Somerset’s Strategy for Governance

2016 to 2019

Draft for consultation  February 2016
This document summarises the collective views of the Somerset Governors who joined the Education Design Team to co-construct a Strategy for Governance for implementation in Somerset during the 2015-2016 Academic Year. The strategy draws on a number of key Somerset documents, national research and Ofsted documentation.

Please see ‘Somerset’s Strategy for Achieving Excellence for All’, for the broad education picture, including performance data and our ambitious trajectory for improvement.
1. National Context

It is accepted that the expectation on governing bodies has increased substantially over the past 10 years. Sir Michael Wilshaw, HMCI, (Nov 2015) says “the role is so important that amateurish governance will no longer do”. There is now a legal requirement on them to lead their schools through effective strategic planning with a long term vision and ethos that drives the way in which their schools will approach their aims. There are a significant number of outstanding governing bodies who are able to influence the future agenda for the school and can demonstrate that governance is having an impact on the outcomes for children and young people.

The challenge is to reach a position where all governing bodies are able to achieve this as a result of individual governors understanding their role, fully engaging in the work of the corporate body and holding Headteachers to account for the performance of their school.

Recruitment / Retention of high quality governors is essential to achieve outstanding governance. Sir Michael Wilshaw HMCI (Nov 2015) stated ‘(senior governors) need to be able to ask the probing questions and hold the difficult conversations when necessary’. This is true, but this should apply to all governors and finding the right governors can often be difficult.

There is a clear national agenda of partnership working across schools with the potential for county wide structural change to achieve this. The discussions nationally are focused on one governing body / trust with an over-arching responsibility for a number of schools. A multi-academy trust may have a number of local governing bodies which in itself can pose difficulties if the LGB is unclear about the expectations of the Trust Board and the levels of delegation. The challenge of achieving this long term national expectation is going to require governing bodies to

- be able to accept that the status quo is unlikely to continue and
- have the necessary qualities to be able to undertake the responsibility of governing a group of schools.
2. Local Context

There are currently over 2700 Governors across Somerset representing 242 Boards of Governors. The Boards can be further analysed as follows:

- 48 are stand-alone academies
- 17 are part of a MAT and so only a local board of governors
- 163 single maintained school board including the 4 PRUs
- 14 federated boards representing 31 schools

Somerset currently have 4 National Leaders of Governance (NLGs) and no Local Leaders of Governance (L LGs), but are trying to recruit over the coming year.

Somerset Governor Services is a traded service within Support Services for Education (SSE). They provide a variety of support services to Governors and Governing bodies to enhance leadership and management in school and academies. Working alongside Somerset County Council and external colleagues, such as the Diocese of Bath and Wells and the Diocese of Clifton, the service works to ensure that boards of governors are effective, that they meet statutory requirements and that they provide appropriate challenge and support to their schools. 233 (96% of the total number of boards) schools currently buy back services from SSE for Somerset Governor Services.

Somerset Governors’ Group (SGG) is in a position of development at present. It is the representative body of governance in Somerset but at present does not have the majority of governing bodies across the County signing up to its association. Whilst the members of SGG are affiliated to the National Governors' Association, boards across the county aren’t unless they subscribe individually. If SGG were to have a greater affiliation representing all boards of governors, governance across the county would be more fully engaged with national issues and be in a better position to influence education in our schools by having a voice which is recognised as being of value and importance, for example school organisation issues and how this impacts on governance structures.

Governors often struggle to hold Headteachers to account and are unclear about their core roles and responsibilities, Governors often get involved in aspects of school life that are not relevant to them and are too content to accept whatever information is provided by Headteachers. Equally, difficulties arise for governing bodies who attempt to carry out their challenge role, but are met with resistance and are left feeling unable to fully hold their Headteacher to account.

It is recognised that assessing the performance of a Governing Body and its contribution to School improvement is very difficult. Somerset Governor Services do
offer independent inspections/assessments and this needs to continue alongside the development of other approaches such as self-assessment by the Governing Body.

Clerks to Governors can make a significant contribution to supporting the Governing body in carrying out its duties and clarifying roles and responsibilities, but practice and arrangements are inconsistent. Many Clerks will undertake the role as an extension to their school contract potentially compromising their independence.

Governors need to feel supported by the Local authority with effective involvement and engagement of Governors in considering Strategic Decisions taken by the Local Authority. If we are to achieve our strategic vision, then the profile of governance needs to be raised across Somerset and the critical role that it has on School Improvement.

The Leadership and Management criteria in the Ofsted framework, explains the role of the Governing Body and the need to develop a culture where governors, school leaders and partners have a collaborative approach to educating the children and young people of Somerset?

3. Our Aspiration

Our aspiration is that in Somerset, regardless of the category of school or age range, a true partnership exists between governance, school senior leadership and the Local Authority that transfers to all staff, pupils and parents to produce a collective approach to the strategy for school improvement. Governance will be embedded through its own local association in the strategic development of the Local Authority’s School Improvement programme by having a significant voice at all tables.

The impact of high profile governance in Somerset will be that all schools benefit from effective governing boards who provide a strategic direction for their school and have the ability to ensure that their priorities are being implemented in a cost effective manner.

We believe that in five years’ time, governance in Somerset will have evolved in line with national expectations with overarching Governing Bodies holding more than one school to account using a variety of structural models to achieve this.

Employers will be actively supporting schools across the age range in Somerset, with relevant skills and expertise available to governance which will enable these overarching governance arrangements to succeed. Having governors from the local employers’ network will be an effective way of employers influencing education whilst supporting schools and enabling young people to be fully prepared with the skills required for successful career/employment experiences.
Our aspirations and principles are upheld by our new Children and Young People’s Plan:

- Children and Young People have a voice and are listened to
- Outcomes are improved for all children and young people
- Services are person centred
- The impact of inequalities is reduced
- We work together to coproduce services, align our resources, and jointly commission

4. Our Ambition

At the heart of our ambition is that effective Governance supports school communities in being judged good or outstanding by Ofsted and there is a real sense of ownership for carrying out the following three core functions:

1. **Ensuring clarity of vision, ethos and strategic direction**;

2. **Holding the headteacher to account for the educational performance of the school and its pupils, and the performance management of staff**;

3. **Overseeing the financial performance of the school and making sure its money is well spent**.

We want every governor to undertake their role with passion and commitment, recognising the importance of their individual and corporate contributions and decision making so that all pupils gain the best experience and achievements possible. To do this we need to develop a partnership approach to supporting boards which benefits from the expertise and skills from a range of providers including other governing bodies. Peer support is an ambitious proposal given the expectation of governors to deliver against their own school agenda but all governors can and should learn from one another by sharing good practice and not being afraid to seek support.

Chairs of governors have a significant role to play, in bringing about positive change that will empower individual governors to participate fully in board matters. This will require confidence building of Governors as well as the further development of the core skills to undertake the role effectively.

We will need a coherent approach to the way in which governing bodies are provided with support, advice and guidance.
5. Our Key Priorities

Priority 1. Develop the skills and capability of Governing Bodies, particularly around more effective ‘strategic’ governance.

What we need to do:
- Encourage more school to school support and collaboration between Governing Bodies.
- Ensure good practice can be easily shared across Governing Bodies.
- Ensure high quality training, advice and support is available to Governors and Chair of Governors in particular – informed by feedback from evaluations, Governors, SEPs and others.
- Work with Community Learning Partnerships to encourage more collaboration.
- Work with local employers to help develop Governors skills.
- Promote and develop the role of LLGs and NLGs within Somerset.

Priority 2. Raise the awareness of Governance across Somerset and the contribution it makes to School Improvement.

What we need to do:
- Review the arrangements for ensuring Governing Bodies are represented and have a voice across Somerset. This should include SGS, COG meetings etc.
- SGG to increase its national focus and become a fully participating member of the National Governors’ Association with affiliation for all boards in Somerset not just SGG members.
- Ensure SGG and Governors vires are represented at key strategic groups and discussions.
- Review communications on Governance such as newsletters and bulletins.

Priority 3. Develop the assessment of Governing Bodies’ performance and identification for areas for improvement.

What we need to do:
- Ensure independent reviews of performance and effectiveness are available.
- Enable Governing Bodies to undertake an annual self-evaluation that would be returned to the LA.
- Consider 360 degree appraisal/evaluation of Chair of Governors.
- Increase collaboration between Governing bodies to identify areas of strength and area for improvement.
• Ensure the Somerset Education Partners (SEPs) consider Governance when discussing school performance with the Headteacher.

**Priority 4.** Improve the recruitment and retention of School Governors.

**What we need to do:**

• Launch a marketing campaign to recruit new Governors.
• Work with local employers to champion the role of Governor as a way of supporting staff personal and professional development.
• Work with key volunteering groups to promote the role of Governors.
• Review content and accessibility of documentation and processes used for recruitment, induction and support and training of Governors.

**Priority 5.** Promote and strengthen the role of Clerk to Governors

**What we need to do:**

• Raise the profile and understanding of the Clerk to Governors role.
• Issue guidance on expectations and good practice.
• Review arrangements for recruiting Clerks to Governors and link with Governors recruitment priority highlighted above.

6. **The Role of the Local Authority**

It is critical that Governance is seen as an integral part of the LA’s policy for school improvement and supporting intervention in schools. Governance issues need to be fully considered when the LA is categorising schools and identifying areas for improvement and further development.

Being able to demonstrate the LA knows its Governing Bodies is linked to being able to demonstrate it understands and knows its schools.

Somerset Governor Services in supporting Governor Bodies will be aware of governance issues within schools and has information that can support the LA in delivering its strategy and vision. It is recognised that such a Services faces difficulties around potential conflicts of interest; having both individual governing bodies and the LA as customers. A clear distinction needs to exist with clear commissioning arrangements in place to ensure clarity and sufficient funding to resource the activities required.