

Cllr Mrs Gill Birch  
Children, Young People and Learning Overview & Scrutiny Panel  
Bracknell Forest Council  
Easthampstead House  
Town Square  
Bracknell  
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Date: 02/09/13

Dear Gill

**Response to a report by a Working Group of the Children, Young People and Learning Overview and Scrutiny Panel: School Governance**

I am writing with my response to this report and to your letter of 5 July 2013.

The recommendations within the report have been considered carefully by the Children, Young People and Learning Management Team and by me. A response to each recommendation in the report will be considered by the Executive at their meeting on 15 October 2013.

I recognise the hard work that has gone into the production of the report and welcome the report and its findings. I think that the most direct way to respond is by reference to each of the recommendations in the report.

The underlined sections are quotations from the report and use its numbering.

- 6.1 It is recommended to all that every opportunity continues to be taken to recognise and promote the valuable role of school governors, with the aim of ensuring that all schools are good schools and have a full complement of governors committed to the success and wellbeing of the school and its pupils as a means to achieving this status.

Accepted. The Executive Member for Children, Young People and Learning shares the group's view of the valuable role of school governors and fully endorses this recommendation. The Departmental Management Team will explore ways in which all members of the department can contribute to achieving this objective.

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It is recommended to the Executive Member for Children, Young People and Learning that the following recommendations be made to governing bodies:

- 6.2 Governors be regularly encouraged to concentrate on ensuring safeguarding practices are sound, and challenging the performance achieved by their schools. This should include holding the school to account for any issues preventing an excellent Ofsted rating.

Accepted. The Children, Young People and Learning team will continue to provide opportunities for governors to attend training on safeguarding, e-safety and safer recruitment. Governing bodies are encouraged to nominate a safeguarding/child protection governor with responsibility for ensuring the governing body is aware of current issue, that staff are suitably trained and that any safeguarding issues are appropriately dealt with.

- 6.3 All governing bodies be encouraged to implement succession planning. Related to this, the Council explore with governors the introduction of a school policy on the maximum tenure of chairs of governors. This should recognise the value of continuity and knowledge retention, balanced by the need to introduce fresh thinking and approaches periodically.

Accepted. Whilst the department is supportive of the principle of succession planning, it should be noted that the Council is not in a legal position to impose a maximum tenure for chairs of governors. An annual election is recommended as good practice by Bracknell Forest. Training has been offered on succession planning and will continue to advocate a managed approach to this important issue.

- 6.4 Building on good practice already in place, the induction of new governors be improved by more widespread: use of 'buddies' or mentors; individual school induction handbooks; attendance of a meeting of all committees to enable the governor to identify which he/she is best suited to serve; use of web information advising on the basics of the role of governors; acronym sheets and receiving chairs of governors' explanation of unfamiliar matters at governing body meetings as means of integrating and inducting new governors and facilitating their early involvement and contribution.

Accepted. This recommendation reflects a substantial degree of good practice. Whilst much of this may be evident in many Governing Bodies, it represents an opportunity to enhance the quality of governance across the borough.

- 6.5 All governing bodies be requested to adopt a code of conduct.

Accepted. Again, this is recommended as good practice by Bracknell Forest and a Code of Conduct is included in the induction pack issued to all new governors.

- 6.6 All governing bodies be reminded of the importance that the membership of governing bodies ideally needs to reflect the communities served by the school. Governing bodies should be mindful of this when recruiting new governors.

Accepted. It should be noted that there is also considerable emphasis on recruiting governors with the right skills and on occasion it may be that these are not available from within the local community.

- 6.7 All governing bodies be asked to carry out 'exit interviews' of governors at the point they stand down, as a valuable learning resource. The knowledge gained should be shared, in non-personalised form, among all governing bodies.

Accepted. The Governor Services Team would be pleased to receive any information obtained through such interviews and will disseminate and key messages to all governing bodies.

- 6.8 Information stalls be introduced, run by experienced governors, at appropriate events such as school fêtes and Borough events, to assist with raising the profile of the role of governor and recruiting suitable candidates to fill vacancies. Governors note that the Governor Services Team has a bank of promotional material and banners that can be borrowed for use at school events for this purpose.

Accepted.

The Executive Member for Children, Young People and Learning agrees that recommendations 6.2 to 6.8 reflect a substantial degree of good practice.

Existing meetings and briefings will be used to emphasise the need to develop good practice in these areas and to promote discussion and the sharing of ideas on how best this can be developed in individual Governing Bodies.

The Governors Services Team is available to assist in many of these areas, for example, in the provision of a model code of conduct and as a source of information and publicity materials.

It is recommended to the Executive Member for Children, Young People and Learning that the relevant officers implement the following recommendations:

- 6.9 A general programme of pre-Ofsted visits be made to schools by advisers who ask challenging questions similar to those asked by Ofsted, to assist schools to prepare for inspections. The programme should prioritise schools in most need of improvement, and sessions should vary to reflect the type and size of school. This should include a tick list of actions to evidence effective governance to Ofsted inspectors, and feature a workshop with governors to raise their awareness of their role and inspection requirements, provide learning points and act as a self-evaluation tool. Although such support is not included in the Service Level Agreement with the Council, it should be available as a bought in service or offered cost free to schools at risk.

Accepted. In view of the enhanced focus on governance in the 2013 Ofsted inspection framework, the Executive Member for Children, Young People and Learning agrees that all possible support should be made available to assist governing bodies in preparing for inspection. The Learning & Achievement branch will consider how best to implement this recommendation within the capacity of the service.

Considerable support has been made available to help governing bodies prepare for inspection, including an on-site training session entitled 'Preparing For Inspection'. It should also be noted that a great deal of support has already been given to governing bodies in providing evidence of effective governance through the self-evaluation portfolio. The Governor Services Team will continue to explore strategies for supporting governors in making effective and flexible use of this tool and will develop indicators to help identify which governing bodies require priority support.

- 6.10 Consideration be given to the concept of a central pool of governors with specialisms who can be called upon by all governing bodies to advise and remedy issues as required. The Council be responsible for maintaining a list of such pool governors, who could meet informally on occasions during the year to include networking sessions where all other governors are welcome to attend to discuss issues and obtain advice.

Accepted in part. The Executive Member for Children, Young People and Learning assumes this to mean a group of governors who continue to serve on their respective governing bodies. The Governor Services Team is prepared to ask governing bodies to nominate governors whom they feel possess particular skills and who would be prepared to share these with another governing body. An initial vehicle for sharing the expertise of these governors could be the forum for parent governors proposed in recommendation 6.13.

Should this recommendation mean the creation of a pool of 'unattached' specialists, available to support a governing body on request, the Executive Member for Children, Young People and Learning feels that this would be unworkable.

It should also be noted that the National Leaders in Governance programme is also available to support governing bodies in this respect.

- 6.11 With a view to making the Bracknell Forest skills audit form more easily understandable, focusing on the skills required of governors by asking governors to set out their skills in place of the current tick box approach, the Link Governors Forum be invited to identify the skills required of governors as part of a review of the form. The re-designed form must take account of confidentiality and be circulated to all governing bodies in the Borough to assist them with undertaking skills audits.

Accepted. The Executive Member for Children, Young People and Learning will ask the Governor Appointments Committee to redesign the skills section of the application form used by prospective governors. The Committee will be pleased to take suggestions from the Link Governor Forum and this item will be included on the autumn term agenda.

- 6.12 It be explained more clearly to governors that the self-evaluation toolkit does not have to be followed strictly and it can be adapted to meet individual schools and governing bodies. New governors be encouraged to look at the toolkit and bring a fresh view as to whether it has been followed. The Governor Services Team re-visit the implementation of self-evaluation and consider the next stages.

Accepted in part. It is clear from the introduction to the self-evaluation portfolio that this is an optional tool which governing bodies may wish to adopt to support their work. The Executive Member for Children, Young People and Learning is advised that governing bodies have already responded to this in a range of flexible ways. The Governor Services Team hopes to involve schools in showcasing alternative approaches to the implementation of the toolkit as part of the ongoing review of its effectiveness.

- 6.13 A forum meeting every six months be established for parent governors where they can network with other parent governors and share experiences and remedies to issues.

Accepted. The Executive Member for Children, Young People and Learning recognises the value placed by the Working Group on the feedback received from parent governors and has asked that the Governor Services Team seek to establish an initial meeting of the recommended forum during the current academic year. Link Governors will be consulted in the autumn term with regard to the proposed format and content of this initial meeting. It would be helpful to consider making this meeting available to all 'parents who are governors', rather than just to those who serve as parent governors.

- 6.14 The Chairs' Briefing, which is in the form of briefings and operates at a strategic level, be extended to provide chairs with opportunities for increased interaction and for discussion and networking at the conclusion of sessions.

Accepted in part. The Executive Member for Children, Young People and Learning accepts that all groups consulted by the Working Group attested to the value of such interaction, discussion and networking. It should be noted that the agenda for the Chairs' Briefing is invariably very full, although the Director of Children, Young People and Learning has indicated that there may be an opportunity to review the format of these sessions to increase the level of interaction. Chairs will be consulted at the next meeting with regard to their views about increasing the length of the briefings to facilitate this recommendation.

- 6.15 The quality of advertising material for recruiting governors be reviewed. This could usefully include a leaflet to explain the role of governors and their responsibilities. With regard to the time commitment required of a governor, the information disseminated should not refer specifically to a timeframe in case it discourages applications but not understate that either, as the role requires a considerable commitment.

Accepted in part. The Executive Member for Children, Young People and Learning will ask the Governor Services Team to review the leaflet which is currently available. However, there is a danger that this may misrepresent the role of the governor if this did not include reference to the four year period of office.

- 6.16 The governor related content of the Bracknell Forest website be evaluated, specifically to: explore the possibility of introducing an on-line feedback forum where comments concerning training and valuable learning points can be posted; producing a summary sheet of training sessions.

Accepted in part. The Executive Member for Children, Young People and Learning will ask the Governor Services Team to explore the introduction of a summary/points for action sheet as part of its training sessions. It is agreed that an on-line discussion forum would be a potentially useful innovation but it may be difficult to manage and moderate such a development within existing capacity. Again, The Executive Member for Children, Young People and Learning will ask the department to undertake a feasibility study.

- 6.17 The good practice identified by this review be collated and circulated to all governing bodies and they be encouraged to discuss and consider it for adoption.

Accepted. The full report of the Overview and Scrutiny Working Group will be circulated to all governing bodies and Headteachers. As noted above, the report reflects the substantial degree of good practice already in place in Bracknell Forest.

Existing meetings and briefings will be used to emphasise the need to reflect on and enhance good practice and promote discussion and the sharing of ideas on how best this can be developed in individual Governing Bodies.

Yours sincerely

CLlr Dr Gareth Barnard  
Executive Member  
Children, Young People & Learning