

NATIONAL GOVERNORS' ASSOCIATION

Annual Conference and AGM

Saturday, 19th November 2016

The first speaker of the day was Belita Scott, National lead for Governance at Ofsted. Belita's background in education included having been Head of an outstanding school, a SIP and on the management committee of an outstanding provider of School Centred Initial Teacher Training.

Belita offered a 'taster' of the report on Governance, to be published in about two weeks. The presentation would cover what had changed, Ofsted's definition of good governance, the evidence base, key findings and some depth on some of these, and recommendations.

In 2011, *Learning from the Best* had outlined a lot of change and the greater demands on governors now. Michael Wilshaw had commissioned a survey in 2015 into what made good governance, especially in deprived areas. Belita referred to the Section 5 inspection definition of good governance – the accountable authority. On page 146 in the *Inspection Handbook*, it indicated what inspectors sought as evidence of the impact made by those responsible for governance. For Academies Ofsted would look at the Scheme of Delegation on the website to understand the layers of Governance, to see where the responsibility lay. The day before an inspection Heads were spoken to in order to check on their understanding of the delegation.

The report was evidence based, drawing on a Call for Evidence in 2015, in which there were 2632 responses – from governors, SBMs, Heads, clerks, parents and CEOs. They also visited 24 schools, across the country, in deprived areas where the school had risen two grades, from RI to Outstanding, between inspections. Schools were asked: *'What was it like before? What was new? What made the difference, and the difference to governance?'* Ninety monitoring visits were made to schools from primary, secondary and special sectors. School leaders and governors were talked with. There was also evidence from Lead Inspectors from six schools that were judged inadequate.

Key findings:

Expertise, support, partnership:

- *Many governors lacked the expertise needed to hold school leaders to account.*
- *Many schools lacked access to high quality people with professional educational expertise to help them meet the increased demands. They recognised need for professional support but this was difficult to find. Some had had a positive experience of NLGs: others found they were poorly co-ordinated and there was an inconsistency in quality. There was also in some cases a lack of capacity to meet demands.*
- *Work of clerks was praised.*
- *Surveys had shown that payment to chairs of governors was seen (by 1/3 of respondents) as a means to find greater expertise; 1/3 were against payment; 1/3 felt payment should perhaps be made in certain circumstances.*

Accountability & Recruitment:

- *A need to clarify lines of accountability roles and responsibilities – essential to effective governance; impact of changes to RAISEonline.*
- *Recruitment & Retention – a serious challenge, especially in poorest areas.*

Self-evaluation & Commitment to the Community:

- *Weak governance, especially in poorest areas, was at risk of going undetected until an Ofsted inspection.*
- *Commitment to and knowledge of the local community made an essential contribution.*

Main findings:

Current environment: *Massive changes in assessment; curriculum; structures and landscape of academies; policy changes and impact.*

Challenges: *Needed to know how to: hold leaders to account; understanding strategic role; keep up to date with changes, in school and in education. Also needed to know how teachers and governors should work together. And recruitment was always a challenge.*

Weak Governance:

- *Governors not skilled and didn't access training to enable them to challenge effectively*
- *Insufficient knowledge of roles and responsibilities; and systems and procedures for governance were not fit for purpose*
- *Lack of understanding of performance: did not pay close attention to pupils' outcomes; 2/3 couldn't account for (use of) Pupil Premium funding*
- *Did not challenge Headteacher robustly, or challenge the Headteacher's interpretation of published and internal assessment data*
- *Understood when outcomes improved but did not recognise/give attention to comparisons made with national data so 'gap' did not diminish*
- *Did not keep up to date with developments in education*

What made good governance:

- *Training – induction and regular refresher for all. Perhaps mandatory*
- *Areas for training: safeguarding, safer recruitment, Prevent; understanding of HR, financial management, H&S; strategic planning and holding the school to account; National Curriculum*
- *Skills & Knowledge: changes made to increase skills and knowledge on a Board (although governors with right skills not always easy to find); Heads as governors needed to be more knowledgeable about governance*

Roles, responsibilities and lines of accountability and issues:

- *Unclear lines of accountability for governors*
- *Expectations of strategic leadership role*
- *No-one held governing boards to account (Ofsted, but who else?)*
- *Sometimes roles and responsibilities of local boards were not clarified, and were affected by different tiers of governance in becoming part of a MAT*

Effective support and governance:

This was a big factor in school improvement. Things that helped were:

- *External reviews, if done well and speedily*
 - *Alternatives to external review were: Diocesan and LA support; self-review; higher quality and more targeted training; independent body to support governor development through training*
- *Robust self-evaluation; then implement to judge effectiveness and inform training and development*
- *Good practice was to undertake skills audit and set priorities for improvement*
- *Ability of governors to reflect on own practice by visiting other schools, which raised own expectation. Some had never visited other schools, yet learning was done by sharing, networking and picking people's brains.*

Clerks – pivotal to helping governing boards to:

- *Be well-organised; fulfil strategic role; review policies; attend and update training; have papers in good time*
- *Clerks should:*
 - *be aware of Government activities; report back to a committee or FGB; should be members of NGA / NCoGs etc.*
 - *be outward facing*
 - *access termly training and briefings*

Paid governance:

- *SoS could pay any member of an IEB that she appointed, as could an LA*
- *DfE's view was to pay in exceptional cases (in some IEBs).*
- *Paying allowances: retainers, bursaries, stipends*
- *At least governors should be released for the work*
- *Mixed views on payment: For – could bring professionalism, increased knowledge, increased accountability, commitment; it would be supporting professional expertise*
Against: governance was community service; payment could change the motivation for serving a governor.

In the poorest areas:

- *Little understanding of how best schools reduced the difference, the 'gap'*
- *However:*
 - *Some tried to understand the school community and found innovative ways to help the disadvantaged*

- *Needed to improve understanding of engagement with local community, to work to know the local community*
- *Needed to recruit those who worked in the local community e.g. small local firms and local religious organisations*
- *Communication vital; and parent governors needed to share information between the school and the local community*

Recommendations:

Governing Boards:

- *Ensure GB's clarity about its role, accountability lines, especially when these were multi-level*
- *Publish information on governance on website to show clarity on roles and responsibility*
- *Robust review process*
- *Professional support and training*
- *In MATs:*
 - *Review lines of accountability and ensure all understand annually*
 - *Publish annual review information on website*
 - *Make sure local governing bodies fully understand roles using expertise across the Trust to ensure consistent quality*
 - *Use support expertise from across the trust and beyond*

DfE: aim should be to ensure:

- *Clarity of national standards*
- *Number of NLGs increased*
- *Professional clerks*
- *Improvement in the quality and effectiveness of external reviews*

Ofsted should:

Robustly report extent to which governors access training and were committed to their own development (para 141 of the Inspection Handbook).

Belita finished by emphasising that it had been a huge privilege to go into the 24 schools and talk to governors and Heads about their journey.

Judith Bennett (Oxfordshire Association and former Chair of NGA)

{As usual, we are indebted to Judith whose ability to take such copious and comprehensive notes is way beyond that of most people}