

GATHERround

EDUCATION NEWS FROM THE GOVERNORS' ASSOCIATION
THROUGHOUT HULL AND EAST RIDING

IN THIS ISSUE:

1. WHO HOLDS US TO ACCOUNT?
2. SO WHAT'S TO BE DONE?
3. DfE AND GOVERNANCE
4. MORE MONEY? WAIT FOR IT!
5. HOW DIGITISED ARE OUR CHILDREN?
6. DON'T FALL FOR IT!
7. ASK GATHER
8. MASTERING MATHS
9. ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2017

Welcome!

.. and a belated best wishes to all for 2017. After the Christmas trees have gone for recycling, festive lights packed away and teatowels returned to their proper use for another year, this time in the spring term can feel like a bit of an anti-climax, especially when what seemed like perfectly sensible resolutions on 1st January now feel like self-punishment. "Actually, I don't really need to lose weight/give up booze/run the London marathon or whatever this year," we catch ourselves saying as steely will is replaced by pathetic longing.

There is one resolution that we hope you'll find easy to keep and that is to read your twice-termly GATHERround and perhaps contribute an article or ask us about something that's bothering you. This is a good term for governors to see their school at work and to review how plans made are coming to fruition, so don't delay - make an appointment to go and see where you can offer support or simply to get to know your school better.

Something to look forward to this term is our annual conference for governors which is taking place this year on **Saturday 25th March** so make a note in your diary. There's more about this in Section 9.

If you have questions or concerns about anything to do with governance please contact us.

E-mail us at: info@ga-ther.org

Post on the Forum at: www.ga-ther.org

Tweet us: [@ga_ther](https://twitter.com/ga_ther)

While we were all enjoying the build up to Christmas in our schools, three reports were published which all governors need to be aware of. Vince Barrett takes a look at them and comments on what they might mean for us here in Hull and the East Riding.

1. Who holds us to account?

Published on 15th December, just as we were ready for our Christmas break, Ofsted came up with: [Improving Governance: governance in complex and challenging circumstances](#).

This report focuses on the findings of an “in depth” survey commissioned by Sir Michael Wilshaw for which inspectors visited 24 (is that in depth?) improved schools in some of the poorest areas of the country. Each of the schools visited had been found to be good or outstanding at their most recent inspection, having previously been judged as requiring improvement or inadequate. Inspectors talked to governors, school leaders and others involved in the running of these schools to understand what they’d changed. It also draws upon “*information received from thousands of school governors, clerks and leaders in response to a call for evidence in November 2015*”. I haven’t come across any governor who heard the call or indeed responded. Did you? So what did the survey and the ‘thousands of responses’ reveal? In short, they seem to suggest we are a band of untrained volunteers who lack the necessary knowledge or skills to do the job properly. Here are the main findings in bold with my commentary beneath:

1. ***“Many governors lack the expertise needed in an increasingly complex education system to hold school leaders to account”.***

No surprises here. There is no defined system for recruitment of governors nor is there any requirement for training. Governance is based solely upon the goodwill of volunteers who generously give their time to support their school in any way they can.

2. ***“Governors need better access to highly skilled people who have the educational expertise to help them meet the increased demands of their role”.***

All LAs used to provide a School Improvement Service and a Governor Support Service. In many parts of the country, these have all but disappeared. East Riding and Hull schools are fortunate in that both LAs still have School Improvement Strategies with services that both maintained schools and academies can access via a Service Level Agreement. In the East Riding, with very few academies, 93% use these services and the Hull Strategy document 2015-18 aims to support all its schools and academies. Is yours one of them?

3. ***“Recruitment and retention of governors is a serious challenge, particularly in some of the poorest areas of the country.”***

I don’t think a survey, ‘in depth’ or not, was needed to come to this conclusion.

4. ***“Clarity about lines of accountability, roles and responsibilities is an essential part of effective governance.”***

You don’t say! More on this in a minute.

5. ***“Weak governance, including in some of the poorest areas of the country, is at risk of going undetected until the school is inspected by Ofsted.”***

Absolutely, since there is now no national clear line of accountability. Here in Hull and East Riding, however, we are still held to account by our Local Authorities who carry

out annual reviews of many of their schools and academies. In recent years, funding for LA services nationally has been decimated but both of our LAs still deem education to be a vital service even though, particularly in Hull, many schools are now operating as part of a MAT. Unfortunately many governors nationally, as is clear from this survey, now see Ofsted as their accountable body.

6. *“Paying the chairs of governing bodies can act as a means to achieving a professional and open relationship between governors and school leaders.”*

As far as I’m aware no school governor is paid for their service. Where on earth has the evidence for this come from?

7. *“Governors from within the community make an essential contribution, particularly in areas of deprivation where there may be specific barriers to learning that need to be understood and tackled effectively and sensitively.”*

Ofsted kept this vaguely positive note until last but then we all know this.

So there we have it. Ofsted obviously don’t think very highly of us.

2. So what’s to be done?

Following this rather unflattering litany of weakness, the report goes on to make several suggested actions for us to put things right. It says all governing boards should:

1. *“Ensure clarity of roles, responsibilities and lines of accountability for governance, particularly where multi-level governance makes accountability complex.”*

I’m pretty sure all governing boards already define members’ roles and responsibilities. It’s the accountability bit that’s more difficult. I think we accept that we are accountable to parents but as asked above, who does the DfE identify as the ‘official’ national accountable body for governance as a whole? Local Authorities? NGA? MAT Members and Trustees? Ofsted?

2. *“Publish information about governance on the school website in line with statutory requirements or the academy funding agreement to ensure transparency and clarity of roles and responsibilities.”*

We’ve known that we have to do this for some time, survey or not. Have you looked on your school’s website to see what information about governors is published? Does it meet the statutory requirements? East Riding Governor Services offer a paid service to look at your website and tell you if anything’s missing.

3. *“Ensure that they have a robust review method in place to assure themselves that the board is effective.”*

Do you have in place a review system to consider how you are doing? Do you challenge colleagues who are consistently absent from meetings? To whom do you turn for help if there are problems?

4. *“Secure professional support and governor training as needed to ensure effective governance.”*

As stressed earlier, we do still have access to professional support and training from both our LAs. Make sure you make the most of what’s on offer.

3. DfE and governance

There's more. The report goes on to make suggestions for the DfE. It says it should consider:

1. ***“Publishing national quality standards to encourage schools to continue to improve governance by undertaking robust self-assessment and making use of their findings”***

No mention of who would administer such a system or measure governing boards against the standards. Self-assessment without external verification is rarely robust.

2. ***“Expanding the number of effective national leaders of governance and the provision of professional clerks so that schools can access the right level of professional support for their needs.”***

The DfE is not in the business of coercing volunteers into undertaking a demanding NLG training course, nor is it likely to provide an army of professional clerks.

3. ***“Ensuring greater coordination by the National College for Teaching and Leadership of national leaders of governance.”***

It's one thing for the NCTL to provide career support and professional development for paid education professionals and quite another for provision of the same for unpaid volunteers with a likely high turnover of personnel.

4. ***“Improving the effectiveness and the consistency in the quality of external reviews of governance.”***

As in 1 above. It's highly unlikely that DfE would become involved in this.

What about suggestions for LA Governor Services? There aren't any.

Finally, Ofsted say they **WILL**:

“Report more robustly on the extent to which governors are committed to their own professional development in order to secure sustained improvements in governance practices.”

They'll only be able to see any marked improvement if DfE agree to suggestions 1 to 4 above. It's not going to happen.

This report should be ringing alarm bells for the government. Paragraph 28 states:

“Across the education system, there is not always clarity about who holds governing bodies to account. Just under 1,000 responses named ‘Ofsted’ as the body holding them to account. In some of the 24 survey schools, inspectors specifically noted that the governing body was not held to account by anyone outside the inspection system. In the maintained schools surveyed, the local authority or the diocese were the main sources of external support.”

Dioceses do a good job in holding their faith schools and governors to account but the majority of schools and academies are not linked to a particular faith, meaning that LAs are still the organisations holding governors in maintained schools to account. There is no mention in the report of who holds academy trustees and governors to account. There is therefore a huge irony in the government's determination to remove LA involvement in the running of schools altogether as George Osborne pointedly said in his last Autumn Statement (2016) speech: *“The Spending Review and Autumn*

Statement represents the next step towards the government's goal of ending local authorities' role in running schools and all schools becoming an academy."

Osborne's gone but his cuts (£600m this year) to the Education Support Grant, which funds LA school improvement services, have stayed. If Osborne's dream becomes a reality, how can the weaknesses in governance identified in this report be addressed? To do so, every school would need to have access to a team of independent education experts who understand what good education and effective governance look like. These experts would provide unbiased reports on the quality of provision in each school and the effectiveness of its governing board. The school and board would be expected to respond to any criticism by writing and implementing improvement plans which would then be assessed by the same independent experts. If this sounds familiar it's because it's what LAs used to do. Ofsted comes down heavily on weak school governance but makes no mention of the devastating government cuts to local authority support to schools. LAs may not all have been perfect but they were a sight better than the fragmented system of school and governor support that we now have. I think it can be confidently stated that most of the governance weaknesses identified in this report have been exacerbated by the government's rigid and damaging education policies over the past six and a half years. Ofsted should have had the courage to say so.

4. More money? Wait for it!

Also in December, the Department for Education published the results of its consultation on the proposed reforms to the national funding formula for schools. As expected, there is not likely to be any new money put into the national funding pot (other than the £240m pledged in the autumn statement for new grammar schools; that's another story), but a redistribution of what's already in it. In announcing the possible changes, Education Secretary Justine Greening confirmed the bulk of available cash would be distributed via a consistent base rate for every pupil, regardless of where they live, which will increase as they progress through the system.

Announcing the consultation results, Ms Greening said:

"We need a system that funds schools according to the needs of their pupils rather than their postcode, levelling the playing field and giving parents the confidence that every child will have an equal opportunity to reach their full potential."

Can't argue with that. Then she said the formula reforms would mean *"an end to historical unfairness and under-funding for certain schools"* and that she is *"very keen to allow schools the 'proper time' to reflect on the document,"* so there will be a 14-week 2nd phase consultation, closing on 22nd March. Why this consultation needs to be carried out in two phases, no-one seems to know.

Anyway, education pundits have been quick to do the sums and came up with a projected Brexit-like statistic of 54% of all schools nationally (10,740) likely to get more cash with the remaining 46% (9,128) losing money. [Schoolsweek](#) published their projected top twenty winners and losers on 14th December. The top 'winner' is Derby with a projected 2.9% increase while the East Riding comes in at number 17 with a projected 2.0% rise. Hardly megabucks but then, as a certain retail chain assures us, every little helps. Unsurprisingly, many London boroughs are forecast to suffer cuts with eleven of them listed as the biggest losers, suffering reductions of between 1.1% and 1.4%. Hull doesn't feature so presumably is not in for a win or loss of any note.

There will no doubt be a lot of noise made by the losers during the 2nd phase consultation but we'll keep you up to date with developments. It does rather look as though we won't see any changes to the funding formula until at least 2018 and possibly beyond when everything may be put on hold again as the next election looms. Could this be a DfE delaying tactic?

With brilliant timing, a report by the National Audit Office (NAO) also published on 14th December said that the DfE had no strategy for school finances and schools will need to make £3 billion of efficiency savings over the next four years. Don't you just love the world of politics?

You can read more about Justine Greening's announcements on school funding [here](#), a House of Commons Briefing Paper [here](#) and the NAO's report [here](#).

STOP PRESS 14th January: Justine Greening has been warned that tinkering with the proposed national funding formula to appease senior politicians pressing for a more radical plan could cause it all to "come crashing down". More on this in the next issue.

5. How digitised are our children?

Here's the third report that should be of interest to governors in all phases. Schools have long been aware of the importance of teaching children about using the internet safely and making sure they don't communicate with anyone they don't know - but can we keep pace with the technological advances that mean the internet can be accessed via children's mobile phones, smart watches, tablets and games consoles? Add to this the fact that most children from the age of 10 or so are now signed up to at least one social media app and it's becoming ever harder for schools or parents to know what sites children are accessing or what information about themselves they're volunteering.

Anne Longfield, the Children's Commissioner for England, agrees and in a report published on 4th January entitled [Growing up Digital](#) she says that children and young people are not prepared for what they are signing up to on the internet and frequently give personal information away that can be used elsewhere. She says this is largely due to 'impenetrable' website terms and conditions, containing hidden clauses, waiving privacy rights and allowing content posted by children to be sold on. Terms and conditions are written for adults without consideration for children, even though they are now the biggest users of online social media. A study was carried out by a taskforce to test teenagers' ability to understand the terms and conditions of the photo-sharing website Instagram, which it says is used by 56% of 12 to 15-year-olds and 43% of 8 to 11-year-olds. The report says none of the teenagers understood fully what the terms and conditions committed them to. The taskforce's panel then simplified and condensed Instagram's terms and conditions and found that the same group of children understood it easily.

This is a global issue and not one that we can fully address locally. This is why the Commissioner in her report recommends that we should be putting in place a national 'digital citizenship' curriculum although as yet there is no detailed definition of what this should contain. However, the report does go on to recommend that it should be taught from the age of four so that children learn about their online rights and responsibilities and that social media companies should rewrite their terms and

conditions in far simpler language. Is this yet something else that schools have to ‘bolt on’ to an already overcrowded curriculum or is it vital that we help children understand what they are signing up to online? Read the report; it certainly made me think!

6. Don't fall for it.

Talking of concerns about internet use, it's not only children who are at risk. The media recently reported that fraudsters posing as government officials are contacting schools in attempts to hold them to ransom. According to police, fraudsters call schools claiming to be from the ‘Department of Education’ (sic) and asking for the personal email of the headteacher or school business manager, claiming they need to send ‘sensitive’ documents directly to the head and not to the school's published admin email address. They then send not sensitive, but damaging files containing ransomware which, once downloaded, encrypts school files. There then follows a demand for up to £8,000 to recover them. Apparently, having up-to-date virus protection will not always prevent files from infection.

The police have issued the following advice:

- Don't click on links or open any attachments you receive in unsolicited emails or text messages.
- Do not pay extortion demands as this only feeds into criminals' hands, and there's no guarantee that access to your files will be restored if you do pay.
- If you have been affected by this, or any other scam, report it to Action Fraud by calling 0300 123 2040, or visiting www.actionfraud.police.uk.

This is appalling and will make heads and administrators fearful of opening any email attachments. This could lead to them missing important and genuine information - not least of which is your twice-termly copy of GAtHERround!

7. Ask GAtHER

I've been a governor in a large primary school (450 on roll) for six years. The headteacher retired last year after twenty five years' service to the school and so we appointed a new young headteacher who is unfortunately turning out to be a ‘surgeon head’ (GAtHERround18), making changes and doing things without putting proposals before the full governing body. This is starting to upset us as the previous head was very good at talking things through before taking action. We were judged as ‘good’ in our last Ofsted inspection five years ago and we don't want our tried and tested systems throwing out simply for change's sake. We're all experienced governors and surely it's our job to decide what's best for the school and ensure the head and senior team do as we tell them.

From what you say, it appears that you have enjoyed quite a long period of undisturbed calm, with a headteacher who has clearly spent much of their career in your school. There's nothing wrong with that if all's been plain sailing and your school has developed and is performing well. Someone new coming in and doing things in a different way is bound to challenge this Utopian idyll. But do you have concrete evidence that your school *is* performing well against other similar schools? It's very easy for governors to feel that all's well because the head has told them it is and parents are supportive of the school. You do, however, make a number of points about governance that we must question.

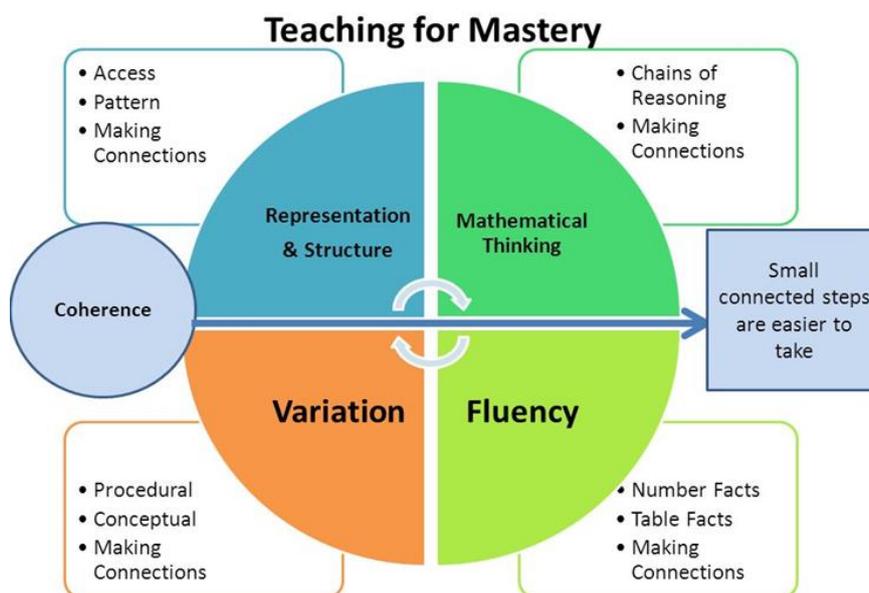
Firstly, it seems that your previous head ran everything past governors at the termly full board meetings. Surely you will have had committees with delegated powers to look at aspects of the school's work in between times? Otherwise, the school's development must have been very slow. You say you are now upset because the new head is making changes without consulting governors. You must remember that governors are not there to micro-manage the day-to-day activities within school; you have appointed professional people to do that and you must trust they will do it without unnecessary intervention, i.e. 'telling them what to do'. The governors' role is to have a strategic overview of the school's performance against an agreed Development Plan, drawn up in a partnership between managers and governors. It is the SLT's job to decide on and put in place whatever is necessary to fulfill it. We would hope that your new headteacher knows what's in your Plan and is adjusting systems and policies that will move the school forward and is not just making changes for change's sake. Inevitably, they will want to make modifications to the Plan, based on what they have seen of the school at work and they should inform you why these are deemed necessary.

We suggest that you include the Development Plan as a regular agenda item at full governing board meetings so that everyone's clear about what's happening and why. Finally, you can expect an Ofsted visit before too long. The Inspection Framework has changed several times since you were last inspected so you need to make sure everyone understands what they'll be looking for this time around!

8. Mastering Maths.

This is something some of us find very difficult to do so we are very grateful to Fran Ward, governor at Bubwith Primary School, for providing us with a very full report of a course she attended in December with the title *“Primary Mastery Subject Leaders training”*

Her report covers a wide range of topics including providing a relevant curriculum, structuring primary maths lessons, using diagrams and charts to aid understanding and recording evidence for inspection. Just as a taster, here's a diagram representing the mathematical concepts that primary children need to understand:



The full report's too comprehensive to include here but you'll find it [here](#) or on our website under Resources/Downloads. It's particularly pertinent for primary school governors with a maths responsibility. We think that ongoing training is a very important part of the role of school governor and we thank Fran for sending us her report. If you've attended any sessions that inspired you, tell us and let's share experiences.

9. Annual Conference 2017.

We're busy working on our ninth joint conference in partnership with the Hull and East Riding School Support Teams. The date this year is **Saturday 25th March 2017** and the venue as usual is **Bishop Burton College**. The theme of the conference is '**Making the Ordinary Extraordinary**' and the confirmed keynote speaker is John Tomsett, headteacher at Huntington School near York. John is a well-known figure in the education world and is an avid Tweeter, blogger and author. Also attending and running a workshop on the Ofsted report discussed in Sections 1, 2 and 3 above is Gillian Allcroft, NGA Deputy Chief Executive. We hope that the commentary on the key outcomes of the Ofsted report above will provide you with some questions for Gillian!

Questions will be an important part of this year's conference as we are including a 'question and answer' session to a panel comprising our keynote speaker John Tomsett, NGA Deputy Chief Gillian Allcroft and a willing governor from one of our schools, yet to be confirmed. Before the event we will be asking registered delegates for questions to put to the panel so think about anything you'd like to be considered. There's plenty going on to choose from!

Our school performers this year are from North Ferriby Primary who will be providing a musical ensemble and, as always, there will be a range of workshops in addition to Gillian's to choose from.

Conference fees are the same as last year at £60.00 per delegate for GAtHER member schools and £75.00 per delegate for non-members. More information about the conference and how to apply for places will be sent into schools as soon as we have finalised the programme but if you're an early bird, simply email us your name(s) and school's name to reserve your place(s).