegation of specific responsibilities for monitoring and evaluating the work of the school to working groups and individual governors was closely aligned to the school's improvement priorities. Sharply focused minutes from governing body meetings identified precise actions and arrangements for monitoring and informed further improvement planning.

Governors made a significant contribution to the effectiveness of the school's engagement with parents and carers. The responsiveness and approachability of governors were valued strongly by parents. Governors recognised the challenge of communicating with parents in a school where 21 languages were spoken and many ethnicities, religions and cultures were represented. They regularly talked to parents in the playground and welcomed them into the school to celebrate their children's work and achievements, for example, in contributing to creating a new vision statement for the school. Through this informal contact, parents were encouraged to run clubs and attend workshops and meetings about their children's learning.

Governors also invested considerable time and commitment to ensuring that the views of parents on their children's learning and well-being were heard. These views were then taken into account and used to identify priorities for improvement in a more formal way. Governors took responsibility for devising questionnaires that were written in plain and accessible English which could be translated if necessary. The questionnaires were sent out annually with pupils' reports and whenever a need to consult parents was identified during the year. All responses were read and noted. Parents recognised when things happened as a result of their feedback. The prompt response from governors made parents more inclined to engage further with the school, which was evidenced in their high response rates.

Danecourt Community School, Medway

Danecourt is a primary special school. The school was originally designated for pupils with moderate learning difficulties but is increasingly catering for those with severe learning difficulties and more complex needs. Since 2004, it has had a designated unit for pupils with severe autistic spectrum disorders that has increased in size.

The development of a programme to create individualised learning experiences for autistic children demonstrated the highly effective levels of governor challenge and support for the school. The headteacher had identified that provision for the growing numbers of pupils with autism was an area for development. Two teachers attended a one-day training course on a programme that used the Applied Behavioural Analysis (ABA) approach. They presented the headteacher with a proposal to trial this approach with a small group of autistic pupils. They explained the rationale fully and drew up a detailed proposal for a small-scale trial. The headteacher shared this development with the governing body.

The governing body agreed that members of the curriculum committee would receive a presentation from the teacher leading the initiative. The teacher prepared detailed briefing papers for the meeting and drew up an action plan for the implementation of the pilot. The clerk ensured that the papers were sent out well before the meeting so that governors had time to read them and think through the questions they wished to raise. They asked pertinent questions, made requests for tracking data to be provided to them and sought assurances that the well-being of staff would be considered when implementing the changes. The governors asked for a year's worth of data to be used to project results which they challenged knowledgeably. The teacher reported finding the challenge of the governing body useful rather than threatening because it helped her to evaluate the rationale for change and consider its effectiveness.

A date was set for the teacher to return to report to the committee on progress in implementing the trial. Tracking data indicated that the trial had been a success and the programme was then gradually extended for all the autistic pupils. A few months later, governors visited classrooms to monitor its implementation. The modified provision for autistic pupils was recognised as effective in the school's inspection in October 2009.

Debden Park High School, Essex

Debden Park High School is a specialist performing arts school, serving an urban area which contains pockets of deprivation. The school is part of the Kemnal Academies Trust and is actively involved in a partnership with local schools.

The school was judged to require special measures in January 2007. Leadership and governance were inadequate and the school had a deficit budget. The Trust was asked by the local authority to provide support to the school, which began in March 2007. A period of significant change followed, including a change of headteacher and a new chair of the governing body. Improvement was rapid and the school was

removed from special measures in October 2007. The substantive headteacher initially joined the school on a six-month secondment from the Trust. Key tasks for the new leadership were to build governors' trust, provide them with accurate information about the school's performance, and establish systems and structures which used time effectively and helped governors to maintain a clear focus on improvement.

Two governors from the Trust brought with them a wealth of experience and expertise in school improvement. They used this to work with the governing body. They demonstrated how to use information that the school provided to ask insightful questions. Governors were provided with a wide range of information about the school's performance, which was presented in a way that was easily accessible to them. Each governor was linked to a specific aspect of the school's work, such as ensuring high levels of pupil attendance. Governors were also linked to a named member of staff who had responsibility for an aspect of the school's work, and a process of regular reporting was established between the two. Reports were then discussed at committee meetings and reported back to the full governing body.

The meeting structure was also streamlined. Two committees, one focused on resources and the other on educational standards, were established. Each had clear terms of reference and a timeline of events throughout the year to ensure that all their statutory duties were met. Meetings were agenda-driven, had a clear focus and were conducted in a business-like way so were not too long. This way of working ensured that governors understood their strategic role and did not stray into operational matters. They understood their roles and responsibilities because there were clear induction procedures. All governors were provided with a governor handbook and there was an initial meeting for new governors with the headteacher, chair of governors and clerk.

Expectations were made explicit. Minutes of meetings recorded challenging questions and action points clearly. The school leaders took time to ensure that governors understood the information they were given. They encouraged all governors to ask questions and listen to what they had to say, providing more information, which included some from external experts. These processes built trust and confidence among governors who understood their role of 'critical friend' and were able to make informed decisions about the direction of the school.

The overall effectiveness and governance of the school were judged outstanding when inspected in September 2009.

Hexham Priory School, Northumberland

Hexham Priory is a community special school for pupils aged 3 to 19 years with severe learning difficulties, often in association with medical or other complex needs. The school serves a large rural area and the number of pupils has grown steadily over the last decade. A significant proportion of pupils are dual registered and also attend their local mainstream school on a part-time basis. The school moved into new purpose-built premises in September 2009 and has a full complement of 12

governors. The full governing body meets termly, supported by three committees for curriculum and standards, finance and premises.

Governors had a wide range of skills and had high expectations for the school and its pupils. Many governors were former parents who wanted to give something back in recognition of the progress that their children had made while at the school. These members understood the needs of parents and could provide high-quality guidance to other governors on the requirements of children with special needs and their families.

The governing body established a way of working where members felt valued and able to make a contribution to meetings. Governors were equally determined to achieve a successful school and to improve their own performance as governing body members. They established an excellent mechanism for strategic planning and self-review of their performance. An annual 'Away Day' was used to review the performance and impact of governance on the school. A key element of the day was to build a team of governors who worked effectively together. The outcomes were short- and long-term priorities for the school that fed into the school improvement plan. The day allowed governors the time to have an open discussion about the issues that were important to the school away from the formal agenda of the full governing body meeting and committees. From the Away Day, they produced notes and an action plan which reviewed achievements during the previous year and analysed where governors wanted to be in the future in areas such as relationships with parents, inclusion and the emotional health of pupils. Highly developed team-working by the governing body was evident in the building of new accommodation for the school.

Horton Grange Primary School, Northumberland

The school is larger than most primary schools. Nearly all pupils are of White British heritage. A higher than average proportion of pupils are eligible for free school meals. The proportion of pupils identified as having special educational needs and/or disabilities is higher than average, as is the proportion of pupils with a statement of special educational needs.

In 2007 the school was judged to require special measures. It went through a turbulent period as a consequence of high levels of staff absence and staff turnover. The current headteacher is the fourth to lead the school since November 2007. In January 2008, the local authority replaced the existing governing body with an IEB. Eight teachers, the headteacher, the deputy headteacher and a member of the senior leadership team have been appointed since January 2009.

Following an Ofsted monitoring visit in 2008, members of the IEB were informed that they were not receiving accurate information about the school. They reviewed the effectiveness of the initial IEB and decided to reduce the number of members to a core group with the skills to take the school forward. The IEB took action to appoint a replacement full-time headteacher. These robust actions were significant in moving the school forward rapidly.

The members of the smaller IEB shared a common sense of purpose and determination to drive improvement. They had the essential skills of education, finance, management and administration. In addition, they had experience of working on other governing bodies. The chair of the IEB was also the chair of a federation of schools. As a result, governors received accurate information about the school so they were able to robustly monitor and challenge. The school improvement partner provided regular and comprehensive reports on the quality of teaching, learning and pupils' progress.

The IEB placed a high priority on appointing excellent teachers and devoted significant resources to the process. The school established a link with an outstanding school in a neighbouring authority to share practice and help with implementing improvement strategies, particularly the arrangements for appointing senior leaders and teachers. The headteacher and the school improvement partner went to see applicants for the deputy head post teaching in their own schools before short-listing took place, and then all were observed teaching in the partner school. The applicants for the deputy head post were observed by the head, the school improvement partner and the head of the partner school. The local authority has provided guidance and support to the IEB and the headteacher to deal with underperforming staff, using capability procedures.

At the previous inspection, there was no school self-evaluation or quality assurance of teaching and learning. A massive change was to get staff to take greater responsibility for their own performance. Governors supported this change by regularly monitoring reports on the outcomes of observation and quality assurance of teaching and learning. They triangulated the evidence on pupils' assessment outcomes, looking at pupils' work and observations of teaching and learning to ensure they had an accurate understanding of the school's performance. They also undertook 'learning walks' to seek the views of staff and pupils.

In December 2009, the overall effectiveness of the school was judged as satisfactory and governance was judged to be outstanding.

Kingsmead Community School, Somerset

Kingsmead Community School is a smaller than average 11–16 secondary school serving a large rural area.

The governing body was very well organised and its committees provided the key for challenging and supporting the leadership of the school. These committees were closely involved in drawing up the school development plan and in monitoring progress against its priorities. Governors were passionate about the school and contributed a wide range of knowledge, skills and experience. They ensured that they were well informed about the school's work and undertook appropriate training as necessary, for example on RAISEonline and Fischer Family Trust data provided for members of the curriculum, learning and school performance committee.

Governors expected initiatives to be considered carefully and discussed in full. They subsequently provided strong support as well as rigorous scrutiny through the most appropriate committee. The views and ideas of the students were considered carefully through the representative for the student voice on the student services and pastoral committee. Students felt that they were listened to and that they made a real contribution to improving the school.

Governors' 'open days' provided planned opportunities for approximately six governors to gather first-hand information about the school at work on one day each term. Governors visited a series of lessons, usually in pairs so that they had mutual support and someone with whom to discuss and share their thoughts. Governors also met with members of staff relevant to their role and spent time visiting alternative curriculum provision. The programmes for the days were designed to ensure that every member of staff was visited in the classroom by governors once a year. Crucial to the success of these occasions was the trust and openness which characterised relationships throughout the school, including those between staff and governors. Governors were there to see 'the school in action', talk to students when appropriate and observe relationships between them and between students and staff. At the end of an open day, participating governors met informally to compare their thoughts and share ideas with the headteacher. They also fed back orally to their committees who reported in turn to the whole governing body.

These days played a key role in enabling the governing body to check on progress with improvement priorities and to contribute strongly to shaping the direction of the continuing improvement of the school.

Linden Lodge School, Wandsworth

Linden Lodge is a large day and residential special school for pupils aged 2–19 years with a wide range of visual impairment and other complex needs, including severe, profound and multiple learning difficulties. The school also provides: mobility training; a range of therapy, including physiotherapy; occupational therapy; speech and language therapy; and music and play therapy. A nurse is on site to cater for pupils' medical needs. Pupils come from a wide catchment area that includes 28 local authorities.

Trusted and valued members of the school, governors were exceptionally involved in all aspects of school life. The chair of the governing body stressed the importance of communication, trust and integrity. Governors were encouraged to be open and honest with each other, and with staff, parents and partners, and to openly express their opinions. There was a strong emphasis on providing informed challenge and holding leaders to account. Governing body meetings were characterised by robust, high-quality debate and discussion. New initiatives were always fully debated, and the consequences and outcomes anticipated and evaluated.

Governors learnt from past experience of managing projects and painstakingly assessed what could have been done better. They used the knowledge gained from these assessments to inform and plan future development. For example, the local

authority raised a proposal to include pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties and disabilities at the school, who would be accommodated in a new custom-built centre. The governing body reached a consensus to accept the proposal and, using a calm, measured and thorough approach, they challenged at every stage. They made sure that they gathered accurate information and sought the views of all those involved, including parents, students, health professionals and staff. The governing body visited provision in other schools and consulted partner schools. They negotiated certain conditions with the local authority so that management of the new provision rested with the governing body and the school budget was not compromised. The governing body stipulated the timescale for building work so that an existing project, the installation of the hydrotherapy pool, would not be adversely affected.

Market Rasen De Aston School, Lincolnshire

Market Rasen De Aston School is a larger than average secondary school with foundation status. It has specialist status for mathematics and computing and serves a large rural catchment area, where 70% of pupils require transport to and from school. The school provides boarding accommodation for up to 70 pupils.

Shortly after the appointment of the new headteacher, the governors collectively, and with the support of the headteacher, identified that they could be more effective in their ways of working. Without any formal self-review scheme, they evaluated and re-shaped the work of the governing body. They noted that the committee structure had been in place for a long time and new governors were expected to join the committees where there were vacancies rather than where they had particular skills or interests.

Governors identified that they needed to focus more on the attainment and progress being made by their students, including those in the boarding provision. As a consequence, governors reviewed and improved their working practices. They restructured into more relevant key committees, which included the academic standards and quality assurance committee, the student welfare and boarding committee and the resources committee (including staffing and finance). Each committee had a specific additional responsibility for the boarding students. For example, the academic standards and quality assurance committee considered the attainment and progress of all groups, including those who were boarders; the student welfare and boarding committee was directly responsible for the boarding development plan; and the resources committee was responsible for monitoring the staffing and budget in the boarding house.

An annual, full governing body business meeting was introduced. This meeting reviewed the work of the previous year, agreed roles and priorities, confirmed committee membership and identified training needs for the forthcoming year. The programme for all meetings was agreed and the objectives from the school improvement plan were allocated to the committees. This process ensured that the terms of reference for each committee had strong links to the school improvement

plan. Each full governing body meeting included reference to each of the objectives and progress towards achieving the committees' agreed priorities.

Pickering Community Infant and Nursery School, North Yorkshire

The school serves a market town and the surrounding rural area.

The three governors who were delegated to carry out the headteacher's performance management developed particularly effective practices for setting, monitoring and evaluating the headteacher's performance on an annual basis. Objectives were set that were linked to the school improvement plan priorities. Governors then agreed the success criteria to be used to evaluate each objective. Each of the three performance management governors took responsibility for one of three objectives. Using the school improvement plan, each governor identified with the headteacher the range and type of activities that would be taking place during the course of the year and how the governor would be able to collect evidence that activities had been undertaken and were having an impact. Each governor was responsible for collecting the agreed evidence. For example, one objective related to improving standards in writing across the school. The governor visited classes to collect examples of writing at the beginning of the year, during the year and at the end of the year; attended writing workshops with the subject leader; observed staff training sessions on writing; spoke to pupils about their attitudes to writing and about the progress that they were making.

At the termly review meetings, each governor was responsible for reporting on the progress that had been made towards their allocated objective. Governors stated that this process had allowed them to get to know the work of the school first hand and had given them a better understanding of the process of school improvement.

Governors were also effective in supporting and training new governors to understand how to implement this process. As a result of the success of this strategy, individual governors have adopted some aspects of the implementation of the school improvement plan to monitor and evaluate.

The Byrchall High School, Wigan

The school is a larger than average secondary school situated in an urban area. It has specialist status for mathematics and computing and is also a Training School and a Leading Edge School.

Over a three-year period, governors, working in close partnership with the headteacher and the school leadership team, had developed a strong sense of trust and openness which enabled them to both challenge and support the work of school leaders. This approach to governance had been particularly effective in raising standards in science. The governors became aware of concerns related to the effectiveness of the science department because those who were parents themselves voiced concerns about teaching and learning. Concerns were confirmed when governors met with the school improvement partner and the headteacher as part of the target-setting processes at the school.

An action plan was drawn up. When this plan was shared with governors there were detailed discussions about the planned actions and timescales. As a consequence, governors asked for some points for action to be brought forward. One governor volunteered to become the link science governor and was closely involved in monitoring and reporting on progress in the science department to the full governing body. This involvement with the department included regular meetings with the deputy headteacher who had line management responsibility for the head of the science department. Discussions between the link governor and staff focused on systems for tracking the attainment and progress of students. These identified some classes where students were not on track to reach their targets and the link governor was able to ask what support was being provided for individual teachers and students. The leadership team responded by providing additional support and training for teachers and some pupils. The link governor made regular reports to the curriculum and staffing committee so that all governors were able to monitor performance. Both the head of the science department and the deputy headteacher were invited to present reports to the two committees.

Although governors understood the underlying issues related to staff absence, they were clear in their expectation that the students deserved to be doing as well in science as they were in other subjects. The most recent results at the school indicated that attainment and rates of progress in science were continuing to improve and were almost in line with attainment in English and mathematics.

The Charter School, Southwark

The school was established in 2000. Students are from a diverse range of cultural, ethnic and social backgrounds. The school became a business and enterprise college in September 2005 and was awarded high-performing specialist school status in April 2009, with science as a second specialism.

Effective links had been established with key curriculum leaders and their staff through the link governor system. This allowed governors to discharge their statutory obligation to ensure that the National Curriculum was being delivered as well as being an integral part of the school's cycle of monitoring, review and self-evaluation. The information gathered by link governors on the curriculum, teaching and learning, staffing and resource allocation helped them to understand the context of the school's improvement planning and its impact on students' achievement. By visiting the school and engaging in formal dialogue with curriculum leaders, link governors appreciated the realities of school life and the issues faced by staff and pupils. The system also helped school staff understand the role of a governor and fostered closer links with the governing body.

High quality written guidelines set out a clear, shared view of the link governor role and their responsibilities and duties. The purpose of the system, and how it worked, was made clear. Link governors made at least one visit during the academic year. The focus of visits was closely aligned to school improvement and curriculum priorities. The visits were fact finding with the aim of building a 'critical friend' working relationship. They enabled more effective and better informed governance

of teaching and curriculum issues. Helpful written prompts were provided to identify what a link governor might look for during a school visit. These were very broad ranging and included reviewing: changes to personnel; the curriculum; and professional development priorities for team members and the progress made towards meeting them. A proforma to record notes of the meeting, agreed by the link governor and the curriculum leader, was shared with other governors and the results were reported on at full governing body meetings. Governors relished the opportunity to be involved and curriculum leaders saw the process as an integral part of their self-evaluation. They valued the opportunity to celebrate success and raise issues that were relevant to their area of work.

Waterville Primary School, North Tyneside

This average-sized primary school has a high proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals and pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities. It has a speech and communication unit.

Some years ago when the school was underperforming, newly appointed governors became aware that governors were not being provided with sufficient information to be able to challenge senior leaders robustly. They also identified that the business of the governing body was not being managed efficiently and effectively. At this time governors benefited significantly from clear guidance and support from the local authority's governor services. They received training in the appointment and performance management of the headteacher, very useful guidance on planning governing body meetings, and briefings on local and national developments.

The school's performance has improved significantly over many years and outstanding performance has been maintained at two Ofsted inspections. Improvements to governance have been significant in driving the improvement of the school.

Governors received comprehensive information on the performance of the school and could benchmark it through external audits. The governing body ensured that governors had the skills and experience needed to challenge the information provided by senior leaders. Strong educational challenge was provided by three governors who brought substantial experience and knowledge of primary schools at local and national level. They ensured that other governors understood the information presented so that whole governing body decisions could be made. As a result of the accuracy of the information provided and the school's track record of success, governors had high levels of trust and confidence in the school's senior leaders. They were clear about their role in setting and monitoring the school's strategic priorities and left the operational management to school staff.

A key part of the governing body's strategy to sustain excellence was their determination to appoint outstanding teachers and to provide them with an environment which ensured that they enjoyed working at the school. They ensured that teachers and other staff were provided with excellent professional development and support that was linked to the achievement of the school's strategic priorities.

West Alvington Church of England Primary School, Devon

This is a small primary school that serves the village where it is located and its surrounding area. At the start of the 2009/10 school year, the school joined a federation of two schools, with a shared governing body and an executive headteacher.

Governors and staff had confidence in each other and were clear about their respective roles and responsibilities. The governing body was continually striving to secure excellence in all aspects of the school and was not satisfied with features being merely 'good'. It was exceptionally well organised with an annual cycle that set out very clearly what needed to be done month by month, with very good support from the clerk. The committees carried out much valuable work in drawing up and reviewing policies and checking the progress of the school, with good reporting to the full governing body. Governors saw the school at work through planned opportunities to meet staff and observe learning in the classrooms. They were also well known to parents and pupils. As a result, they had information which helped them to see the impact of their decisions.

The governing body was closely involved in monitoring progress against the school's development plan through governors' membership of teams linked to particular priorities. Teams met regularly to review action taken and its impact. Governors strongly supported the development of the school's leadership potential for the benefit of the two schools in the federation.

The governing body fulfilled its role in partnership with the executive headteacher and her staff, to ensure that there was a shared sense of purpose and trust. As a result, governors were welcomed into school. Regular and informal contacts with the school were underpinned by a more formal programme of visits to the school that included meetings with members of staff and planned visits to classrooms to see learning. There was clarity about what was and was not appropriate for governors to comment on; this was set out in agreed protocols. As a result of these approaches, the governing body had very clear information on the progress that the school was making with its priorities.

Winchcombe School, Gloucestershire

Winchcombe is a small secondary school. It has specialist status for science and leadership.

Governors and staff had a firm grasp of their respective responsibilities. This enabled the governors to fulfil their role very well. The governing body was very well organised and benefited from the detailed work of its committees in considering the progress of the school and from very good support from the clerk. Governors were extremely well informed about the work of the school through detailed reports from the headteacher and other key staff and from visiting the school themselves. As a result, governors were very well placed to ask questions about the school's performance and seek explanations from senior staff. Questions elicited a positive

response from senior leaders and resulted, where appropriate, in reviews and revisions of practice.

The governors set out to remove any perceived barriers between the school and the local community and to ensure broad local representation on the governing body. As a result, there was a good mix of governors, including several with community links, who had a wide range of skills and networks with others.

Community governors were willing to share their skills and expertise with the pupils. They had made a key contribution to the school's regular 'flexible days' when the usual curriculum was set aside to support wider activities, including business enterprise. The school's involvement in 'Young Chef of the Year' and in hosting 30 Chinese pupils for a term also owed much to the governors' links to the community. The 'Sports Hub' currently under construction is a striking testimony to the strength of these links. The governing body agreed with the town council to provide a site for an all-weather pitch that would serve a wide range of organisations in the community and be available for pupils to use during the school day. New classroom accommodation had also been incorporated in the buildings associated with the Sports Hub, securing significant cost advantages for the school. The governors' role in the complex discussions necessary to carry forward such a project was crucial to its success.