

Enterprise and Learning Committee

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Purpose

1. The Enterprise and Learning Committee is one of four subject scrutiny committees established by the National Assembly. This committee is taking evidence on its enquiry into the role of school governors in Wales. Estyn has been asked to provide evidence to support this enquiry.

Background

2. Estyn is well informed about the work and effectiveness of governors in schools across Wales. We draw our information on the work of governors from a variety of sources

3. Estyn is responsible for carrying out statutory inspections of all schools in Wales. Each school is inspected every six years and the information we collect from these inspections gives us an all-Wales view of standards in education, including the work of governors.

3. As part of the inspection process, inspectors focus on how the work of governors contributes to the leadership and management of a school. Inspectors hold a meeting with governors before the inspection begins to ascertain the role that they play in helping to lead and manage the school. The work of governors is further evaluated during the inspection of the school itself. Each inspection report contains a section that includes evaluation of the work of governors.

4. The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales summarises evidence from school inspections each year and provides general judgements regarding the effectiveness of school governors in both the primary and secondary school sectors.

5. Estyn also attends regular termly meetings with officials from Governors Wales. These meetings provide a focus for the joint sharing of information about the work of school governors across Wales.

6. Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) often contribute to meetings of local authority governor groups and have run workshop sessions at regional conferences for governors throughout Wales. Through these activities, HMI inform governor groups about issues relevant to their roles that have been identified through the inspection process.

Summary/Recommendations

7. Estyn is aware that most governors make a valuable contribution to the work of schools in Wales. They support schools through a considerable amount of effort and commitment without receiving any form of financial benefit. They are keen to be effective in their governance roles and most are eager to learn how they can be better at what they do. Each school has a professional leadership team that may involve deputies, assistant headteachers and senior staff and each governing body has a key role to play in supporting these lead professionals.

8. Estyn's inspection framework requires inspectors to make judgements about how well governors meet their responsibilities in schools. In particular, inspectors make judgements about the extent to which governors:

help to set the school's strategic direction;

regularly monitor the quality of provision; and

meet regulatory and legal requirements.

9. Within these judgements inspectors look in more detail at the work of governors and report on how well governors:

understand their roles and their school;

contribute to strategic planning;

are informed about issues that affect the performance of the school;

use this information to take effective and appropriate decisions; and

fulfil all the legal duties placed upon them.

10. Our most recent inspection evidence indicates that three quarters of governing bodies across Wales meet their responsibilities well. Also, in just over one in every ten schools, governors are doing outstanding work. There are some shortcomings but only a very few governing bodies has serious shortcomings.

11. Estyn inspections of the work of governors tell us that the best governing bodies are well informed and act as 'critical friends' who ask challenging questions about school performance, planning and financial management. Many governors also contribute to school self-evaluation through links with subject departments.

12. Most governing bodies are effective in their work but a small number are failing. In a few schools, governors do not understand their role well enough and are not well enough informed. In one or two of the schools we have inspected, not all governors attend meetings regularly and, as a result, a small number of governors have to carry out an unfair proportion of the work.

13. An analysis of inspection outcomes for the last 18 months shows that there were important shortcomings relating to the work of governors in 12 schools:

in three schools for failing to help set the provider's strategic direction;

in six schools for failing to regularly monitor the quality of provision;

in nine schools for failing to make sure that their schools met legal and regulatory requirements.

14. In primary schools more generally, the failure of governors mainly relates to:

not having all the policies or action plans that are statutory requirements, in areas such as equal opportunities and racial equality;

limited information and content in the school prospectus and annual report to parents; and

not enough involvement in monitoring the quality of provision.

15. In secondary schools, where governors are failing this is mainly because they have not ensured that their schools meet legal and regulatory requirements. This includes, the lack of a daily act of corporate worship and non-compliance with some aspects of National Curriculum provision, for example, in Welsh and religious education.

16. Governing bodies that are effective help shape the future direction of the school. This means they are clear about a vision for the school that emphasises its distinctive character and ethos. In this strategic role, effective governing bodies engage in robust and challenging dialogue about what steps should be taken to deliver high standards of pupil achievement and excellence for all.

17. It is the job of governors to make sure that strategic plans are made and implemented effectively. Estyn's inspection framework identifies the role that governors need to play in school self-evaluation. Monitoring and evaluating a school's performance is one of the most important jobs a governing body will be involved in but this is one of the weakest areas in the work of governors. In almost a third of schools, the work of governors in monitoring the quality of provision has important shortcomings.

18. Where governors have problems with this task, schools usually fall into one of two categories:

those with a governing body that fails to realise that monitoring and evaluation are important parts of their role, usually because they have not kept up with developments in the ways that governors are required to operate; and

schools where the governors believe they have been monitoring and evaluating the school's performance, but are not, in fact, doing that effectively.

19. Governors have an important role to play in providing challenge and externality to the school's self-evaluation process. However, governors often do not focus enough on current and robust information about the school but rather judge school performance on the basis of perceived good past and/or present performance. The challenge for these governors is to probe the information they are given about pupil achievement to make sure that underachievement is not masked and to make sure that their schools are not complacent about standards. In many schools, governors are improving the way they use assessment data by looking at trends in school performance over time and by comparing this performance with national and local authority averages, and with the performance of other similar schools.

20. Estyn's recent report on the 'Evaluation of the extent and impact of remodelling on learning and the school workforce', published in the spring of 2009, provides evidence on the involvement of governors in the changes associated with the implementation of the national agreement on workforce remodelling. Our evidence indicates that governors have been fully involved in considering these changes in almost two-thirds of the schools. In the other schools, governors have been informed of and have approved the changes made.

21. The national agreement states that governing bodies are responsible for ensuring that the work-life balance of headteachers is reasonable and that they have dedicated headship time in which many of their leadership tasks can be carried out.

22. Governors find these responsibilities difficult to put into practice and dedicated headship time remains the aspect of the workload agreement that has been the most difficult to implement. This is often because most headteachers themselves realise that it is very difficult to maintain a reasonable work-life balance at all times. Headteachers acknowledge that the concept of dedicated headship time is always going to be very difficult to achieve because of the nature and demands of the role.

23. Governors of schools in challenging areas, in particular, find it difficult to identify any time during the working day when the headteacher is not involved with operational issues. In addition, many headteachers who do not receive an allocation of dedicated headship time have few staff to delegate work to and therefore 'take on' too many managerial tasks themselves.

24. The best governing bodies are well placed to make sound decisions. In many schools governors have a good grasp of school development planning because they have been helped to understand what is involved. These governing bodies often receive appropriate training from the local authority and are often helped by headteachers who are willing to talk them through the planning

process step by step, so that they can make a positive contribution.

25. In the last 18 months, in nine schools, governors have not met their legal requirements as key policies were not available and/or complete. In these schools, schemes of work for National Curriculum subjects are often incomplete while, in a few, statutory policies are out of date and do not help the working of the school as much as they should. Governors in these schools do not monitor the school's policies effectively; they do not have a list of what ought to be in place; and neither do they have a rolling programme for reviewing policies over time.

26. If governors are to make a positive contribution to discussions about the curriculum, they need to have a sound understanding of national initiatives. In the best schools, this understanding is often gained from training sessions they share with school staff, or because named governors are linked with specific areas of the curriculum.

27. In the schools where we have judged the work of governors as outstanding, governors:

help to shape the future direction of the school;

ask relevant questions about the school's performance and make comparisons with other similar schools;

involve themselves in monitoring and evaluating the work of the school and driving forward improvement;

work well together as a governing body with a well-established pattern of well-run meetings where terms of reference and roles and responsibilities are clear;

receive training that underpins and improves governance;

review the work of the school, building on strengths and improving shortcomings; and

are visible in the life and work of the school.