

Becoming a School Governor

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BECOMING A SCHOOL GOVERNOR

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Introduction

The London Borough of Barnet is the second largest of the London Boroughs with an ethnically diverse population estimated as 314,581 in the 2001 census.

Education continues to be one of the council's highest priorities and we are proud of the achievements of all our schools and will continue to work in partnership with them to improve standards.

Currently (as of January 2006) the borough has four nursery schools, 91 primary schools, 21 secondary schools, four special schools and two pupil referral units. Of the 91 primary schools, 31 are either infant or junior schools, 34 are Voluntary-aided comprising 11 Roman Catholic, 15 Church of England and 8 Jewish schools.

Of the 21 secondary schools, seven are single-sex schools, eight are Voluntary-aided comprising one Jewish, one non-affiliated, four Roman Catholic, and two Church of England Schools.

Each school is governed by a governing body made up of professionals and lay-people who give freely of their time and energy, committing their talents to the service of their schools.

**Can you answer 'yes' to the following questions?
If so, then you may well have what it takes to be a school governor!**

- Do you believe schools should give children the best possible education?
- Do you want to put something back into your local community?
- Are you interested in people?
- Do you have time to get to know your school, to go to meetings and read papers?
- Are you comfortable asking questions?
- Are you open to new ideas and ready to learn?

WHAT DOES A GOVERNING BODY DO?

The governing body's main role is to help raise standards of achievement. The governing body:

- is accountable for the performance of the school to parents and the wider community
- with the professionals in the school, plans the school's future direction
- appoints the headteacher
- makes decisions on the school's budget and staffing
- makes sure the national curriculum is taught
- helps decide how the school can encourage pupils' spiritual, moral and cultural development
- makes sure the school provides for all its children, including those with special needs

Being a governor involves more than just an interest

Governors make up the biggest volunteer body numbering some 370,000 in England and their time commitment in fulfilling their role should not go unrecognised. The time a governor devotes can vary widely, depending on how involved s/he becomes and what needs doing. The governing body usually meets at least once a term. A governor will probably also sit on one or two committees dealing with:

- Finance
- Staffing
- Curriculum
- Premises

Being a governor can be rewarding

Being a member of a Governing body provides a chance to:

- make a difference to how well the school runs
- see how your efforts help raise standards
- do something positive for the next generation
- serve the local community
- help realise your own potential by learning new skills

Every school has a governing body. It is made up of:

- parents elected by other parents at the school
- teachers elected by their colleagues
- a staff governor elected by school support staff
- local education authority governors
- governors co-opted by other members of the governing body
- and usually the headteacher

SCHOOL GOVERNORS AND OFSTED

The Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED) identifies the governing body's main responsibilities as follows:

- To provide a strategic direction for the work and improvement of the school
- To support, monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the school
- To hold the school to account for the standards achieved and the quality of education

This extends to:

- Helping to shape the vision and direction of the school
- Ensuring that the school fulfils its statutory duties, including promoting inclusive policies in relation to Special Educational Needs (SEN), race, disability and sex.
- Having a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the school
- Challenging and supporting the senior management team.

Accountability

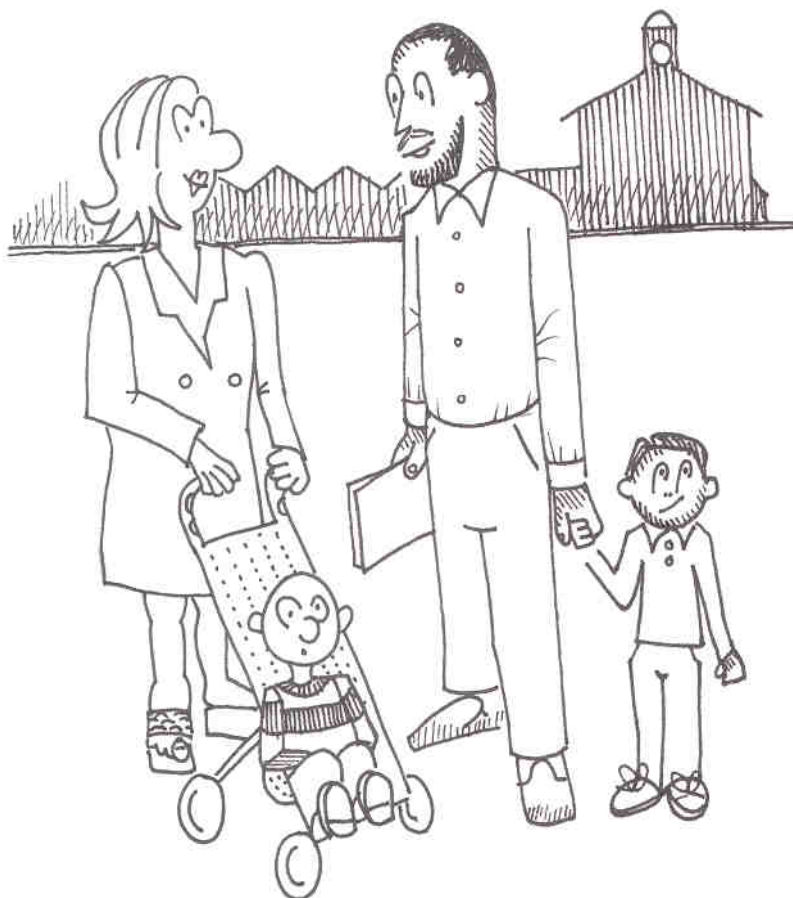
Schools are financed out of taxes – local and national – and the quality of the education they provide, the influence they have on their pupils and their smooth running are of concern to everybody. The governing body, working in partnership with the head and staff of the school, is the agency through which the school is accountable to the local authority and to its community, both for its use of public funds and its effectiveness. It is also there to ensure good relationships between the school and the community it serves. It brings together a number of interests – the local education authority and, in the case of Voluntary Aided schools, the church or other body which provided the school, the parents, the teachers and the community.

The strategic role

Governors are for the most part people with jobs of their own and they are not educationists. Teachers have had a long training and are experienced as well as skilled in helping children to learn. Distinctions have often been made between governance and management (“governors govern and managers manage”) to provide a demarcation between governors’ responsibilities and those of professionals. In a setting wherein governors decide the distribution of the budget, and are responsible overall for academic standards, care of premises, staff appointments and dismissals, personnel and pupil discipline policies, communication and marketing, one can no longer draw this distinction. It must be accepted that governors share in every aspect of the strategic management of the school. Note the work ‘strategic’, for it is the key to maintenance of workable boundaries.

The critical friend

Governors often say that their main part is to support the school and of course they do, but governors play many parts. They are ambassadors and interpreters and often critical friends. When it comes to the serious parts they play – monitoring, judging, mediating, warning, even sometimes requiring changes - it is to be remembered that governors are not acting as individuals but as a corporate body working within fairly strict rules and, if necessary, by majority vote.



WHAT MAKES A GOOD GOVERNOR?

It would be a pity if any keen and committed person was driven away by mistaken notions about governors having to have special skills or knowledge. The history of the school governor is all about the belief which people have had for centuries that education is not just a matter for educators, and that the precious light of 'ordinariness' must be allowed to shine on expert activities. So the first qualification must be ordinariness. Everyone has skills – listening, peace-making, organising, throwing ideas into the air, catching ideas and patiently working them through. A good governing body will have a mix of these skills, and schools must make it clear that they're not just looking for accountants and lawyers.

The main requirements are:

- Interest in education and commitment to that school
- Tolerance and ability to work with others
- Patience
- Enthusiasm
- Willingness to learn
- Willingness to spend time getting involved in the school
- A strong feeling about doing things openly and democratically.

There is no one race, faith or social type who makes a perfect governor. Governors should be representative of the school community and a governing body will be all the richer for a diversity of backgrounds and beliefs.

The whole idea of governors rests on the fact that they are ordinary people from the local community served by the school, bringing everyday experience to task. It may seem a heavy responsibility but it is not one which you bear alone but only as a member of a team.

The question of loyalty

Individual governors are appointed by the LEA or foundation, elected by parents or teachers, or co-opted from the local community. Each group brings with it a different viewpoint and represents a different interest.

It is important to understand the difference between a delegate and a representative. A delegate is there to obey instructions from an interest group and vote on every issue as instructed. Governors are not delegates.

A representative on the other hand is not obliged to vote in accordance with instructions but is obliged, if he or she has been elected or appointed by a group to listen, carry views and concerns to the governing body and report back.

The loyalty of every governor must be to the governing body, and the interest of a particular group – parents, staff, a political party – must never be allowed to divide governors from one another in their primary duty to the school and their commitment to

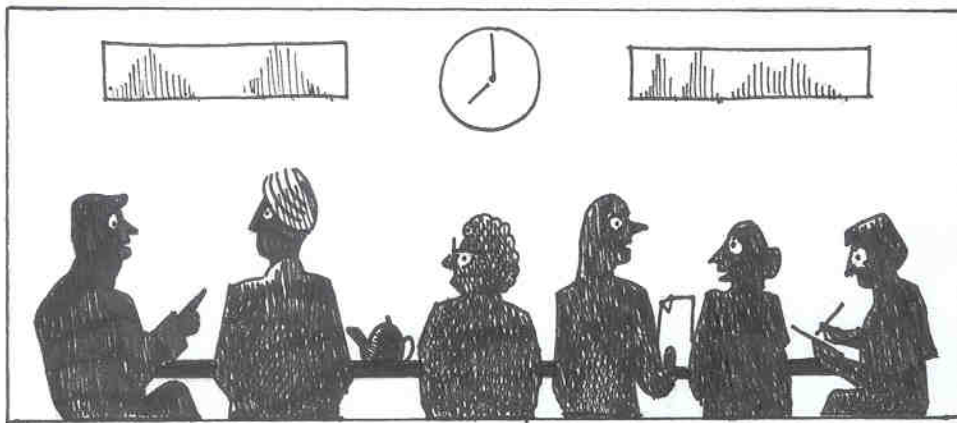
majority decisions.

In open debate with colleagues at properly conducted meetings and with the benefit of all available information, corporate decisions will be made. While different interest groups are deliberately brought together in a governing body to ensure its breadth and variety, the end product also reflects their influence on each other and their shared knowledge.

Maintaining Confidentiality

Governors are in a privileged position and often come into possession of information which in the best interests of all should remain confidential. Although commonsense suggests that certain matters should remain confidential, everything discussed at governors' meetings should be regarded as such. It is the published minutes which tell the outside world what has happened and nothing else.

It is important that all should feel free to speak openly in a meeting without the fear that anything discussed were to be bandied around the supermarket or appear in the local press.



GOVERNOR CATEGORIES

The size and makeup of a governing body is adopted in accordance with the School Governance (Constitution)(England) Regulations 2003 (Si2003/348). If you are interested in becoming a governor, an appointment can only be made if there is an appropriate vacancy.

Foundation Governors

In church schools (or schools established by other voluntary bodies) or foundation schools, these governors are appointed by the founding body to represent the interests of those who originally provided the school. Foundation governors have a particular responsibility to see that the school is run in accordance with the beliefs of the founding organisation. In many cases there is a trust deed which lays down certain principles which must be followed.

If you are interested in becoming a foundation governor at a particular school, you should get in touch with the chair of governors or headteacher who will then pass your details onto the appointing body for consideration should there be a vacancy.

Parent Governors

Parent governors are elected by the parents of the school. Parents, including carers, of registered pupils at the school are eligible to stand for election for parent governorship at the school. Parent governors are elected by other parents at the school in an election. If insufficient parents stand for election, the governing body can appoint parent governors. Only if insufficient parents stand for election can the governing body appoint:

- A parent of a registered pupil at the school, or if that is not possible;
- A parent of a former pupil at the school, or if that is not possible;
- A parent of a child of or under compulsory school age.

A person is disqualified from election or appointment as a parent governor of a school if they are an elected member of the local community or if they work at the school for more than 500 hours (i.e. for more than one-third of the hours of a full-time equivalent) in the school year at the time of election or appointment.

If you are interested in becoming a parent governor of a particular school, you should contact the headteacher, chair or clerk to the governing body to find out if there is a vacancy.

If an election is running and you are a parent or carer of a registered pupil, you will automatically receive an invitation to stand.

If more than one candidate is standing in an election, you should be prepared to make a written statement explaining why you are interested in becoming a governor.

Staff Governors

Both teaching and support staff paid to work at the school are eligible for staff

governorship. Staff governors are elected by the school staff and must be paid to work at the school; volunteers are not eligible. Any election which is contested must be held by ballot.

School staff who are eligible for election as staff governors (i.e. who are paid to work at the school) are not eligible to serve as LEA governors or community governors at their school. If they are paid to work at the school for more than 500 hours in a school year they are not eligible for election or appointment as parent governors. Staff can, however, vote in parent governor elections if they are parents and be governors at other schools. Their employment status will not affect their qualification for governorships in these categories at another school.

If you are interested in becoming a staff governor, you should contact your headteacher.

LEA Governors

LEA Governors are appointed by the LEA. Under the Local Government Act 2000, LEA Governor appointments are made by the Council or the Executive. At present in Barnet it is a Council function discharged by the Council or General Functions Committee. LEA Governors are appointed to comply with the agreed political party breakdown numbers of Conservative 169, Labour 122, Liberal Democrat 32.

If you are interested in becoming an LEA governor you should contact your political party office who will make the appropriate recommendations. If you are not affiliated to a political party, you should contact Barnet Governor Services who will forward your details on to Democratic Services who will then circulate your details.

A person is disqualified from appointment as an LEA governor if they are eligible to be a staff governor of the school.

Community Governors

Community governors are appointed by the governing body to represent community interests. Community governors can be persons who live or work in the community served by the school, or persons who do not work or live close to the school but are committed to the good governance and success of the school.

If you are interested in becoming a community governor, you should complete an application form. You can request a form from Governor Services or can complete the form electronically on:
www.lgfl.net/lgfl/leas/barnet/web/Schools%20Intranet/Governor%20Services/Main/.
You may wish to contact the headteacher, chairman or clerk to the governing body of your preferred choice of school for an informal chat.
Should a vacancy arise at your preferred school (if you have expressed a preference) or other governing body, your application will be forwarded to governors for consideration at the next meeting.

Sponsor governors

Sponsor governors are appointed by the governing body. It is at the governing body's discretion whether they choose to appoint sponsor governors or not. If the governing body wants to appoint one or two sponsor governors it must seek nominations from the sponsor(s). The governing body can appoint a maximum of two persons as sponsor governors.

Persons who give substantial assistance to the school, financially or in kind, or who provide services to the school can be appointed by the governing body as sponsor governors.

Associate members

The governing body can appoint associate members to serve on one or more governing body committee and attend full governing body meetings. The definition of associate member is wide and pupils, school staff and people who want to contribute specifically on issues related to their area of expertise (for instance finance) can be appointed as associate members.

Associate members are appointed as members of any committees established by the governing body. They are appointed for a period between one and four years and can be reappointed at the end of their term of office. Associate members are not governors and they are not recorded in the instrument.

ENSURING THE SAFETY OF CHILDREN

Any governor appointment is subject to satisfactory clearance and you may be asked to provide evidence of identity in order that the relevant DfES List 99 or CRB checks can be carried out.

TERM OF OFFICE

The term of office for all categories of governor is four years, but the governing body can decide to set a shorter term of office for one or more categories of governor. Any governor may at any time resign by giving written notice to the clerk.

QUALIFICATIONS AND DISQUALIFICATIONS

A governor must be aged 18 or over at the time of their election or appointment.

A person is disqualified from being a governor or associate member if they:

- Are detained under the 1983 Mental Health Act;
- Have failed to attend the governing body meetings for a continuous period of six months, beginning with the date of the first meeting they failed to attend, without the consent of the governing body. This provision does not apply to the headteacher;
- Have been removed from the office of charity trustee or trustee for a charity by the Charity Commissioners or High Court on grounds of any misconduct or mismanagement or under Section 7 of the Law Reform (Miscellaneous Provisions)(Scotland) Act 1990 from being concerned in the management or control of any body;
- Are included in the list of teachers or workers prohibited or restricted from working with children or young people;
- Are disqualified from working with children
- Are disqualified from being an independent school proprietor or employee by the Secretary of State;
- Have been sentenced to three months or more in prison (without the option of a fine) in the 5 years before becoming a governor or since becoming a governor;
- Have received a prison sentence of two and a half years or more in the 20 years before becoming a governor;
- Have at any time received a prison sentence of 5 years or more;
- Have been fined for causing a nuisance on school premises during the five years prior to or since appointment or election as a governor;
- Refuse to an application being made to the Criminal Records Bureau for a criminal records certificate.

A person will be disqualified if:

- His/her estate has been sequestrated (temporarily repossessed) and the sequestration has not been discharged, annulled or reduced; or
- He/she is the subject of a bankruptcy restrictions order or an interim order.

WHAT SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE?

There is expertise of all kinds available to governors as well as training and support. The London Borough of Barnet provides a wide range of support for governors including:

- A comprehensive termly Governor Development Programme
- Central training sessions
- School-specific school-based training and support
- Training and support for committees
- Support and advice for individual governors
- A confidential helpline (020 8359 7622)
- Twice-termly copies of 'School Governor Update'
- Access to Governor Resource Library
- Access to Governor Website at www.barnet.gov.uk/education/governors

STILL INTERESTED?

If you would like to speak to someone further, **please telephone Governor Services on 020 8359 7622.**

If you wish to be a governor at one specific school (for instance where your child attends) **contact the Chair of the governing body or the Headteacher at the school** to let them know of your interest.

Governor Services also run regular taster courses for those interested in becoming a governor.

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