

GATHERround

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

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Welcome!

We at GATHER like to look on the bright side and focus on the positives of being a school governor. Sometimes that's quite hard to do when we're all facing financial constraints, more and more legislation and increased demands on our time. In this issue you'll find quite a lot to do with money and the sometimes dire consequences of current government policy. As a result of all the turbulence created by the latest DfE requirements, we hear governors are deciding to call it a day and leave. Some schools now have a number of vacancies that they are finding hard to fill. Is yours you one of them? Recruiting new governors is made all the more difficult because there's no obvious place to advertise your vacancies. Why not advertise here in GATHERround? Just e-mail us with your school/academy's name, what skills you'd ideally like and how anyone interested can get in touch and we'll do the rest. There's no charge for this if your school/academy is a member. We'll also be re-modelling our website soon and could look at putting vacancies on there too so that, dare I say it, non-members may also see it.

Talking of our website, our webmaster has now moved on and we desperately want to recruit a governor on to our Council with experience of using Wordpress. Can you or anyone you know help us? We'd love to hear from you!

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)

1. More money troubles

You may remember in the last edition of GATHERround we reported on the escalating concern about the proposed education funding reforms. Since then, things have really been hotting up. At the end of January, governors in West Sussex wrote to their MPs to warn them they will refuse to sign off budgets or carry out their strategic responsibilities. This is in order to back their headteachers who fear they might have to make teaching staff redundant, merge classes and cut school hours because of expected funding shortages.



DfE predictably responded by saying that schools in England are receiving record levels of funding and asserts that the new funding formula will provide a much fairer basis for allocating funds to schools and give heads more certainty over budgets and long-term planning. Meanwhile, the National Audit Office is warning that schools nationally must make cuts of £3bn in spending by 2020. Just to put the icing on the funding cake (or rather remove it), the Treasury has taken back £384m originally promised to education for paying for the plan that required all schools to become academies. When the then Education Secretary Nicky Morgan scrapped the plan last May, the Treasury immediately recovered this earmarked extra funding.

It's a mess and it's no wonder that a group of governors has decided to threaten direct action. Should we all follow suit? After all, the East Riding has long been one of the lowest-funded authorities in England. What does the NGA think? Emma Knights, Chief Executive says:

“We urge governing boards not to withdraw from their role when, more than ever, our schools depend on strong governing boards to make decisions in the best interests of children. While there is obvious PR merit in the action taken in West Sussex, governing boards of maintained schools and academies have a legal responsibility for the financial oversight of their school, which includes deciding how the budget is spent.”

Quite right and we agree with Emma about not withdrawing. Governors striking? Would anyone notice? Schools would remain open, teachers would still be teaching and school managers still managing. It would take a catastrophic school failure that could be proved to have been caused solely by the absence of a governing board to have any impact on ministers or the DfE. Our primary function is to support our schools in providing a good standard of education and working with school leaders to lobby government when its policies make this difficult to achieve.

The one person who should be making a statement about all this is current Education Secretary Justine Greening. Where is she? Perhaps mulling over the best way to spend the £150m the DfE has been allocated to fund an increase in selective grammar school places over the next three years.

2. Spare a thought for the orphans

Apologies but this is also about money. Despite Nicky Morgan's U-turn last year, there are some schools for which staying under the wing of their local authority is not an

option. They are those that Ofsted judges to be inadequate. Once that happens, the government's Regional Commissioner for the area must appoint a multi-academy trust (MAT) to take over the running of the school and turn it into an academy. Pretty straightforward you may think. Except that it isn't in all cases. A school not too far away from us - Easingwold School north of York - received the dreaded 'inadequate' ruling last October and the Regional Schools Commissioner for the North of England, Janet Renou, quickly selected Outwood Grange MAT (OGAT) from Wakefield to take the school on. Senior OGAT staff duly arrived at the school, parents were told new policies would be put in place to improve matters and that discipline would be tightened up. All going to plan so far. Until the wheels came off. At the end of November, OGAT put its plans on hold because the poor condition of the school's buildings came to light and the cost of putting them right meant that it could become an unviable proposition. Since then, discussions have been taking place between OGAT, the local authority and the DfE about who takes on financial liability for the work required. That's four months so far that the school has been in limbo over an issue that is all about money and not about improving the educational provision.

There are much wider implications of this scenario. As well as baulking at schools in poor condition, MATs could refuse to take on schools in any difficult circumstances. Surely the privatised MATs will choose to take on 'easy' schools without rotting buildings, complicated finances or challenging pupils. And what about very small rural primary schools? There are plenty of those in the East Riding. No large MAT is likely to take them on. What about schools in deprived communities? Any MAT adopting those will be put under pressure by DfE to show immediate improvement in results with limited funding and resources. 'No thank you' MAT trustees are likely to say. What lies at the root of all this is money. Like OGAT, no MAT can afford the risk of a school that may damage its financial viability. Add to that the high reputational risk of taking on a school in a tough area and it's easy to see why MATs will pick and choose which schools they take on. They are businesses after all.

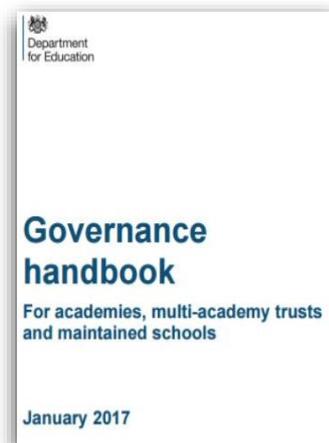
Governors of schools that are leaving their LA but do not have a MAT sponsor are in the unenviable position of being seen as a part of the problem in the first place ("If the school was failing, why didn't you do something?") and yet still have to support the school while problems are sorted out. These schools are being labelled as 'orphan schools'. There are more than 80 of them nationally which, at least six months after a failed inspection, still don't know who will be running them. In 12 cases, two years have passed since a failed inspection without a sponsor being found. The DfE does not seem to be providing any answers to the obvious questions all this poses - except to say that in extreme circumstances, closure is an option. Very often, as presumably is the case with Easingwold School, this simply isn't an option.

The National Union of Teachers has said cases such as these are symptomatic of the chaotic changes to education that are letting children and young people down. We can't help but agree.

3. 21st Century Governance - read all about it

Those of us who have been school governors for a long time may remember the hard copy '*Guide to the Law*' which was issued to all governing bodies to make sure they understood their remit. As technology progressed, this became issued on a CD and then

went online where it became *'The Governors' Handbook'*. It's always been a fairly turgid document that did not have a broad appeal which is why in 2014, GATHER produced our own slimmed-down hard-copy version called the *'Guide for Governors'*. The latest online DfE version published in January is now ['The Governance Handbook'](#) and, despite its boring cover (right) is much improved largely due, we suspect, to the involvement of the NGA in its compilation although it's still 130 pages long. The content is much more coherent than before and is based around six requirements for good governance:



- Strategic leadership
- Accountability from senior leaders to governors and from governors to parents
- People with the right skills
- Structures that reinforce roles and responsibilities
- Compliance with statutory and contractual requirements
- Evaluation that monitors the impact of governance

We recommend that Chairs of Governors provide a hard copy of at least Section 1.2 *'The key features of effective governance'* to all governing board members because it concisely sets out expectations.

Where the Governance Handbook does fall short though, is in its attempt to explain the functions of MAT Boards and Trusts - what a Member is and whether a Director is the same as a Trustee. This is without getting into the difference between a Local Governing Board and an Academy Consultative Committee.

Overall, however, it's much better than previous versions and the recommendations made in it are much more realistic and clearer than those made in the rather cringing Ofsted report published just before Christmas: *'Improving Governance: governance in complex and challenging circumstances'*. Read GATHERround 19 to see what we thought about that!

4. Annual Conference 2017.

The date of our annual conference is just around the corner; this year it's on **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 improving governance in challenging times such as those described above is Gillian Allcroft, NGA Deputy Chief Executive.

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 LA School Improvement Adviser Brian Stillings. 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 School 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. If you haven't yet booked your place, you'll need to be quick as we're very nearly full. If you'd like to attend, simply email us your name and school's name to reserve your place.

5. Ask GAtHER

I've been a helper at my local primary school for many years, both as a parent and now as a willing volunteer. I recently put my name forward to become a governor and was successful in being co-opted on to the board. I was issued with a lanyard to identify me as a governor whenever I visit the school but when I went in to help as usual and wearing my new lanyard, our receptionist still wanted me to sign in as a helper and wear a visitor's badge rather than my lanyard. Does this mean that I'm not volunteering with this class in my role of governor?

This is a good illustration of the difference between the role of helper and that of governor. Governors are responsible for defining strategy and having an overview of how the school is developing; helpers are a part of the operation of the school in achieving that strategy. It's important that all governors understand this difference because a governors' monitoring visit has a very different focus to a helper listening to readers - which is not part of a governor's role. I suspect it's for this reason that you are asked to wear a different badge as a helper. The word 'governor' on a badge can strike fear into the hearts of some staff! Having said that, your school is not operating a national edict on this and now that you are a governor, you might like to suggest this as an agenda item at a future meeting so that everyone understands the situation. However, a word of warning. Do not allow your helping role become a vehicle for gaining and passing on information to governing board meetings. If you do this, you might find you will not be welcome as a helper for long!

6. A nursing carry on

Protests were held at the beginning of February at the Humber NHS Foundation Trust regarding plans to cut £500,000 from its public health nursing budget. What's this to do with school governance? It could be quite a lot if you're a governor in an East Riding school or academy. This is because much of the proposed saving is planned to be made by reducing the number of school nurses working in the East Riding by 25% resulting in just six nurses having to cover the thousands of pupils in East Riding's 145 schools, academies and units. Health campaigners say 19 nurses are needed to provide an effective service. Are you aware of what school nurses do? They carry out height, weight, sight and hearing checks for primary age children, helping to spot any problems early and providing advice to parents about issues such as obesity and the need for regular exercise. They also run immunisation programmes and support children and young people with chronic health conditions such as Type 1 diabetes, asthma or epilepsy. They are also often involved in school safeguarding and health education. In short, they play a vital role in early identification of health issues, preventing potentially serious problems in later life. School nurses are unsung heroes so if you

don't know what their involvement is in your school, or indeed if they have any at all, it's worth asking a few questions to find out.

This seems to be just an East Riding issue. Humber NHS Foundation Trust covers Hull as well. Are Hull school nurses affected at all by these cuts?

7. Why be a governor?

Claire Carter is Chair of Governors at St Anne's Fulshaw C.E. Primary School, Wilmslow, Cheshire. She feels very strongly about the effects that government education policies are having on the role of school governors and has written a very powerful blog expressing her views on the damage that she feels is being done. She's called it '*The choice I have to make is an immoral one*' and it was first published on the NGA website in February. In it, she eloquently lists all the things she did not become a governor to do and all the things that governors should be required to do but are prevented from so doing by demands on their time to address other government requirements. We reproduce it here in full with the NGA's permission. Please take the time to read it. I guarantee that it will move you. To tears probably.

"The choice I have to make is an immoral one.

I did not become a governor to watch businesses and moneyed organisations take over schools for their own ends.

I did not become a governor to watch funding meant for new textbooks and teachers' salaries spent on six-figure boons for corporate high-fliers.

I did not become a governor to meet attainment targets set by ill-advised government departments with constantly changing demands.

I did not become a governor to hear about teachers so stressed they can't teach, wrung out because they are slaves now to assessments and convoluted grading systems.

I did not become a governor to see professional teachers treated as amateurs who care nothing for their charges.

I did not become a governor to witness my government create a creeping culture that reaches into communities and playgrounds rather than trust in the word of experts.

My school is in an affluent area of the country but one need not look far to realise that many children come from low income or struggling homes. Children at my school have learning difficulties and others are extremely vulnerable. This is the case in many of the schools in our community. But instead of being a priority these children are side-lined and overlooked by our government and its policies. It is a reversal of the kind of 'shared society' we aspire for.

I did not become a governor to be used as a skivvy to administrate the government's succession of cuts.

I did not become a governor to use my valued relationships with teaching professionals as the friendly face of their unreasonable demands. I did not become a governor to bruise or spoil the education of the young people I wanted to help.

I did not become a governor to tell teachers that their teaching assistant has served his or her last day and watch as they assimilate the news, overcome with fear for the well-being of their charges.

I did not become a governor to watch school buildings and play areas crumble like the biscuits we can't afford to provide for staff, or tea bags or milk.

I did not become a governor to watch teachers look at me through tears and tell me the years they have spent trying to set up some simple service for our most vulnerable children have come to nothing.

I became a school governor to give something back. I wanted to use the skills I've gained in life, including a music degree and an MBA, to stand up for the little school that is often ignored or considered ineffective - especially under Michael Gove. It was and still is the case that our towns need small schools to educate and nurture our primary aged children.

I became a governor because I could help with budgeting and planning and to ensure value for money for the British taxpayer. I believed that could be done while providing an excellent education for children.

I became a governor to ensure that every child was given the best opportunity our school could offer. To question the school and its leaders and challenge them in order to strive for the best education for our children.

I became a governor to ensure school policies adhered to the law and to keep our children safe. To ensure our strategies were long-term and we improved the lives and experiences of our children as they grew within in our school.

To Justine Greening I would simply ask 'how can I do this?' As I write I realise the implications of the decisions that lie before me and I am brought to tears.

I regret that I have to consider the effects of our school becoming financially unviable at a time when our community needs our school the most. Because if I make the cuts necessary to ensure financial balance I will rob our children and those most vulnerable of vital teaching, help or services. This will not be a deficit that you will have to deal with, Ms Greening, but I will have to watch our school and community become demoralised, heartbroken and miserable.

The choice I have to make is an immoral one. I could abandon it altogether but how can I? I know too much. I know that despite everything the staff will stay on. They'll even give my own children an education. No - they need me and my governor colleagues to stick at it and not give up.

Meanwhile the Department for Education (DfE) publishes A Competency Framework for Governance. Do they really want to discuss competence at a time when school budgets are bashed to pay for other government policies like the apprenticeship levy, which is already creaming our budget for 2017? Is it the school's job to reduce the jobless figures now? And after many years the DfE has got round to looking at a 'Fairer Funding' policy - a policy that once again manages to stuff our school. And our county, already in the lowest funded 40 counties in the country, is stuffed too.

Our society and economy will pay in years to come when our productivity is low and our hospitals and prisons are full of those who were once the children we couldn't afford to help or educate. In fact I believe it's already started.

Those with power - please help us, think about us, care about us, listen to us and do something."

If your school/academy is a member of the NGA, you can log in and see responses from governors nationwide [here](#). You may wish to add your own.

8. And finally...

We have a bit of a problem. The problem is that now we have over 120 schools/academies' governing boards as members, the workload on Council members is increasing. Obviously one of the jobs is producing this newsletter but we also have a website to maintain, a forum to administer, invoices and receipts to issue, conferences and seminars to organise, LA and national events to attend and governor queries to answer. Our constitution says we should have 12 Council members but we're now down to just five plus our two LA Associate members. We would really like to hear from any governor who can give one evening a term for attending Council meetings plus some flexible time to help with the tasks described above, especially with website and forum development. We pay expenses for any travel involved. If you're interested, please e-mail us on info@ga-ther.org or phone us on 01377 200216 if you'd like to know more.