



External review of governance

Commissioned by Derbyshire County Council

Westhouses Primary School

Dr Chasca Twyman

14 July 2022

NLG	Dr Chasca Twyman
School/trust	Westhouses Primary School
Chair	Simon Taylor
HT	Juliette Whitby
Governance professional	Amy Flint
Key contact	Simon Taylor
Commissioned by	Derbyshire County Council
Date review commenced	10 March 2022
Reason for the review	
In February 2019 the school was inspected by Ofsted and received an outcome of 'requires improvement'. There have been many changes to the board since this time and board were keen to use the review as an opportunity to highlight good practice and areas for further development.	
Background information	
This is a maintained primary school situated in a small village in an area described as 'more deprived'. The school has the following profile: • There are 77 pupils on roll with a capacity of 89 and a declining intake • An above average number of pupils are eligible for pupil premium (29%) • An above average number of pupils receive Special Educational Needs (SEN) support (25%) and 0% have an Education Health Care Plan (EHCP) • No current pupils have English as an additional language (0%) The last Ofsted inspection in 2019 judged the school as 'requires improvement' in all areas except personal development, behaviour and welfare which was deemed 'good'. The headteacher has been in post since 2016. The most recently published pupil progress data (2019) shows pupil progress and attainment was average in reading, writing and maths, though the outcome in maths was negative. These outcomes were broadly similar to 2018 data. The school has very small cohorts and these can skew data trends significantly. In-school data for this year shows pupils still have gaps in their in their learning. Preliminary SATS data for 2022 suggests some improvements have been made in maths and spelling and grammar, but not in English (n=11). The school also has a relatively high number of in-year transfers. The school has a balanced budget though the long-term forecast is in deficit.	
The governance framework	

The instrument of government makes provision for 11 governors:

- Three parent governors
- One local authority governor
- One staff governor
- Five co-opted governors
- The headteacher

There is currently one parent governor vacancy.

The board currently delegates to the following committees:

- Teaching and Learning Committee
- Resource Management Committee

There is also a HTPM committee and a pay and progress committee that meet as needed.

The board is clerked by the office administrator.

The chair joined the board in January 2018 and became chair in Sept 2020.

GIAS is up to date.

The governance area of the school website is up to date.

The external review process

The process of the review was discussed fully and agreed with chair. The review covered all aspects of governance, and included:

- A document review of board and committee meeting minutes and papers where available; named governor reports; local authority reports; and key governance documents where available.
- Interviews were held with the headteacher, chair, vice chair, clerk and one other governor.
- An observation of a full board meeting
- A feedback session with the board
- This written report and action plan

Key message

This board has a good mix of governors in their first and second terms of office. Under the current chair, and with the support of the headteacher, the board has developed some excellent governance practices and has high expectations of its school. It is carrying out its core functions:

- 1. The board can clearly articulate its vision and its long-term strategy. There is a robust annual improvement plan, but the board would benefit from documenting its longer-term strategy.**
- 2. The headteacher is currently held to account effectively and governors understand their role in ensuring effective scrutiny, challenge and performance management. There are some excellent examples of good practice.**

3. Financial oversight is strong and though the budget is tight, there is good scrutiny about how best to deploy resources. Resources are used to support the vision and strategy.

This is currently a strong board. The chair is professional and reflective and encourages good practice. The headteacher has actively sought out new governors with skills to develop the board. There is a strong culture of professionalism, respect, challenge and scrutiny.

There are some areas of governance that can be further strengthened and the board have demonstrated a strong appetite to develop further.

Findings

Findings are organised with reference to the DfE's Competency Framework for Governance and the six features of effective governance

1) Strategic leadership

- a) All governors articulated a strong sense of the culture and ethos of the school.
- b) The board drive the direction of the school through scrutiny, question, challenge and reflection and this was evident in the observed meeting, and mostly evident in the minutes. In interviews, governors were able to articulate clearly the long-term strategy, though this had not specifically been documented. The school currently focuses on the annual school improvement plan.
- c) Though the annual plan has a brief three-year overview, the focus is on the current year. The school improvement plan is co-created with input from the local authority advisors, the headteacher and the governors. Areas for school improvement emerge though the year to feed into the next plan.
- d) Governors conduct their own parent surveys and have held parent consultation groups on specific topics (eg. SEND) to help inform their strategic thinking.
- e) The headteacher and the governors have been prudent with their finances. They have specifically recruited governors with a business perspective to help them manage financial risk. The chair identified potential staff mobility as a risk to such a small school, and though this was an area that is currently not a problem, it could change swiftly.
- f) The board recognises that it has become more strategic since the last Ofsted. The new governors understand the strategic role of governance very well and the chair and headteacher have helped steer the board to ensure meetings are strategic, focussed and hold to account.

2) Accountability

- a) The board has actively worked with the headteacher on what data they need to review and in what format. This has helped governors to be more strategic and to hold the headteacher to account more effectively. In the meeting observed, a governor asked about progress data on girls' underachievement in maths and how this compared to other schools. The headteacher has developed strong networks locally and was able to say that this issue was school/cohort specific and explained the interventions that were in place. No governor has access to the Department for Education Analyse School Performance (ASP).
- b) Governors have worked with the headteacher to manage the finances prudently. The headteacher has sourced additional funding where possible so that continuous improvements are being made within the school. In the observed meeting a

governor followed up the maths question (2a) by later asking whether, given the savings in one area, this money should be released to support girls' maths. There is evidence that the school uses benchmarking data to scrutinise their finances further.

- c) The school has used a sports premium evaluation tool to show the impact of the spending on the curriculum and this evidenced in their minutes with appropriate discussion.
- d) The school improvement plan as presented to governors is lengthy but governors are happy with the level of detail in the report.
- e) Governors have worked with the headteacher to refine the format of her report. However, the reports do repeat information from previous headteacher reports, making them lengthy and as such they do not always feel up to date.
- f) Governors understand their role in performance management and use an external advisor for the headteacher's performance management. To ensure the development of governors, the vice chair now leads this process. The chair also recently conducted some scrutiny on staff performance management to examine at the logic behind decisions. This is excellent practice.
- g) Governors are active in their link governor roles and know the school. All governors have at least one role. All visits align with the school improvement plan and governors write reports and feed back to the board. It is clear that governors know their school well. The headteacher does not feel that governors are coming into school too frequently on these visits, and said the visits were planned, efficient and strategic in nature.
- h) Governors are committed to asking challenging questions. In the observed meeting, governors were articulate in their questioning and comfortable to challenge the headteacher. In interviews, governors were very clear that their role was to hold the headteacher to account, as well as to support her, and unprompted all gave examples of how they did this in practice. The clerk has actively worked on her minutes to improve how she records challenge, but decisions are not always captured precisely.
- i) The chair's professional role and experience is such that he is confident to have difficult conversations when needed.
- j) The chair meets with the school advisor several times during the year and the advisor has been invited to present at board meetings.

3) People

- a) The board regularly conducts a skills audit and analyses the results. It is used informally to guide recruitment. The headteacher has been very active in recruiting people to the board and encouraging parents with good skills to apply for governor positions. As such this is a very skilled board with governors who are dedicated to their role. Many work full-time but find time to do their roles actively and efficiently. There is a real sense of collective purpose to the board.
- b) The chair has not undergone any form of appraisal in the role. The chair has not conducted annual conversations with governors about their roles and experiences.
- c) The clerk to governors is also the school office administrator. In 2020-21 she carried out the clerking role with an office colleague as a shared temporary role. Since October 2021, she has a contract and carries out all the clerking. She is supported by the former clerk (with whom she shares an office) and a governor who was a former clerk. She has completed a short clerking course locally in 2019.

- d) The board has individually and collectively built up strong relationships of trust with the school, and within the board. The atmosphere in the observed meeting, which was the first face-to-face meeting since March 2020, was professional, collegiate and very good natured.
- e) The board is currently operating very well and has a good balance of expertise. The challenge will be ensuring the good practices and ethos of the board has developed are maintained into the future.
- f) There is a strong ethos of continual governor development and training is actively encouraged and recorded in minutes. However the budget is tight and this may limit access to training.
- g) The clerk is efficient and is developing her new role. She would welcome further training. There is scope to tighten up how decisions are recorded in the minutes.
- h) Agendas are set remotely between the clerk, headteacher and the chair. In the observed meeting, the agenda could have been more tailored to reflect the needs of the meeting and this would have reduced the need to use any other business. The chair, on reflection, said the agenda setting meetings had dropped away and these would be reinstated.
- i) The observed meeting was well chaired. The chair invited questions before asking his own. For some items, proposers and seconders were asked for and this is not needed. Minutes show that the chair also frequently reminds governors about good practice.
- j) The chair and the headteacher have a positive, respectful and productive relationship.

4) Structures

- a) The board is an appropriate size for the school. There is one outstanding parent vacancy but the headteacher is accomplished at encouraging parents with good skills to join the board, through compliant elections.
- b) The committee structure is logical and works effectively for the school. The full board, teaching and learning committee and resources committee each meet four times per year for two hours. Working parties are used productively to explore specific issues in-depth and then report back to the board.
- c) Clear terms of reference are in place for all committees. There is no governance scheme of delegation.
- d) Attendance at meetings has been high. The observed meeting was the first face-to-face meeting since March 2020.
- e) Governors clearly understand their roles and responsibilities.

5) Compliance

- a) Governors understand their legal, regulatory, contractual, financial requirements and these are all explained fully during induction training. Governors and the clerk know where to check issues and are confident to do so. A member of the board is a former clerk to governors so also has good expertise in this area.
- b) The policy review schedule is managed by the school office and the clerk. Recent work on this has resulted in large numbers of policies being reviewed in committees. There are some policies that do not need governor approval.
- c) The board is confident in the area of equalities and health and safety legislation.
- d) The chair works in safeguarding in his professional role and is link governor for safeguarding. He also ensures all board members understand the governor requirements around safeguarding. A governor has recently taken over the role of

SEND governor and his training is an action point on the school improvement plan. There is some excellent practice around the SEND governance role.

6) Evaluation

- a) The board do not formerly evaluate their work, but in practice this is a naturally reflective board. Prior to the pandemic, an informal meeting to evaluate board effectiveness had been introduced.
- b) The board see reports from external advisors and also meet with the school improvement advisors when they visit school.
- c) The board has not formally completed a self-evaluation but would consider this for the future.
- d) This is the first external review of governance.
- e) The headteacher has been extremely proactive in governor recruitment. The board has an induction policy.

Recommendations

Vision and strategy

1. The board would benefit from documenting its longer-term strategic planning to ensure that the good strategic thinking that is forward-looking is captured more effectively.
2. The board should consider whether it would prefer a streamlined (less operational) version of the school improvement plan.

Holding to account

3. The board should review the format of the headteacher report so that it is more efficient to produce and read, and either does not replicate previous reports, or updates are clearly differentiated.
4. The teaching and learning committee should nominate one or two governors to have access to ASP. Training (in-house or external) should be sought in understanding the reports available.

Financial oversight

5. The board should consider access to whole board online platforms for training and information. They have great benefit for ongoing professional development for governors and clerks.

Governance structure and practice

6. The board would benefit from streamlining the number of policies that it approves as some of these are unnecessary.
7. The board should consider reinstating agenda setting meetings so that agendas are focussed and serve the needs of the meeting. The clerk could keep a template of agendas across the school year to aide her work rather than putting unneeded items on the agenda.
8. It would benefit the professionalism and efficiency of the board if a 'sharepoint' or 'hub' were used for governor documentation.
9. Though the clerk is efficient and proactive she would benefit from further training and development to ensure the good practice within the board is better captured within the minutes.

10. The board should consider actively looking at the Ofsted leadership and management requirements, alongside their previous Ofsted report so that they are well prepared for any visit.

(More detail about how these recommendations can be put into practice will be included in the action plan.)

Detailed actions to be undertaken

See governance action plan

Progress review

A return visit will be arranged for December 2022

Acknowledgments

Governors have fully and enthusiastically engaged with this review. They were open and honest in their interactions which made the review a pleasure to conduct. Thank you for being so welcoming, helpful and constructive and I wish you well moving forwards.

Date completed

14 July 2022