



A Very Challenging Role

How can the Council ensure that school governors provide effective challenge for their schools?

The School Governance Scrutiny Inquiry Panel
City and County of Swansea - Dinas a Sir Abertawe



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Why This Matters

Foreword by **Councillor Fiona Gordon** (Convener)

The role of school governors has changed significantly over recent years, with governors playing an increasingly important part in the management of schools, and school improvement. In many schools, governing bodies have responded to this change, seeking new ways of ensuring they adapt to changing demands, but in others, old ways of working remain and need to be updated. Roles can become fixed with a lack of questioning and clarity about those roles, and relationships can become too 'cosy' which can impact on the capacity to challenge schools sufficiently.



Each governing body has a different dynamic, just as each school is unique, and this report aims to point out general principles of good practice which the panel recommends that governors are encouraged to consider. Just as schools have moved to become self-improving and peer-supporting, governing bodies must similarly look at how they can continually improve in their ability to challenge schools. This is important not just because their schools must always be inspection-ready, and governors are part of the Leadership and Management element of the inspection by Estyn, but because an effective governing body aims to ensure that the school is doing the best it can to improve outcomes for learners. In order to do this, governors need to feel confident and supported, with access to information.

In forming our conclusions and making our recommendations we have listened carefully to governors, council officers, clerks to governing bodies, ERW, Estyn and the Cabinet Member for Education. We have also looked at good practice elsewhere and considered the findings of other research such as the Hill Review. I want to personally thank everyone who has taken the time to share their views with us; I hope that they will be happy with this report.

I also want to pay tribute to my colleagues on the panel for their engagement and contribution. Particularly I want to thank Professor Catherine Farrell from the University of South Wales, who gave up her time so generously to be a co-opted member.

Finally, we hope that this report offers practical help to the 1300 school governors in Swansea. The valuable work that they carry out is on a voluntary basis and is all for the benefit of the children in their schools. Long may they continue.

Fiona Gordon

Summary of Conclusions and Recommendations

How can the Council ensure that school governors provide effective challenge for their schools?

Conclusions

1. Recognise and thank school governors for the vital work that they do
2. Ensure that school governors are clear about what their role means in practice
3. Ensure that general information and advice for school governors is consistent and easy to access
4. Ensure that governors can understand the information they receive from their school
5. Encourage school governors to seek information about their school beyond head teachers' reports
6. Support individual governors to manage their own learning and development
7. Support governing bodies to manage their own learning and development
8. Encourage the involvement of the whole governing body in school improvement work
9. Work with governing bodies to fill their skill gaps
10. Promote the governor role to the private sector and beyond
11. Share good practice through local authority appointed governors
12. Work with head teachers to ensure a culture of challenge in meetings
13. Help governing bodies to identify the support arrangements that are best for them

Recommendations for Cabinet

Long term challenges (12 months+)

1. Develop a council wide mechanism for filling the skills gaps identified by governing bodies either through, transfers, swaps or by matching new governors with particular skills and experience

Medium term improvements (6-12 months)

2. Produce a mini booklet for governors that provides a simple guide to their role
3. Undertake a review of information provided to school governors with ERW, Estyn and Governors Wales with a view to ensuring a shared approach that avoids duplication

4. Provide a standard data template to head teachers and encourage them to use it
5. Work with Estyn to provide information about all training opportunities for governors in one place
6. Move from civic centre based training provision to a flexible model that combines, whole governing body, cluster school and e-learning
7. Develop an online learning log that governors can use to self-manage their training and development
8. Consider how the mandatory new governor training might help governors to think about the self-management of their training and development
9. Build the involvement of all governors into the Autumn Core Visits
10. Undertake a campaign to promote the role of governor targeted at private sector employers and partners in the public and third sector

Quick wins (within 6 months)

11. Write to the chair of governors and head teacher of each school to promote the good practice points included in this report (listed in APPENDIX A)
12. Write to every school governor thanking them for their work on behalf of the Council and highlighting the list of 'what every school governor should expect' (listed at APPENDIX B)
13. Take additional steps to publicise the good work being done by governors and governing bodies
14. Simplify the information on the Council website about school governors which should provide links to the Governors Wales website for all general information
15. Remind all schools that whole governing body and cluster school training can be arranged on request
16. Hold a seminar for LA appointed governors to explore their role in sharing good practice

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1 WHY WE PRODUCED THIS REPORT

1.1 Overview

1.1.1 This report focusses on the following question:

How can the Council ensure that school governors provide effective challenge for their schools?

1.1.2 In selecting this topic and producing this report we wish to underline the crucial role that governors play in ensuring that schools provide the very best education for all of our children. We recognise that this is a significant period of change for everyone in education and that school governors are feeling this change as much as anyone. The extreme pressure on budgets comes at a time when the expectations on governors are higher than they have ever been. We hope, therefore, that our proposals help governors to do the best that they can.

1.2 Selecting the topic

1.2.1 The Inquiry into School Governance was proposed by the Annual Scrutiny Work Planning Conference in May 2014 and was subsequently included in the scrutiny work programme by the Scrutiny Programme Committee.

1.2.2 This topic was chosen because ensuring high levels of pupil attainment is one of the Council's five priorities. It is also an issue that many scrutiny councillors are directly involved in as they are also school governors, often in more than one school.

1.2.3 At our pre inquiry meeting we heard from the Cabinet Member of Education that this was a topic of particular importance. She highlighted a number of issues that she hoped we could consider as part of our report. We listed these issues in our letter to her before we started the inquiry:

- The need to consider the recommendations of 'The future delivery of education services in Wales' Review undertaken by Robert Hill Consulting 2013
- That there is a shortage of governors
- There is confusion about the general role of the governor and also confusion about the differences between different types (parent, LA etc)
- That some governor panels are too 'cosy' – the same people have been doing the same thing for years and may not be challenging enough
- Skills analysis should be looked at to ensure that panels have the skills they need as a group
- Closer integration between challenge advisors and governing bodies could be valuable
- The important role of audit in identifying areas of weakness

- 1.2.4 We heard from Estyn during the inquiry that the ‘critical friend’ criteria that they use to assess governors during inspections were typically the weakest element of school leadership. This was particularly the case for primary schools. This further underlines the importance of the inquiry.

1.3 The Hill Review

1.3.1 A central aspect of the policy context for this inquiry was the Hill Report: *The Future Delivery of Education Services in Wales* (2013). This review looked at the effectiveness of education at school and local authority level, and considered what should be done at school, local authority, regional and national level in terms of:

- raising standards and improving learner outcomes at all ages
- better support and challenge to schools to improve standards
- developing and strengthening the leadership of schools and the quality of teaching and learning
- ensuring value for money and effective use of resources
- bringing about coherence and strong links between all areas of the education system, including post-16 provision and the wider children’s services agenda.

1.3.2 This review suggested the following options:

- Monitoring the impact of the new governor training arrangements to ensure that they are of high quality and support more effective governance in practice
- agreeing with regional consortia a template of what an effective governance support service looks like
- providing a standard school performance data-reporting template for governors
- enabling outstanding chairs of governors to act as Lead Practitioners and so support improvements in governance at other schools
- working with CBI Wales and other employers to develop a register of aspiring and serving business leaders willing to serve as school governors in each region.

1.3.3 We have considered each of these options as part of our report.

1.4 Intended contribution

1.4.1 As a Panel we believe that we can make a valuable contribution to this topic. We recognise that, while there are no easy answers, success will only come from a conversation that everyone is able to contribute to. It is in this spirit that our conclusions and recommendations are offered.

1.4.2 Specifically this report aims to contribute to this vital debate by:

- Offering evidenced proposals that will lead to school governors being more effective and school performance being improved
 - Sharing the views of key stakeholders including governors, head teachers, clerks to governing bodies, Estyn and ERW
 - Considering the conclusions and recommendations from regional and national reports and an assessment of the implications for Swansea
 - Increasing councillor understanding about the school governor role and how it contributes to school performance
 - Raising public awareness of the work of school governors
- 1.4.3 During the inquiry we have uncovered a number of examples of what we consider to be good practice and we have included them in our conclusions. As we are proposing that these are shared with the chairs of governing bodies and head teachers we have listed them separately at **APPENDIX A**.
- 1.4.4 Governors Wales have also produced 20 questions that governing bodies can use to inform their self-improvement. Our good practice list is not intended to be a replacement for these questions and we would recommend them wholeheartedly. Rather we wanted to provide a Swansea perspective based on the evidence that we heard. We hope that governing bodies will look at both.
- 1.4.5 We have also identified what we consider to be reasonable expectations for governors. Again, we hope that these can be shared with governors and have listed them at **APPENDIX B**.
- 1.4.6 We are also happy to recognise the limitations of the inquiry. Given the complexity of the topic and the time that we had this report necessarily provides a broad view.
- 1.4.7 Finally, many of our conclusions are in line with the Council's current direction of travel and these are offered in order to provide reassurance. Others may be either additional or contrary to what has already been agreed. These are intended to offer challenge and to stimulate debate. Where we have made recommendations these are intended to help improve the service.

1.5 Use of key terms


- 1.5.1 Education as a service area is rife with technical terms and acronyms in particular. In the report we have tried to write for the layperson and have avoided acronyms whenever possible. There are, however, a few terms that we use throughout the report that should be clarified from the outset.
- 1.5.2 **Challenge** – this word is right at the centre of the inquiry but is nevertheless sometimes difficult to be precise about. Indeed, we did wonder whether another word should be used instead. However, the word 'challenge' is firmly fixed in the conversations about how governors work so we will stick with it and say a little about what we think it means.

- 1.5.3 A challenge is not simply a request for information or clarification (although we did come across the word being used this way). Providing challenge, in our view, means one of the following:
- Asking for a particular course of action to be justified as better than another course of action
 - Suggesting an alternative course of action and asking for the relative merits of this course to be considered
 - Identifying a flaw in either the information or assumptions that underpin a particular course of action
 - Suggesting new information or assumptions that might lead to a different course of action
- 1.5.4 We would expect a challenge to either add reassurance that the **right thing** is being done or to lead to things being **done differently**. In this regard we were struck by evidence that we heard from Estyn that, while many governors were able to point to examples of ‘challenge’ in meetings, they subsequently struggled to describe what, if anything, had changed as a result. The key point here is that governors should be able to see the challenge that they provide in meetings have a direct bearing on how the school operates.
- 1.5.5 **Challenge Adviser** – this is someone who is employed by the local authority under the umbrella of ERW. Their role is to work with schools to raise standards and ensure high quality education.
- 1.5.6 **ERW** (Education through Regional Working) – is an alliance of six local authorities, bound by a legal agreement, working to deliver school improvement services. The six authorities are; Carmarthenshire, Ceredigion, Neath Port-Talbot, Pembrokeshire, Powys and Swansea.
- 1.5.7 **Estyn** – Estyn is the office of Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales. Estyn is independent of, but funded by, the National Assembly for Wales. Its purpose is to inspect quality and standards in education and training in Wales.
- 1.5.8 **School Development Plan** – this is the school's strategic plan for improvement. It reflects the school's self-assessment and sets out the actions a school will take to improve learner outcomes.
- 1.5.9 **Autumn core visit** - Each autumn term, challenge advisers visit all schools. They meet with the Head teacher and Chair of Governors in order to challenge the school's self-assessment processes and also to scrutinise data. They also monitor the school's strategic planning for improvement.

2 EVIDENCE

2.1 Evidence collected

- 2.1.1 Evidence was collected between January and September 2014. In total 17 evidence gathering activities were undertaken by the Panel as follows:

- a. Overview of governor support service from the School, Governor and Student Services Manager
 - b. Examples of Research into School Governance
 - c. Informal visit to the Clerks Forum to hear views of clerks to governing body
 - d. Session with representatives of Swansea Association of Governing Bodies
 Swansea Association of Governing Bodies (or representative)
 - e. Session with the Head of Education Improvement and Student Services Manager including feedback from the recent Swansea / Neath Port Talbot governors' conference
 - f. Session with Estyn Inspector
 - g. Session with ERW officers
 - h. Session with three schools identified as having Good Practice (Hafod Primary, Bishopston Comprehensive and Ysgol Bryn Tawe)
 - i. Informal Session with recently trained new governors
 - j. Observations of governing bodies of good practice schools (Hafod Primary, Bishopston Comprehensive and Ysgol Bryn Tawe)
 - k. Question and Answer session with the Cabinet Member for Education
 - l. Survey of Swansea Governors conducted for this inquiry
 - m. Research comparing Swansea with Cardiff and Newport conducted for this inquiry
- 2.1.2 Professor Catherine Farrell (University of South Wales) participated in the inquiry as a co-opted member of the Panel. Her contribution reflected her previous work and research in this field. Please see, for example:
- Welsh Government (2013), *School Governance Task and Finish Group Report*
- Catherine Farrell (2014) *School Governance in Wales*, Local Government Studies
- Both can be downloaded at: csp.southwales.ac.uk/publications
- 2.1.3 For full details of the evidence gathered including details of all of the findings from each session please see the evidence pack for this inquiry. This can be downloaded at www.swansea.gov.uk/scrutinypublications

3 CONCLUSIONS

This report considers how the Council can ensure that school governors provide effective challenge for their schools. Each of these conclusions, therefore, is a suggestion about how the Council's Cabinet might approach this problem. Specific proposals are identified throughout and listed separately in the Recommendations section that follows.

We recognise that schools are relatively independent from local authority control. There are, however, a number of ways that Cabinet can influence the work of governing bodies such as through information, advice, training, the work of the Governor Support Unit and the work of the Challenge Advisors. It is to these channels that we have looked in this report.

3.1 Recognise and thank school governors for the vital work that they do

- 3.1.1 A consistent message from our evidence gathering was that, while governors are volunteers, the role that they carry out is becoming more and more difficult to perform.
- 3.1.2 The Swansea Association of Governing Bodies, for example, told us that it is difficult for governors to cope with all of the things that they are now being asked to do and that new responsibilities are being placed on them all of the time. Given this increasing burden, particularly in the context of the cuts, they asked; 'why would anyone want to do it?'
- 3.1.3 We also heard from Council officers at the start of the inquiry just how the role of governors is becoming increasingly challenging; with budget reductions they will be increasingly involved in making school staff redundant.
- 3.1.4 For this reason alone we should be publicly praising the work of governors and the vital difference they make to their schools. As a Panel we certainly want to record our thanks and admiration to school governors.
- 3.1.5 However, we should be recognising the work of governors not just because this is the right thing to do but also because it provides encouragement and it lets them know that they have the support and backing of the wider community. This might just be the difference between a governor staying on or choosing to step down. Indeed, a number of respondents to the survey suggested that there should be more publicity around the role of the governor.
- 3.1.6 We propose, therefore, that Cabinet considers what extra steps might be taken to recognise the good work being done by individual governors and governing bodies. This might be through letters from the Cabinet Member, a media campaign or an award scheme of some kind. Cabinet may also consider suggesting to Welsh Government that a St David's Prize could be awarded for the most effective governing body.

3.1.7 School's achieving the Bronze Governing Body Award status is another good news story that could be shared more. We were pleased to hear that eight governing bodies have so far been successful and that a further 23 will soon be assessed.

3.2 *Ensure that school governors are clear about what their role means in practice*

3.2.1 Given the challenging nature of the job we believe that every school governor is entitled to have their role set out clearly and meaningfully. Estyn also consider this to be important and use 'how well governors understand their roles' as one of their inspection criteria. If governors are to provide effective challenge they need to be clear about their role.

3.2.2 The Cabinet Member also asked us to consider whether governors were clear about their general role and clear about the differences between the different governor roles.

3.2.3 Our survey suggested that the majority of governors are more or less clear about their role. When asked whether governors in my school are clear about their roles and responsibilities' 29% strongly agreed and 55% tended to agree. However, a number also pointed to a lack of role awareness and the need for further training.

3.2.4 While we believe the general governor role is straightforward and uncontroversial, there are a number of aspects that can present difficulties.

3.2.5 The first is that, while confidence in the role appears to come from experience, newer governors do not have the understanding of the role that they should. As a Panel we were concerned to hear from recently trained governors that they felt unprepared for their role. In part this was because they felt that the induction training was useful in theory but did not prepare governors for the role in practice. One said that his training 'explains the role of the governor in black and white but it is not always like that in reality'.

3.2.6 At our meeting with the clerks to governing bodies we heard how a well thought out induction and mentoring scheme can help new governors bridge this gap between the theory of training and the practice of governing body meetings. This was confirmed at our meeting with the new governors where one said that: "Having another governor to mentor and encourage was the biggest help received." We do not believe, however, that mentoring schemes are happening in all schools and would like to see this made into a clear expectation.

3.2.7 We also heard the suggestion at our meeting with new governors that there should be a mini booklet / guide for new governors that they can take around with them. This is a proposal that we support.

3.2.8 A second difficulty is that governors have to both challenge and support as part of their role. We heard from Governors Wales, for example, that 'high levels of challenge and support from governors are required at the same time'. We also heard from the Council's Head of Education Inclusion that it

can be difficult to get the right balance. A finding from the Joint Governing Body Conference held in April 2015 was that there is a ‘risk that there can be “an overbalance of cheerleading” in the governing body.

- 3.2.9 Our view is that the right balance between challenge and support cannot be defined as an absolute but should be a matter for each governing body to determine. As a minimum, and given the critical importance of this issue we feel strongly that every governing body should explicitly discuss this issue as a separate agenda item at a meeting and preferably at the first meeting of the year.
- 3.2.10 A third issue that we encountered was the increasing use of link governors who have been given the responsibility to look after a particular subject area or other topic on behalf of the school. We noticed during our observations, for example, that governors needed to ask what the role entailed during discussions about who should be allocated to be which link governor. Ideally we would expect that the link governor role should be clear to all governors from the start.
- 3.2.11 Again, we would like to see a clear statement of the link governor role presented to the governing body by the head teacher for awareness and discussion.

3.3 *Ensure that general information and advice for school governors is consistent and easy to access*

- 3.3.1 Given the challenging nature of the role all governors will have questions they need answered from time to time. Every governor should expect to be able to access general information about their role in as easy, accessible and straightforward a way as possible.
- 3.3.2 We heard from Governors Wales that while there is plenty of information available, governors do not always get the information that they need. The recent joint governors’ conference also pointed to the problems created by jargon and acronyms.
- 3.3.3 We found that governors were able to get their information from four different websites (Swansea Council, ERW, Estyn and Governors Wales).
- 3.3.4 We heard that the information provided was inconsistent between the websites and we found that different answers were given to the same ‘frequently asked question’ on different websites. While we are not suggesting that any of the information provided is incorrect we think that there is certainly the potential for confusion and unnecessary duplication.
- 3.3.5 We believe, therefore, that information for governors should be provided as far as possible in one place. Many of the people we spoke to suggested that Governors Wales should be the website of choice and we support this.
- 3.3.6 In the short term we ask that the Cabinet Member talks to Governors Wales, Estyn and ERW about applying this principle and moves to ensure that only

locally relevant information is included on the Council website and that, for all general information, governors are directed to Governors Wales.

- 3.3.7 In the medium term we would like to see a piece of work conducted that properly considers the information needs of governors from a user perspective. It would make sense if this was a national project conducted by Governors Wales. It should consider newsletters, email and social media as well as websites.

3.4 *Ensure that governors can understand the information they receive from their school*

- 3.4.1 If governors are to be able to provide effective challenge they need to have a clear understanding of how their school is performing. Governors are not necessarily education professionals and this implies two things; school governors must have a minimum level of competence when it comes to understanding data and data must be provided in a format that can be easily understood.
- 3.4.2 Our survey found that governors believe information is provided in a format that they can understand. Nearly 50% agreed that this was the case and a further 40% tended to agree. We conclude, therefore, that schools are doing a good job when providing data to governors.
- 3.4.3 There are nevertheless some areas for improvement suggested by the survey.
- 3.4.4 A number of respondents pointed to the importance of data training. The suggestion was made that it should be compulsory for all governors to attend the interpretation of data course run by the local authority. We heard good things about this course, particularly from the Swansea Association of Governing Bodies. We understand that it is already a mandatory course for new and reappointed governors; we hope that all governors can be encouraged to attend.
- 3.4.5 Other comments we received from the survey referred to consistency in the way that information was provided and the use of technical language. On this basis we agree with the idea in the Hill review that there should be a standard template for reporting school data. Indeed, from our observations of good practice schools we would say this is already happening with schools following a very similar format.
- 3.4.6 We hope that head teachers will be encouraged to review the way that they provide data and to check with their governors that they do not have any of these concerns.
- 3.4.7 As well as data, governors need to be clear about how the school is progressing with the priorities set out in the school Development Plan. We heard from the Head of Education Improvement that if schools are monitoring actions and impact robustly and relaying this information to governors, for example, with a basic red-amber-yellow-green rating, then this can help with governors challenging progress in particular priority areas.

3.5 *Encourage school governors to seek information about their school beyond head teachers' reports*

- 3.5.1 If governors are to challenge effectively they need to be able to balance what they receive from their schools with information from elsewhere.
- 3.5.2 The importance of being able to 'triangulate' data was stressed to us by the Head of Education Inclusion who suggested that governors should be both speaking to children and viewing their work.
- 3.5.3 The idea of book scrutiny came up a number of times as an important activity for governors. We understand that governors are not there to comment on professional teaching practice but they should be able to form a view of how well the children are doing independently of what they hear from the head teacher.
- 3.5.4 More generally we heard from the good practice schools that we spoke to about the value of governors having contact with a wide range of staff, not just the head teacher. We also observed this in meetings. Where link governors are able to engage directly with teachers, particularly in the classroom setting, we believe that this gives them broader knowledge base from which to contribute to governors meetings.
- 3.5.5 As well as involving staff we were also impressed with the way that the good practice schools involved pupils in their meetings through presentations or, at secondary level, through the involvement of pupil governors. Presentations in particular give governors the opportunity to see the children first hand talking about the things they have been doing in school.
- 3.5.6 At the same time we observed how governors with strong links to the community were able to bring this experience into meetings. Governors working with community projects are able to make the links to school activities and draw on community resources. We also recognise the value of governors acting as a link to the community outside of the school. Many parents maybe more willing to talk to a governor about an issue of concern than to talk to the school. This type of community intelligence can be invaluable to the governing body and may provide a useful source of challenge. Linked to this we hope that governing bodies will strive to be as representative of the community as they can be.
- 3.5.7 It is also important for governors to independently gather data about their school. To this end we believe that all governors should be accessing information through the mylocalschool website. This site, recommended by Estyn amongst others, provides a range of data for each school and a link to the most recent Estyn report. The website also provides comparative information relating to all schools and governors should be encouraged to use this to help develop challenge. We believe that the Cabinet Member should be taking steps to encourage all governors to use it.

3.6 Support individual governors to manage their own learning and development

- 3.6.1 We believe that, in order to be effective, individual governors should take responsibility for their own learning and development. While we think that this is right in any case, the reduced resource available to support training and development also provides a practical justification for this.
- 3.6.2 At the same time, we also believe that the skills and experience that governors have to offer goes beyond the formal qualifications that they may have and the formal training that they may have attended. Any discussion about skills should start with recognition of what each individual governor has to offer in the broadest sense.
- 3.6.3 One important factor, not always easy to quantify, is that of confidence. The importance of confidence in respect of challenge was raised both at the Clerks Forum and by Estyn. We feel strongly that confidence needs to be included in any conversations about learning and development.
- 3.6.4 While in our survey, 83% agreed that governors at their school had the right skills, training nevertheless emerged as the main way that council support for governors could be improved.
- 3.6.5 We heard from a number of people that the accessibility of training could be improved. Issues were highlighted around training being more accessible to governors, specifically more training at schools and outside of working hours. We also heard that some governors are not keen to come to the Civic Centre for training.
- 3.6.6 At the same time we heard that the local authority are willing to offer training in exactly this way and that ERW are looking at how training might be delivered for a cluster of schools. This fits well with a point we make later in the report about the value of all governors in a governing body attending training at the same time.
- 3.6.7 The problem seems to be one of communication. We suggest, therefore, that the training offer from both the local authority and ERW is clearly articulated and shared with governors.
- 3.6.8 We also would like to see more training delivered online where this is appropriate. Not only is this a better option for governors with busy lives, it is also more cost effective.
- 3.6.9 Given that the provision of formal training is likely to reduce over time, individual governors will need to think more broadly and more carefully about their own training and development need and how they might be met. There are three things that we think can help with this.
- 3.6.10 The first is to help governors record their training and development experiences. We heard that there is no single way of recording training as only the local authority keeps a record and school training is not provided on this. We feel that an online learning log for individual governors should be

developed so that governors can record and manage their own learning and development.

- 3.6.11 The second thing that can be done is to provide information about training opportunities in a clear and consistent way. On this point we would echo the argument we made about information earlier in the report and suggest that the different providers get together so that training opportunities can be found in a single place – ideally the Governors Wales Website.
- 3.6.12 Finally we like the idea that happens for some housing associations where the chair of the board provides mentoring for individual board members. We hope that chairs of governors can be persuaded to act in a similar way and meet with their governors once a year to discuss their training and development needs and how they can be met.
- 3.6.13 All of this taken together will, we hope, help individual governors to learn and develop. As the Cabinet Member observed in her evidence, governors may want to continue their own personal development and learn something new. This is an important benefit and should be respected.
- 3.6.14 The last point about training for individual governors is training for new governors. The Hill review suggested that new governor training arrangements should be checked to ensure that they were both of high quality and supported effective governance in practice. We are happy that the new governor training is of high quality although, as we have mentioned previously, we need to help new governors translate the theory of the training into the practice of their own governing bodies.
- 3.6.15 We would also like to see new governor training equip new governors with the skills and information they need to manage their own learning. This may already be the case but we believe that it is nevertheless worth reviewing.

3.7 *Support governing bodies to manage their own learning and development*

- 3.7.1 One of the underlying themes of this report is that governing bodies need to work as a group if they are to provide effective challenge. To this end we believe that governing bodies should consider their training and development needs as a group; they should develop a learning mindset.
- 3.7.2 This can happen in a number of ways.
- 3.7.3 First, time should be made at governing body meetings for the governing body to discuss their learning and development needs. This might be done in conjunction with the skills matrix that the Governors Support Unit has developed.
- 3.7.4 Second, governors attending training or any other events should be given time to feed back to the whole group about their experience and what they have learned. Governing bodies should, however, think about how this can be made meaningful and useful.

- 3.7.5 Third, governing bodies could appoint a link governor for learning and development as it relates to the governing body. Their role would be to liaise with the clerk to meet any training and development needs identified by the governing body.
- 3.7.6 Fourth, training and development activities should, wherever possible, be undertaken by the governing body as a group. This will have the added benefit of supporting teamwork as well as ensuring a consistency of approach and understanding amongst individual governors.
- 3.7.7 Fifth, challenge advisors should consider what training they might usefully provide to governing bodies.
- 3.7.8 Finally, the training and development needs of the governing body should be included within the school's self-evaluation process and school development plan.
- 3.7.9 All of these measures are ultimately the responsibility of the chair of governors working with the head teacher. We hope that the Cabinet member can encourage the chairs to take them up.

3.8 *Encourage the involvement of the whole governing body in school improvement work*

- 3.8.1 As well as considering training and development as a group we believe that governing bodies should engage, as far as possible, in improvement activities as a group.
- 3.8.2 We think that there may be a role here for the Challenge Advisers. A closer integration between Challenge Advisers and governing body was suggested to us by the Cabinet Member as something that might be useful and, to this end we think that challenge advisors should be meeting separately with the governing body to discuss their role in school improvement.
- 3.8.3 Working with governing bodies in this way will not only improve the capacity of governing bodies to challenge but will help governors to understand the challenge adviser role. We found from our survey that a high proportion of governors have never met the challenge advisor or have any idea who they are or what their role is.
- 3.8.4 Further to this we feel strongly that all governors have a role to play in the autumn core visits. We heard from ERW that this might present logistical problems but, nevertheless, we would like to see all governors fully informed if not actively involved. This is an excellent opportunity for all governors to hear directly from the Challenge Adviser about the performance of the school.
- 3.8.5 We also heard from ERW about the importance of all governors being involved in the school development plan process. We know from our own experience as school governors that this is not always the case and even in the good practice schools we visited the involvement of governors seemed to come at the end of the planning process.

- 3.8.6 We would like to see, therefore, head teachers being encouraged to involve governors as a group, not just the chair, in the school development plan process from the start.
- 3.8.7 Finally, we are aware that, in many schools, audit reports are not shared with all governors. We firmly believe that sharing audit reports with the whole governing body, and ensuring a full and frank discussion of these reports, should be a routine matter.

3.9 Work with governing bodies to fill their skill gaps

- 3.9.1 To challenge effectively a governing body needs to be able to draw on a range of skills and experiences. Neither the capabilities of any individual nor any amount of training can make up for a significant skills gap in a governing body.
- 3.9.2 One of the questions raised by the Cabinet Member at the start of this inquiry was whether there was a shortage of governors. Overall this does not seem to be the case. The vacancy rate for Swansea is about 5% and we heard that this is not high compared with other areas.
- 3.9.3 Nevertheless we were told by the clerks forum and by Swansea Association of Governing Bodies that some schools do have a problem with recruitment whether it is for parent governors or for governors with particular expertise such as for legal or financial issues. This is supported by the survey where around a third of respondents agreed that recruitment was a problem at their school. The problem, therefore, is one for a number of particular schools rather than for schools across the board.
- 3.9.4 We heard from the Manager of the School Governors' Unit that they are in the process of issuing a skills matrix for all schools to use. We feel that this will be a very useful tool and that all governing bodies should be encouraged to use it. Once again, we hope that this will be an exercise for the governing body as a whole and that it will feature as an agenda item for a meeting of the governing body.
- 3.9.5 We also saw from our observations of good practice schools that governing bodies are able to use their community governor appointments to fill identified gaps. This is good practice that we hope can be shared.
- 3.9.6 Apart from helping governing bodies to identify gaps the council should also be taking steps to help them get filled. The School Governor Unit are willing to talk to any governing body about recruitment and this should be a first step for any governing body that identifies a need. In the longer term there are other things that we would like to propose.
- 3.9.7 First the Council should consider facilitating transfers or swaps between governing bodies in order to fill skill gaps.
- 3.9.8 Second the Council should seek general applications for people to be school governors and then direct them to schools as appropriate.

- 3.9.9 Both of these proposals reflect suggestions made by Hill who suggested that outstanding chairs should act as lead practitioners and that there should be a register of aspiring and serving business leaders willing to serve as school governors.
- 3.9.10 A further issue that governing bodies need to be considering is that of succession planning, particularly for chairs. To this end we also support the idea that chairs should be 'rotated' after a set period so that the experience can be shared and built up in the group as a whole. These are ideas that each governing body will have to consider on their merits.

3.10 Promote the governor role to the private sector and beyond

- 3.10.1 One of the things that the council can do, that individual schools cannot, is to promote the role of the governor more widely. While business is clearly important in this respect, we also need to think about encouraging third sector and other public sector bodies to support employees to become governors.
- 3.10.2 We know that a number of private companies support their staff to be governors as it contributes to their policies for corporate responsibility. At the same time many individuals in business are keen to put something back into the community. Being a school governor does no harm to an individual's CV.
- 3.10.3 The council, therefore, should be doing all it can to promote the governor role to business and other organisations. The council already has good partnership working with the private sector, whether through the regional partnership or the city centre for example, and should make use of these relationships for this purpose. At the same time the Council should be giving positive publicity to those companies who do have progressive policies in this regard.
- 3.10.4 In terms of the third sector and other public bodies the Council should make use of the Local Service Board to promote positive messages about encouraging staff to become governors. Universities may also have a role to play in so far as the 'community service' element of degree schemes might be pointed toward experience working with governing bodies either as governors or in some other role. All governor appointments should of course be made through the existing processes

3.11 Share good practice through local authority appointed governors

- 3.11.1 One group of governors that the council is particularly able to influence are those appointed by the local authority. Most, although not all of these appointments are councillors.
- 3.11.2 As local authority appointees these governors have the potential to suggest and share good practice. Indeed, many are governors at more than one school governing body so can see at first hand potential improvements that might be made.

- 3.11.3 We would like to see the council taking extra steps to encourage this through, perhaps, good practice seminars aimed specifically at local authority appointed governors.
- 3.11.4 During the course of our evidence gathering we heard a number of concerns about governors appointed by the local authority. In particular we heard that they might not always have the commitment expected or were unable to attend meetings due to other commitments. The suggestion was made to us that the panel that makes these appointments could take more advice from schools, in particular where a skills audit has been undertaken, in order to ensure that the best appointments are made. While we are sympathetic to these concerns we do not feel able to take a definitive view and wish to suggest instead that this is matter for a dedicated scrutiny working group.

3.12 *Work with head teachers to ensure a culture of challenge in meetings*

- 3.12.1 The Cabinet Member suggested at the start of the inquiry that some governing bodies may be too cosy and that where the same people had been performing the governing role in a school for a long time that this could mean that the governing body would not be challenging enough.
- 3.12.2 All of the elements that we have discussed so far should create the conditions for governing body meetings to be more challenging. Where governing bodies are clear about their role, have the information and skills they need and are able to operate effectively as a group then everything should be in place for them to provide effective challenge. Meetings are, however, the arena where the challenge should actually take place. We believe, therefore, that chairs of governing bodies and head teachers should take a keen interest in how these meetings work.
- 3.12.3 Our survey found that this is generally the case. Over 75% of respondents agreed that 'governors in my school are encouraged to provide advice and robust challenge to the head teacher.' Of these 45% strongly agreed with the statement.
- 3.12.4 However, 15% of survey respondents did not agree that this was the case and the comments from the survey suggest that the picture is not always as positive as the overall figure suggests. While some talked about the need for governors to have more confidence to challenge, others pointed to the tendency for the head teacher to dominate meetings or for the chair or vice chair to provide the majority of challenge.
- 3.12.5 In our school observations we did see some very good examples of challenge. However, even in these good practice schools we also saw many governors not making any contribution to meetings or only asking for points of clarification.
- 3.12.6 In the school where we saw the widest range of contributions this was encouraged by the way that the chair conducted the meeting; promoting an open and friendly atmosphere and actively asking for contributions. We hope that all chairs can be encouraged to manage meetings in this way. We

recognise that training for chairs is crucial in developing effective chairing skills.

- 3.12.7 In our experience as scrutiny councillors we believe that there are a number of further good practice elements that will help to ensure that governing body meetings support effective challenge.
- 3.12.8 The first thing that governors need is the right questions to ask. The 'Questions for Governors to ask the Headteacher / leadership team in their support and challenge role' is a comprehensive list developed by Governors Wales. This list was suggested to us a number of times and we think that they are an excellent place to start for any governing body. We also saw a head teacher providing questions at a meeting to governors and we think that all heads should be doing this. As one of the ERW officers put it - head teachers should be talking to governors about 'what I would ask if I was you'.
- 3.12.9 The second thing that governors need is the opportunity to prepare properly. We were a little concerned to see during our observations that reports were being provided to governors at the meeting itself. At the same time we also observed reports being circulated in advance by email. This gives governors the chance to digest what can be lengthy reports and cuts down the time that head teachers need to explain reports in meetings. Instead they can say 'you should have all read the report – do you have any questions?' Reports for council meetings are legally required to be provided three working days in advance. We believe this is also reasonable for governor meetings.
- 3.12.10 A third good practice suggestion is that governing bodies hold pre meetings. The purpose of these meetings, that would be for governors only, is to allow governors to consider what they want to get out of the meeting, what questions they would like to ask and to form a collective view, if required, on a topic. We understand that meeting away from the school staff may seem inappropriate for some governors not least because a good relationship with the head is essential for any governing body. For that reason we hope that head teachers will encourage this to happen on the basis that it will strengthen both the governing body and the challenge that they are able to provide. We feel that encouraging governors to meet more informally in this way will develop strong links between governors which will enable better challenge.
- 3.12.11 Finally we would like to see minute taking that captures challenge for the benefit of the governing body not just for the purposes of Estyn inspections. We heard one example of a new governor who was surprised to find her questions for clarification recorded as challenges in the minutes. If every single question is recorded as a challenge then not only does this confuse the issue of what challenge actually means it makes it harder for governors to understand what impact their contributions are making. As we noted earlier, this is in fact something governors may be asked by Estyn.
- 3.12.12 Taken together we hope that these proposals will be useful for governing bodies as they seek to sharpen their effectiveness. We hope, therefore, that

the Cabinet Member will be able to recommend them to the chairs of governing bodies and head teachers.

3.13 Help governing bodies to identify the support arrangements that are best for them

- 3.13.1 All of the good practice points that we have suggested in this report need to be underpinned by effective support arrangements. However, we do not agree with the Hill review that there should be a standard regional template for this. Instead, in keeping with our emphasis on self-improvement, we believe that governing bodies should be reaching their own conclusions about the support arrangements that are best for them.
- 3.13.2 The keystone of support for any governing body is their clerk. Apart from minute taking and other meeting support clerks can have a role in organising training and ensuring that governors get the information that they need. Indeed, the knowledge that clerks have of individual governors helps them to tailor what they send out to ensure that it gets read!
- 3.13.3 We heard from the Clerks Forum that sometimes the school clerk and clerk to governors are combined into one role and sometimes they are separate. Given that there may sometimes be a perceived conflict of interest, around disciplinary issues for example, we feel that, in an ideal world, the clerk to governors should be independent of the school. We also appreciate that, given the scarce resources that schools have to work with; this may not always be possible.
- 3.13.4 Of course support comes from more places than the clerk and governing bodies need to be clear about what support is available to them and for what. Generally we think that the local authority's governors support unit provides an excellent service but we also know that this is a limited resource that will not increase and that governing bodies are entitled to purchase their support elsewhere.
- 3.13.5 There are times when governing bodies will need advice and support from the Local Authority beyond the governors unit on legal or finance issues for example. We were a little concerned to hear that emergency advice in particular was not always easy to come by. We were pleased to hear, therefore, from the Cabinet Member, that a 'single point of contact' approach is being developed to ensure that best advice comes out as fast as possible.
- 3.13.6 Overall we recognise that governing bodies have a number of choices that they can make when thinking about their support needs. We hope that they will be able to give these issues full and proper consideration so that their ability to provide effective challenge can be maximised.

4 RECOMMENDATIONS

The Panel commends Cabinet to consider all issues and ideas raised by this inquiry and, in particular, the recommendations set out below.

The Panel recognises that the Authority

- (a) will need to ensure that any subsequent actions are legal and meet the requirements of any relevant legislation;
- (b) has a responsibility to make the best use of limited resources and that any additional costs will need to be considered carefully as part of the annual budget setting process.

The Panel has kept these principles in mind in the course of its investigations.

Recommendations for Cabinet:

4.1 Long term challenges (12 months+)

- 4.1.1 Develop a council wide mechanism for filling the skills gaps identified by governing bodies either through, transfers, swaps or by matching new governors with particular skills and experience

4.2 Medium term improvements (6-12 months)

- 4.2.1 Produce a mini booklet for governors that provides a simple guide to their role
- 4.2.2 Undertake a review of information provided to school governors with ERW, Estyn and Governors Wales with a view to ensuring a shared approach that avoids duplication
- 4.2.3 Provide a standard data template to head teachers and encourage them to use it
- 4.2.4 Work with Estyn to provide information about all training opportunities for governors in one place
- 4.2.5 Move from civic centre based training provision to flexible model that combines, whole governing body, cluster school and e-learning
- 4.2.6 Develop an online learning log that governors can use to self-manage their training and development
- 4.2.7 Consider how the mandatory new governor training might help governors to think about the self-management of their training and development
- 4.2.8 Build the involvement of all governors into the Autumn Core Visits
- 4.2.9 Undertake a campaign to promote the role of governor targeted at private sector employers and partners in the public and third sector

4.3 Quick wins *(within 6 months)*

- 4.3.1 Write to the chair of governors and head teacher of each school to promote the good practice points included in this report (listed in APPENDIX A)
- 4.3.2 Write to every school governor thanking them for their work on behalf of the Council and highlighting the list of 'what every school governor should expect' (listed in APPENDIX B)
- 4.3.3 Take additional steps to publicise the good work being done by governors and governing bodies
- 4.3.4 Simplify the information on the Council website about school governors which should provide links to the Governors Wales website for all general information
- 4.3.5 Remind all schools that whole governing body and cluster school training can be arranged on request
- 4.3.6 Hold a seminar for LA appointed governors to explore their role in sharing good practice

5 FURTHER SCRUTINY NEEDED

As well as our recommendations for the Cabinet we have also come across an issue that we believe may require further scrutiny. We propose to the Scrutiny Programme Committee, therefore, that it examines:

- 5.1.1 The function and operation of the LA Governor Panel to ensure that it supports the work of governing bodies.

6 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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We are grateful to the governors and staff at Ysgol Bryn Tawe, Bishopston Comprehensive and Hafod Primary for their friendly welcome and for allowing us to observe their governors meetings.

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The Panel would like to record its thanks to the following people who came and gave evidence to us:

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- Betsan O Connor, Managing Director, ERW
- Councillor Beverley Hopkins, Chair of Governors, Hafod Primary School
- Dave Dorsett (New Governor)
- Dereck Roberts, Swansea Association of Governing Bodies
- Felicity Parrot (New Governor)
- Heini Gruffydd, Chair of Governors Ysgol Gyfun Gymraeg Bryn Tawe
- Huw Roberts, Chair ERW Governor Support Group. School Improvement Service, NPT
- Jane Morris (Director), Governors Wales
- Jeff Bird, Head Teacher Bishopston Comprehensive School
- Jeff Bowen (Chair), Swansea Association of Governing Bodies
- Jon Roper, Chair of Governors Bishopston Comprehensive School
- Kathryn Thomas, Manager School, Governor and Student Services
- Kelly Small (New Governor)
- Maldwyn Pryse, HMI, Estyn
- Rachel Webb, Head Teacher, Hafod Primary School
- Simon Davies, Head Teacher, Ysgol Gyfun Gymraeg Bryn Tawe

7 ABOUT THE INQUIRY PANEL

The **School Governance Inquiry Panel** is a team of Councillors who are not members of the Cabinet. Their role is to examine a strategic issue of concern and to make recommendations about how policies and services can be improved.

Members of the Panel

Fiona Gordon (Convener)

Dave Anderson-Thomas (Statutory co-optee)

Anthony Colburn

David Cole

Professor Catherine Farrell, University of South Wales (Co-optee)

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APPENDIX A

Ensuring Effective Challenge: Good Practice Advice for Chairs of Governors and Head Teachers

1. Ensure that all new governors have a full induction onto the governing body and an experienced governor to mentor them. This should include a clear statement of the commitment required.
2. Include an agenda item on 'the role of governors' for the first meeting of the governing body each year. This item should give the governing body an opportunity to discuss the main elements of their role, what 'challenge' means and the proper balance between support and challenge that is right for that school. Where link governors are used then these roles should also be discussed.
3. Ensure that all governors have received data training and are confident in their understanding and use of the data provided to them
4. Formally check with the governing body that they are happy with the way that data is being provided to them
5. Put arrangements in place for governors to view children's work and support from staff to help them to interpret what they are viewing
6. Involve a wide variety of staff in governing body meetings and encourage them to lead items on their subject areas
7. Involve a wide variety of children in governing body meetings through presentations about the work that they are doing. Secondary schools should involve pupil governors in governing body meetings.
8. Encourage governors to report on their involvement with any community activities in order to strengthen links between the school and the community
9. Ask the governing body to consider whether they feel that they are broadly representative of the community
10. Encourage governors to use the MyLocalSchool site as an independent source of data
11. Consider whether the chair can provide an annual learning and development interview for every governor to help them identify priorities and opportunities
12. Include an agenda item on 'Learning and Development needs for the Governing Body as a whole' at a meeting and in order to identify priorities and opportunities
13. Include time on all agendas for governors to feedback from any learning or training events they have attended

14. Consider giving one governor specific responsibility for working with the clerk to support the learning and development needs of the governing body
15. Look for opportunities, whenever possible, for the governing body to undertake learning and training as a whole group
16. Ensure that reports from Audit are shared with the whole governing body
17. Invite the Challenge Adviser to attend and contribute to meetings
18. Liaise with the Challenge Adviser to see what training they might provide for the governing body
19. Reference the training and development needs of the governing body within the School Development Plan
20. Consider involving the whole governing body in the School Development Plan process from the start
21. Consider the skills matrix, issued by the Local Authority, at a governing body meeting in order to identify gaps in the governing body
22. Consider how community governor appointments might be used to fill any skills gaps in the governing body
23. Work with the School Governor Unit to fill a significant gaps once these have been identified
24. Undertake succession planning for chairs of governors
25. Consider fixed terms for chairs of governors so that the experience of sharing can be shared
26. Consider whether all governors are contributing to governing body meetings and take steps to encourage this if necessary
27. Make sure that all governors are clear about the questions they should be asking (the questions available from Governors Wales are an excellent starting point)
28. Give governors time to prepare for meetings by sending reports out in advance
29. Ask the governing body to consider holding governor-only pre meetings to help the chair manage the involvement of all governors
30. Ensure that the minutes capture evidence of challenge but do not confuse this with questions seeking clarification
31. Ask the Governing Body to formally consider whether their support needs are being met at a meeting

APPENDIX B

What Every School Governor Should Expect

1. Thanks and recognition for the work that you do
2. Introductory training when you start (a mandatory course is provided by the Local Authority)
3. A clear understanding of your general role and of any additional roles that you are asked to perform
4. An induction onto your governing body and a mentor from the existing governors to guide you
5. A clear understanding of the commitment you are expected to make
6. Clear information about being a governor from Governors Wales, ERW, Estyn and the City and County of Swansea
7. Clear information from your school about how it is performing
8. Data training to help you understand the information that is given to you by the school (a mandatory course is provided by the Local Authority)
9. The opportunity to view the children's work and support from teachers to help you to understand what you are seeing
10. Contact with staff other than the head teacher both at and outside of governing body meetings
11. To hear from pupils at governing body meetings either through presentations about their work or, in secondary schools, through the involvement of pupil governors
12. Access to information about how your school is performing that is provided independently from your school (the MyLocalSchool site is excellent for data and gives a link to the most recent Estyn inspection report for your school)
13. Information about a range of learning and training opportunities
14. Opportunities to discuss your own training and development needs and the training and development needs of the governing body as a whole
15. To be involved in the School Development Plan process from an early stage
16. Sight of any Audit reports for your school
17. To be part of a governing body that has all of the skills it needs
18. A clear idea of what questions you should be asking
19. Meeting papers in plenty of time to allow you to prepare for meetings