

## **Visiting schools in order to monitor the Curriculum:**

### **The Role of Governors in the Curriculum**

#### **1. THE CURRICULUM**

The Education Act 2002 affirms previous educational legislation in requiring that schools provide a broad and balanced curriculum which “promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society, and prepares pupils at the school for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life.” The curriculum for all pupils of compulsory school age in maintained schools is made up of the National Curriculum and Religious Education (RE).

The National Curriculum varies, depending on the key stage of the pupils. At the foundation stage, the following areas of learning are prescribed: personal, social and emotional development, communication, language and literacy, mathematical development, knowledge and understanding of the world, physical development, and creative development. For key stages 1,2 and 3 it comprises core subjects (English, mathematics and science) and foundation subjects (design and technology, information and communication technology, physical education, history, geography, art and design, music), and citizenship, and a modern foreign language at key stage 3. In key stage 4 all pupils must continue to study English, ICT, mathematics, science, citizenship, physical education and religious education; careers education, sex education and work-related learning must also be provided. Pupils may choose to study subjects from the arts, design and technology, the humanities, and modern foreign languages and schools must make these areas available to all students who wish to study courses in them.

In voluntary aided (VA) schools RE is under the control of the governors based upon the Trust Deed; in voluntary controlled (VC) schools RE must be in accordance with the LEA agreed syllabus.

#### **2. THE LEGAL RESPONSIBILITIES OF GOVERNORS**

It is the duty of the governing body to ensure that the curriculum of the school is in line with the requirements of the Education Act 2002 and that sufficient lesson time is provided for pupils to cover the National Curriculum and other statutory requirements.

Governors and headteachers need to work in a trusting partnership exercising different but complementary roles in relation to the curriculum which are best described as follows: The governors' role is to set policy and ensure that it reflects statutory requirements. This will involve monitoring the implementation of policy by the headteacher and curriculum-related spending. Consideration should be given to standards achieved by the pupils at least annually. The headteacher's role is to plan and organise the detailed curriculum and assessment arrangements in line with the policy set by the governing body and legal requirements, and to monitor the day-to-day delivery of the curriculum.

Governors should not abdicate their role, merely ratifying decisions made about the curriculum by the headteacher, because they feel they lack educational expertise. Conversely, governors should not become over-involved in the detail of the curriculum in a way which may lead to tensions with staff. Partnership is best achieved where governors seek to become informed about the curriculum, engage in consultation with the headteacher and staff and ask appropriate

questions as 'critical friends' to the school.

They should ensure that appropriate assessments (Foundation, Key Stage and GCSE) are carried out and in primary schools that the headteacher sends foundation stage profile results, Key Stage 1 tasks, tests and teacher assessments results to the LEA. Only approved external qualifications and syllabuses must be used.

Schools have a particular responsibility in connection with sex education. The governing body must ensure that a written statement of their policy on sex education is produced and this must be freely available to parents. (In primary schools they must decide whether sex education should be included in their school's curriculum and, if so, what it should consist of and how it should be organised. There are certain aspects of sex education which are part of the National Curriculum and are not optional.) Any sex education must be provided in a way that encourages pupils to consider morals and the value of family life and that pupils are taught the importance of marriage. Parents have the right to withdraw their children from sex education (but not those aspects which form part of the National Curriculum).

Consideration should be given to drawing up a school policy on preventing drug misuse.

The governing body must have a means to consider complaints in relation to the curriculum in line with their LEA's policies on curriculum complaints.

### **3. CURRICULUM POLICY**

A clear statement of curriculum aims provides a good basis for the governing body's evaluation of the success of the school curriculum. It is recommended that governing bodies of church schools produce a written statement of their curriculum aims but this is not a legal requirement.

The governing body should also be involved in the development of individual subject policies. The whole governing body will not always wish to be involved in such consultation and may choose to delegate this to a curriculum committee or, working party set up for that purpose. The curriculum committee will have clear terms of reference, will rely strongly on the professional expertise of teachers and will always report to the full governing body. This committee may also act as the complaints committee over curriculum matters. The curriculum committee, as other committees, should keep clear minutes and be open to any governor who may wish to attend.

### **4. KEEPING INFORMED ABOUT THE CURRICULUM**

Governors of schools use a number of ways to keep informed about the curriculum of their school:

- individual governors are paired with a curriculum subject co-ordinator to develop a special interest in a particular subject. They discuss issues with the co-ordinator and read material relevant to the subject;
- individual governors join staff at training sessions and report back to the governing body;
- a programme of visits is set up to look at particular curriculum areas. This would be planned with the headteacher; there would be discussion with the subject co-ordinator and feedback to the headteacher, followed by a report to the governing body. This links in with the role of the 'paired' governor (above);
- reports by subject co-ordinators outlining policy and practice are planned into the programme of governors' meetings. Such presentations might incorporate the sharing of work samples to illustrate the type of activities being provided and the standards being achieved.

### **5. MONITORING THE QUALITY OF THE CURRICULUM**

In order to form an opinion on the quality of the curriculum and the progress being made in implementing curriculum policies, governors need to develop structures for monitoring. These will normally be linked to the school development plan priorities so that governors can assess the effectiveness and value of decisions made both over policy and spending on resources.

Strategies include:

- reports from the headteacher and curriculum co-ordinators on identified areas. There should be a report from the headteacher at every governors' meeting. This will, as a matter of course, include information on the curriculum;
- visits to the school by a designated governor to evaluate progress in identified areas;
- the annual analysis of test results. This should involve comparisons with previous years, similar schools and pupils' previous attainment (such as baselines or end of key stage 1 scores). It is helpful to analyse results in relation to factors such as ethnicity and gender;
- discussion of reports arising from the visits of LEA or Diocesan advisers. The governors and headteacher, as part of their monitoring of progress in a particular curriculum area, can request such visits.

Governors need to draw up a structured programme for monitoring so that reports from co-ordinators, reports from the curriculum committee and visits to the school can be properly planned. It is unsatisfactory if the governors' involvement in curriculum development is ad hoc and not systematically shared with the whole governing body.

## **Visiting Your School**

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

All governors bring with them a particular and valid perspective. It is important to ground an individual's perspective in a sound knowledge of the school as a whole. Reading the school prospectus and other papers and statistics is a useful starting point, but cannot be a substitute for first-hand knowledge, that is, a visit to the school during "working" hours.

### **2. TIME OFF WORK**

Some governors find it difficult to take time off work in order to visit their school. Under employment law, employees are entitled to "reasonable time off" to carry out their duties as a governor. There needs to be agreement between the employee and employer as to what "reasonable time off" means in practice. It will be necessary to consider the amount of time needed to carry out the duties; the effects of an employee's absence on the employer's business; and whether time off is given to the employee for other activities. An employer is not obliged to give time off with pay. Some governors find it difficult to get time off work during the school day: governing bodies need to be sensitive to this and ensure, as far as possible, that all governors benefit from the experiences of those who are able to get into school during the working day.

### **3. SCHOOL VISITS POLICY**

Governors sometimes ask whether they have a right to visit their schools. There is nothing set down in law, but it is generally agreed that governors need to visit during the school day in order to understand and fulfil their responsibilities effectively. Governors make important decisions about their schools and it is vital that those decisions are grounded in a sound, first-hand knowledge of the school. Part of the governing body's role is to monitor the progress of the school development plan and also the teaching and learning that takes place in the school; it is very difficult to fulfil this role without visiting the school. Schools are, however, complex places and it is vital that visits are organised properly in consultation with the headteacher. Many governing bodies choose to link governors to a class, year group or curriculum subject; in this way individual governing bodies can get to know part of the school in greater depth and develop relationships with staff and pupils.

#### **4. GROUND RULES FOR EFFECTIVE SCHOOL VISITS**

There are four main rules for an effective school visit:

1. **Clear agreed aims** Governing bodies should be clear about why governors need to visit and draw up a planned programme of visits; individual governors must know why they are visiting the school;
2. **Clear channels of communication** Visits must be arranged in consultation with the headteacher and other staff. Feedback is an important part of any visit. Any concerns must always be discussed with the headteacher in the first instance;
3. **Careful planning** Governors should be as fully prepared as possible; read relevant policy documents and talk to more experienced governors and the headteacher;
4. **Empathy** If you are visiting a classroom, try to put yourself in the place of the teacher, remember that you are not there as an inspector, sharing your anxieties beforehand may help to improve the partnership.

#### **5. BEFORE YOU VISIT**

First answer a few questions:

- Why are you visiting the school?
- Is this your first visit? (If yes, see next section)
- Will you go alone or accompanied?
- Will you have a "focus" for your visit? (You cannot expect to find out everything in one go.)
- Are you up-to-date with what is happening in your school?
- Is your visit part of a planned rota of visits?

#### **6. PLANNING YOUR FIRST VISIT**

A first visit to school will be a familiarisation process. If you are a parent, you may be familiar with a particular class or year group, but have little knowledge of what happens in the rest of the school; others may not have visited a school for a long time. Governors planning their first visit should consider the following:

- going with an experienced governor who is used to visiting, or at least talking to other governors who have visited the school;
- accepting any offer from the headteacher, staff or pupils of a guided tour of the school;
- finding out what material is available and reading it before your visit, eg, school prospectus, previous governors' annual reports, school policies on more general aspects of school life, eg, behaviour policy.
- If you are new to "education" your headteacher may be able to supply you with information on the particular stage of education which concerns you, whether nursery, infant, junior, or secondary.

#### **7. ARRANGING A VISIT**

First and foremost, always make an appointment with the headteacher and plan with him/her what you will do during your visit. You cannot expect to learn everything about the school in one visit, concentrating on one aspect, which interests you, is a good starting point. If you are visiting a class make sure you liaise closely with the teacher, you will need to be flexible and respond to situations in the classroom as they arise. Make sure that the teacher is happy for you to sit with the children and to talk to them before you do so.

#### **8. WHAT TO LOOK FOR**

It is vital for governors to remember that a visit to school is not an inspection; misunderstandings may arise if notebooks are in evidence, particularly in a classroom. Depending on the type of visit, you may wish to answer some questions for yourself, below are some examples:

- How many pupils are there in a class and are they overcrowded?

- Are the pupils working alone or in groups?
- Is there enough equipment/books to go round?
- Are all pupils occupied on the same task?
- What is the atmosphere like in class and corridors - is it quiet/calm or noisy?
- Is there an adequate, comfortable staff room?
- Are there attractive displays on the walls?
- Is the library well stocked and well used?

## **9. AFTER YOUR VISIT**

Always thank the headteacher, staff and pupils for their time, it is not always easy to cope with visitors on a busy day! If you visited a particular class, you may wish to write to the pupils and class teacher. If possible, before you leave the school talk over your impressions with the headteacher. If you intend to write a brief report for the governors ensure that the headteacher knows this and let him/her see a copy before it is circulated to the governors. If you have any serious misgivings or questions you must discuss these first with the headteacher and chair of governors. If you are presenting a report based on a class or departmental visit, the class teacher or head of department should be invited to the meeting when the report is discussed. Always inform an individual if they have been named in a report before the report is circulated.

## **10. CONCLUSION**

Visiting your school should be a pleasant experience; time spent in preparing for your visit will reap benefits since you will have a clearer idea of what you are trying to achieve. Visits are an opportunity for getting alongside the headteacher, staff and pupils; being with pupils may be daunting to some governors at first, but it will serve as a reminder that you are a governor essentially in order to benefit the children in the school's care.

*Revd. Chris Shelley*

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