

School governance in disadvantaged urban contexts in England: mapping tensions and analysing potential solutions

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Abstract

The role of governing bodies in the strategic direction and detailed monitoring of schools in England and Wales has expanded substantially in the last two decades, as a central element in the local management agenda. Potentially, at least, local people can play a major part in shaping the school to the needs of the local communities. However, the governors' role has been constrained as a result of competition between urban schools in a quasi-market. In addition, central government control has been tightened through inspection regimes, target-setting, centrally mandated strategies and initiative-led funding (Earley, 1994, 2003, Deem et al, 1995, Levacic 1995, Saran and Taylor 1999, and Shearn et al 1995 Rowan and Taylor (2002)).

This paper reports on a study funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, which aimed to explore the relationship between governance and service quality in schools serving disadvantaged areas. Research questions were as follows:

Whose interests do governing bodies represent? Given the diverse nature of stakeholders in schools, the sometimes divided nature of urban communities and the multiple communities served by many schools, whose voices are heard most strongly on governing bodies? In areas of urban disadvantage, it is often unclear how the range of local voices can come to be heard through governing bodies which are only partly representative of local people and interests.

What influence do governing bodies have? How far do they shape strategic policy-making and detailed decision-making in schools given the degree of autonomy enjoyed by headteachers and externally-imposed constraints? For example, in areas of disadvantage, the capacity of governing bodies is limited by a widespread lack of experience in engaging in such formal decision-making settings.

What is the relationship between the actions of the governing body and the quality of service provided by the school? How is 'quality' defined by different stakeholders? What sorts of stances and actions by governing bodies enhance quality (or different kinds of quality)? For example, we explore the freedoms of action of governing bodies in schools under considerable external pressure because of low performance.

We conceptualise governors as occupying bridging role between three different ideals. It is intended by various stakeholders that the governing body 1) performs a managerial monitoring and evaluation role to maintain standards in the school 2) acts to transform national policy into relevant and appropriate local change, and 3) democratically represents local people and what they want for their school. It is clear that these three ideals sometimes contradict, or differ in ways that give rise to tensions over particular issues. Our findings suggest that governors often lack any explicit awareness of these tensions, but that they experience considerable difficulty in managing the range and sometimes competing demands of the tasks placed on them. Examples from our data include locally elected governors explaining to parents and local politicians their unpopular decision in favour of private financing of the school rebuilding. We also note that the training provided for governors is typically oriented to one or other of these ideals, and that there is little or no training which explicitly prepares governors for the tensions involved in managing the three of them.

Evidence suggests that different individuals in the governing body will place themselves very differently within this field of tensions, and at different times, in response to different events, and that these differences explain something of the dynamics of the governance process. The bridging role is, however, not a source of tension in all schools, at all times. We hypothesise that there is greater alignment between these ideals in areas of less socio-cultural stress.

It is significant for our understanding of governance in areas of social disadvantage that these tensions are unequally weighted in a structural sense – for example government policy is supported by a strong infrastructure, including developed discourses and machinery of expectation. There is no comparable infrastructure for local control of schools; instead there is a very underdetermined set of sometimes competing and often largely unlinked interest and activity groups.

The paper engages with competing options for the future of governing bodies, such as partially replacing governing bodies with a centralised state organisation to monitor public interest, and with the possibility of locating much more power with governors through increased local decision making.

Introduction

A recently completed study sponsored by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation explored the relationship between service quality and school governance in four disadvantaged areas in England. In this paper we summarise some of the main findings, with a view to feedback on whether these findings are more generalisable, and whether they have resonance outside of England, and even outside the UK - or whether in other contexts there are interesting differences from the analysis we present here. The recent completion of the study means that the findings discussed and presented here should be described as tentative.

The paper comprises a literature review, a summary of methodology, and then four sections summarising findings: Section 1 describes firstly the interests of governing bodies: their demographic make-up, the issue of representation, and perceptions of necessary working practices. Section 2 describes the nature of the influence of governing bodies, in relation to critical friendship and their public role. Section 3 develops an analysis of the tensions experienced by governors, in relation to three ideal-typical functions. Section 4 highlights the implications of disadvantage in socio-economic context, using this analysis. There is a final section on implications for future development of governance in schools.

Background to the study

There is a legitimate public interest in what schools do which seems to demand some form of governance beyond the national framework of legislation, regulation and inspection. Traditionally, this governance has been provided by an army of unpaid volunteers – nearly 350,000 according to recent estimates (DfES, 2004) – who make up the governing bodies of the country's 23,000 state schools.

Despite the relatively cosy impression of governing bodies which this may present, it is not necessarily the case that all is well in the world of governance. There is a small but important body of research literature which points to a series of problems (see, for instance, Earley, 2003, Earley & Creese, 2003, Deem et al, 1995, Earley, 1994, Levacic, 1995, Saran and Taylor 1999, and Shearn et al 1995). Three problems in particular emerge from these studies:

- *The balance between challenge and support.* In principle, governing bodies should be able to hold head teachers to account in a way which helps to improve the performance of the school. In practice, this is not always the case. Occasionally, governing bodies, or sections thereof, end up in unproductive, adversarial relationships with their heads. More commonly, governors feel ill-equipped to challenge the professional judgement of head teachers. Despite efforts to improve information flows to governors, heads are able to control something of what governors get to know and much of how they interpret whatever information they receive. Moreover, many governors are uncomfortable with the idea of holding heads to account and prefer to see themselves as advisers and supporters. Earley's (2000) research with a group of schools in disadvantaged areas examined the level of monitoring and evaluation governors adopted with regards to school performance, and found that evaluation of school work only truly occurred when there existed a sense of togetherness and of teamwork, trust and honesty and confidence with a realisation that all parties had a part to play. Governors who could not ask questions of professionals, provide alternative perspectives to professionals or recognise professional responsibilities found it difficult to carry out monitoring and evaluation effectively.
- *The balance between strategy and management.* In principle, governors are responsible for the strategic oversight of the school, leaving day to day management to head teachers. In practice, they may be drawn into day-to-day issues, or feel unable to chart a strategic direction without the detailed professional knowledge to which heads have access. By the same token, since heads control day-to-day decision-making in the school, it is relatively easy for them to extend their influence into areas which perhaps should be negotiated with, or left entirely to, governing bodies.
- *The recruitment of governors.* Some governing bodies have few problems in filling their vacancies with people who have appropriate skills and knowledge. However, this is not the case everywhere. Some schools, for instance, find it difficult to identify parents willing to serve as governors, or have to fill vacancies with governors who feel ill-equipped to make a full contribution. In practice, a small core of governors may carry most of the burden, whilst other governors play a more marginal role. Where governors can be recruited, they may not necessarily reflect the characteristics of local communities. There may be a bias in recruitment towards white, middle aged, and middle class governors, perhaps with a public service background. Ranson et al's study (2005) found that volunteers to become governors were generally white, middle aged, middle class, middle income and public/community service workers. Minority and

marginalised groups in local communities may be under-represented and/or may play little part in the most influential aspects of the governing body's work.

In disadvantaged areas and amongst marginalised groups in particular, these problems and tensions are exacerbated, and this is the focus of the present study. In addition, there is a growing concern amongst policy makers that local democratic processes in such areas appear increasingly irrelevant to many people. The Government's response to this has been to pursue what has come to be known as the 'new localism' agenda (Aspden & Birch, 2005). Essentially, this means involving people in decisions that affect them and their neighbourhood through a process of 'double devolution' (Miliband, 2006) whereby Whitehall devolves decision-making to local government, and local government in turn devolves decision-making to local groups and structures. The rationale for new localism is that local people are better placed than local or central government to know what they need from public policy in general and public services in particular.

The study methodology

Our study was located in three areas which were disadvantaged in the sense that average income levels, employment rates, educational and health outcomes were below national norms, and that there were concentrations of other social problems. The areas are:

- North Millington – a mainly White British residential area in a large, post-industrial and multi-ethnic northern city;
- East Moorfield – a predominant White British, semi-rural area; and
- South Cityborough – an ethnically diverse London borough.

We were interested not only in how school governing bodies in these areas impact on the inner workings of the school, but also on how they relate to local communities and the role they play in encouraging democratic participation at the local level. We focused our work, therefore, not on individual schools, but on areas which were recognised locally as coherent and bounded, and on the groups of schools (five or six) serving those areas. The advantage of this approach is that we were able to identify areas with very different characteristics. The disadvantage is that we had to work with whichever schools served those areas – and in the event these turned out to be almost all community schools.

Within each area, we started by interviewing the chairs, selected governors and head teachers of local schools, representatives of the local authority governor support service and local authority officers involved in regeneration or community development. We discussed with them our three research questions – about the interests represented by governors, about their influence, and about the relationship between what governors did and the quality of service provided by the school – and invited them to relate these questions to their own experiences. In the course of these discussions we learned about issues, problems and events locally which seemed to illuminate our questions in a particularly clear way. We therefore followed up these 'critical incidents' in greater detail, using them as a way to identify and talk to a wider range of people – parents, children, community leaders and others who had had a role to play in these incidents.

As our research neared its conclusion, we held feedback events in each area for all our respondents, and tested our emerging findings in a series of interviews with decision-makers and senior figures at national level who could help us relate them to national policy concerns. Since our study was based exclusively in England, we also sought the advice of researchers in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales as to the situation with regard to school governance in those administrations.

Section 1 – Describing governors interests

RQ1: Whose interests do governing bodies represent? Given the diverse nature of stakeholders in schools, the sometimes divided nature of urban communities and the multiple communities served by many schools, we were interested to find out whose voices are heard most strongly on governing bodies. There are of course many different 'types' of governor, who find their way onto the governing body by different routes (for instance, some are elected by parents, some appointed by the local authority, some co-opted by the governing body itself).

We asked governors (through their chairs) to give us some brief background information on themselves, in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, place of residence, and employment background. Their responses show that, in these areas, the majority of governors are female; most are of an age where they are or could be parents

of children in the school, but a sizeable minority in each of the fourteen schools were older; the majority of governors identify themselves as White, even in the ethnically diverse South Cityborough, where children from minority ethnic groups form the majority of school populations; the majority of governors live close to the school, but with a significant minority living outside the school's immediate locality, even in primary schools, and overall, about half of governors have a professional employment background – but with considerable variations, and little relationship between the proportion of professionals on the governing body and the social mix of the school as indicated by student entitlement to free school meals.

Many governing bodies found parent governors particularly difficult to recruit and difficult to involve once recruited. One chair of governors in North Millington explained that,

A lot of parents find it intimidating. I think the very name 'governing body' puts people off, and they have this attitude of 'I'm not good enough, it's not within my expertise'.

He also argued that most parent governors found it difficult to stand up to head teachers, were easily manipulated by them and were therefore not inclined to engage too closely with the work of the governing body. Not surprisingly, therefore, many heads and chairs reported that they had to persuade and cajole parents to serve on governing bodies.

Parent governors tended to be atypical: one North Millington parent governor told us about herself:

Probably, compared to the rest of the parents who were represented in this school, I suppose I was a bit different. My husband is a teacher...I am a nurse but also a midwife... I've been to university. Most of the parents who were represented in the last school I was at (nearby) weren't, and a lot of them didn't even follow through in their own education...

In many cases, governing bodies effectively divided themselves into a small core of highly active governors and a large group of governors who were less fully involved. The tendency was for the core to be even more dominated by governors from these more professional groups than the governing body as a whole. The two-speed character of many governing bodies further reduced the ability of some groups to become fully involved, as a South Cityborough head pointed out:

I still think it's true to an extent that we have sort of a small cadre of very involved governors and most of the rest are slightly passengers. I think as professionals, and I know I kind of get into a mindset which is where we have all those issues and we're discussing stuff at quite a high strategic level, and I don't always stop... and make sure everybody was following it.

Problematizing the notion of representation

For many governors, the idea of representing a particular interest was unhelpful. As a North Millington chair put it:

You just want an honest, straightforward person's opinion on something; you don't want one that is coloured by a finance background or a trade union background, or whatever.

For others, there was a representative role, but it was in respect of the local 'community' as a whole rather than this or that sectional interest. It was important that a chair in particular should be some one who:

...has affiliation to the area and...hasn't just been shipped in from somewhere' (Head, North Millington).

In general terms, however, governors thought to be acting on behalf of sectional interests were viewed with suspicion by their colleagues. This account from a South Cityborough head is typical:

One of the governing body tried to involve the community association but did it very inappropriately... What he really should have done, is actually brought it up and discussed it himself, rather than getting a total stranger to come in... I told him I'd be very happy to discuss it, speak to the Chair of Governors and get him to put it on the agenda as an agenda item, and bring it up that way.

Another case in South Cityborough illustrates a general tendency that we found for governing bodies to try to 'oust' sectional interests in favour of a set of common interests, shared by the school as a whole. A proposal to fund the rebuilding of a secondary school through PFI (the Private Finance Initiative) was highly

controversial, particularly amongst governors with left-of-centre political affiliations. This created a clear conflict between what these governors saw as the wider public interest, and the more immediate interests of the school. The head described events in the following terms:

There was... political stuff that had to be dealt with... We purposefully did not keep bringing it back to the full governing body meeting... It would have been noise which would generate lots of hot air and probably caused division within the governing body... There was still a political element who didn't particularly want to go down that track. They were pretty much ousted by the chair... One governor resigned. And that changed the dynamic overnight, quite significantly, and took away that kind of political agenda which was really quite destructive.

This incident is now seen by the remaining governors as a defining moment which united them around a common purpose. In schools serving these challenging areas it seems that the sense of rallying around the school was dominant. For at least one chair of governors in South Cityborough, this was something that was specific to schools serving disadvantaged areas:

I think, we're either more cohesive or slightly less demanding of the teaching staff than you would get in a more middle class area... We don't have philosophical disputes, so I think that is different, and that comes from, I think partly to do with the nature of the people on the governing body but also to do with the community it's serving, which if we weren't together it would be a disaster, there's too much stress on the system.

In this context, whilst any specialist skills and experience a governor might have are useful, the most important qualifications are that s/he has the best interests of the children at heart and that they understand the children, the school and the area. As a governor in East Moorfield put it:

It's all right having people from academic, or, you know, business or whatever, but you do need people that are involved with the children don't you, like the mums, the parents, or people that live locally?... Someone that doesn't live within the area, I think that's quite – it's being realistic isn't it, for these children, for this community, in this area, rather than at a business level high up there ...?

Section 2 – Describing governors' influence

RQ2: What influence do governing bodies have? We wanted to find out how far governors shape strategic policy-making and detailed decision-making in schools, given the degree of autonomy enjoyed by headteachers and externally-imposed constraints. In the past in England, when local authorities exercised direct control over schools, governing bodies tended to focus on relatively marginal issues and to be guided by the LA on other matters. Latterly, although there is still considerable variation, governing bodies act more independently in relation to core issues for the school – the appointment of head and staff, performance monitoring, decisions about the shape of the curriculum and so on. In principle, therefore, governors have significant influence in determining the quality of service provided by the school. Current proposals for the widespread creation of trust schools, which will be entirely independent of local authorities, look likely to increase this influence even further.

Our interviews and discussions led us to identify two key roles which capture something of the influence of the governing body.

Critical friendship

In areas of disadvantage, the capacity of governing bodies to monitor and evaluate the schools' work is limited by a widespread lack of experience in engaging in such formal decision-making settings. We found governors much more comfortable in supporting the school leadership than in challenging it. For example, one chair in North Millington described governors' meetings in a way which recognised this tendency:

...we do try and make them entertained and relaxed and laugh in the meetings. This is the dilemma you've got... If you start making them challenging and hostile and start putting too much of a burden on people and expect them to run the school with very little time or training, no-one will want to do it [but] our big failing is this area of evaluation, self-evaluation as well... and challenge.

However, as a head in the same area explained, the lack of challenge comes from both sides:

Governing bodies, in my opinion anyway, are not, they're not stropky individuals, they are people who want a consensus, and they want cooperation and they want support, and I wouldn't do anything to prevent that or alienate my governors individually or collectively.

Governors do scrutinise budgets, debate over decisions and question some assumptions. However, there appear to be strict, if implicit, rules about how and when such challenges can be made. One North Millington head, for instance, objected to over-zealous scrutiny by the governors, which:

...suggests that it is an authoritarian kind of relationship, and it's not. It is a fine dividing line ... We have got to get individuals to realise that they are not here to monitor the school with a magnifying glass. Well, they are but it's the motives and intentions behind why.

One of the implicit rules seems to be that challenge has to be based on mutual respect, on an acknowledgement of the legitimacy of each other's roles, and on a preservation of the boundary between them.

Public support for the school

Another role of the governors is to mobilise resources, local networks, and to help in fighting off external threats. In one incident in South Cityborough, the governors from a number of schools banded together to protest against – and eventually change – the school meals contract negotiated on their behalf by the local authority. In North Millington, it was the special educational needs (SEN) provision made by the authority that was a mobilising issue:

The one thing that causes this governing body to get annoyed and upset, is [the LEA's]...very poor record, in our opinion, of supporting children with SEN... (chair)

Section 3 – Tensions in role, influences on outcome

Based on this empirical study and our analysis of the expectations laid on governors by policy-makers in education, we have come to think of governors as occupying a bridging role between three different ideals. It is intended by various stakeholders that the governing body 1) performs a managerial monitoring and evaluation role to maintain standards in the school 2) acts to transform national policy into relevant and appropriate local change, and 3) democratically represents local people and what they want for their school. We have come to talk about the *managerialist*, *localising* and *democratising* purposes of the governing body. These rationales are not mutually exclusive and frequently overlap in practice and in rhetoric, they offer distinctively different visions of governors' role. In summary:

1. *Managerialist*: Governing bodies are seen as ensuring the efficient and effective management of the school, and of the public resources which support the school. They concern themselves with setting broad strategic directions (drawing on professional advice and working within the prescriptive framework of national policy), and with holding the head to account for the delivery of this strategy (again, using accountability measures that are largely prescribed nationally).
2. *Localising*: Governing bodies have the role of 'making things work here'. Whitehall is beginning to abandon its attempt to control public service provision directly and is instead fostering a 'new localism' which makes services more responsive to local conditions. Governors bring to bear, therefore, their detailed knowledge of the school and its communities in ensuring that national frameworks are customised and elaborated in ways that meet local needs and priorities.
3. *Democratising*: People have become alienated from traditional democratic institutions which seem remote from their lives. Local governance structures, such as school governing bodies, therefore, offer a means whereby people can once again engage with decisions which affect them directly. In this case, the role of governing bodies is to stimulate local democratic participation and to ensure that the school is run in a way which meets the wishes of local people.

It is clear that these three ideals sometimes contradict, or differ in ways that give rise to tensions over particular issues. Our findings suggest that governors often lack any explicit awareness of these tensions, but that they experience considerable difficulty in managing the range and sometimes competing demands of the tasks placed on them. Examples from our data include locally elected governors explaining to parents and local politicians their unpopular decision in favour of private financing of the school rebuilding. We also note that the training provided for governors is typically oriented to one or other of these ideals, and that

there is little or no training which explicitly prepares governors for the tensions involved in managing the three of them.

The three rationales have implications for the relationship between sources of power and the sorts of skills and knowledge that governing bodies need, and the way service quality is defined. They bear on the question of outcomes: RQ3: *What is the relationship between the actions of the governing body and the quality of service provided by the school?*

Rationale	Skills & knowledge	Relationship to power	Definition of quality
Managerialist	Knowledge of management, organisational effectiveness, accountability procedures	Power derives from national policy frameworks. Governors act as the agents of central government in ensuring efficient and effective implementation	Quality is defined by national policy (e.g. in terms of performance standards, centrally-defined curriculum)
Localising	Knowledge of the school and local conditions	Power is located in the governing body (though working within national frameworks). Only the governing body understand 'the local'	Quality is defined in terms of the match between school provision and local conditions
Democratising	Representation of local interests	Power derives from local people and governors act as their representatives	Quality is defined in terms of compliance with the wishes of local people

We had anticipated that some governors at least would be able to articulate a set of principles which might offer strategic direction to their work and which might effectively define the 'service quality' at which they were aiming. We also thought that they might define these principles in reaction to the Government's standards agenda, defining an alternative educational vision more suited to the disadvantaged populations they served. To some extent, our expectations were fulfilled. When pressed, some governors would give us their vision, in the rather broad terms used by this North Millington chair:

I think people are educated to be educated, not to be work fodder...I would have thought most teachers would think that a child is educated to be a good citizen, not to be something that's employable.

However, few governors spoke in such terms, and it was difficult to persuade even this few to elaborate further. There was, in our work with governors, little sense that they were pursuing a fully thought-out strategy aimed at realising some clear vision of what schooling should be like for local children.

This is not to say, however, that governors did not act in a principled way. On the contrary, they held values in high esteem and were, as we have seen, prepared to battle for their principles against both external and internal threats. It is simply that their principles were articulated in terms of the 'interests of the school' or the 'interests of the children', which, for the most part, were taken to be self-evident. They maintained this principled focus rather than explicitly discussing and working out the tensions between the different agendas within which we considered them to be working. In this sense, governors were above all *pragmatic* in their acceptance of others expectations and in their commitment to the school and its children.

Section 4 – Implications in areas of socio-economic disadvantage.

Governors themselves then do not discuss the tensions between the different demands made of them. However, we have found this analysis to be useful in understanding the difficulties faced in areas of disadvantage. We hypothesise that there is greater alignment between these ideals in areas of less socio-cultural stress. If the strategic direction of the school is the subject of broad consensus which in turn is broadly aligned with national policy, maintaining three distinctive rationales may not be problematic. By contrast, in disadvantaged areas where educational problems are acute, there may be less sense that national priorities should also be local priorities, or that there is any local consensus about the appropriate strategic direction.

It is significant for our understanding of governance in areas of social disadvantage that these tensions are unequally weighted in a structural sense – for example government policy is supported by a strong infrastructure, including developed discourses and machinery of expectation. There is no comparable infrastructure for local control of schools; instead there is a very underdetermined set of sometimes competing and often largely unlinked interest and activity groups.

Rationale	Inherent problems
Managerialist	<p>Governing bodies in such areas find it difficult to recruit governors with the necessary skills and experience to play a <i>managerial</i> role. They may not, for instance, have access to large commercial or public organisations able to supply governors with a professional background. Governors may therefore be in no position to exercise a strategic or monitoring role, and may be very reluctant to challenge the views of headteachers and other professionals. Even where skilled governors can be recruited or developed, they may have to be parachuted in from very different areas, and a fissure may open up between governors with the necessary expertise and time to play a full part, and other governors who remain on the margins.</p> <p><i>I was chair because nobody else seemed to want to do it...I was told, 'oh, it'll just be a phone call once a week', but you could actually have a full time job doing it. I work full time and I have two children...I feel I don't have enough time to do it properly...You should have some skills that you bring to the governing body, whereas I think, without any disrespect to my governing colleagues, we don't have particular skills or we didn't appreciate what was involved. I certainly didn't anyway.</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>(Chair, North Millington)</i></p> <p><i>You need governors who can contribute, so it's a toss-up isn't it, between either governors who are representative of the community of the school population, but also you need governors who can actually pull their weight and get the work done... Lots of the one-stop ones [i.e. recruited via the Governors' One Stop Shop] are lawyers, and fine he's great when he's there, but he's not there an awful lot.</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>(Chair of governors, South Cityborough)</i></p>
Localising	<p>The need for some managerial expertise may make the governing body less well-equipped to play a <i>localising</i> role. Governors from outside the area may exercise a sort of benevolent paternalism in deciding what is needed locally, and even if they are local people may be only loosely connected to local interest. They may see it as their job to 'square' local people when controversial decisions are taken. In any case, the room for localisation is strictly limited given the power of education professionals, local authorities and national policy.</p> <p><i>...we all knew what we were all about, so we could be a bit more daring and could take bigger risks. We knew we had to do something radical if we were ever going to change what's happening here in this area. We have got to be much more radical then we ever have been in the past, you know. But it's hard getting support for being radical because, I mean, when we wanted to change the timetable and the hours of the day to fit in with what we were doing, the LEA were very controlling, even to the point of sending letters back that the then Principal was sending out to parents and suggesting alterations.</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>(Chair, East Moorfield, on the design of a newly amalgamated high school)</i></p>
Democratising	<p>Governing bodies are not set up to be <i>democratic</i> in any meaningful sense. They <i>reflect</i> different stakeholders in the school (parents, teachers, local authority etc.) but do not <i>represent</i> different interests in the area. They are largely unelected, but even where a formal election process is in place (as is the case with parent governors) there is often no contest. They have few formal mechanisms for engaging with local people and may have no local connections beyond the school itself. Governors tend not to be locked into other local democratic structures, except for those who are councillors and who, in any case, may be seen as having a loyalty to party rather than locality. Local authority governor support services likewise tend to be isolated from wider community development and democratic participation initiatives. There are real problems, in a situation where families from any</p>

locality can (in principle at least) choose a school, in identifying the community/ies to which schools relate, and those communities may well be turbulent and fragmented. In any case, schools are largely answerable to national rather than local priorities. Where governors try to wrest control from professionals, this can often create a dysfunctional situation.

Certainly, from where I come from, in terms of the work of the local strategic partnership and the way that it engages with community and voluntary sector organisations and that sort of element of things, there is very little direct contact with schools themselves. It's by default. There are certainly school governors involved with the partnership, but not with the school governor hat on. They just happen to be school governors who are there in a different guise....

(local strategic partnership manager in East Moorfield)

I don't think our Governors have got the capacity to have an impact on the community at the moment...Governance tends to be what goes on in the school, not within the community.

(Head, North Millington)

And yet... despite these problems, there is a sense amongst those who participate in current structures and processes that governors do a good job. They may in some cases be reluctant to take a 'hard line' managerialist approach, but heads speak of the helpfulness of having a sounding board in the governing body. Although governors tend to emphasise support, this seems to be less an abdication of challenge than a sense that governors and head are part of a 'family' where everyone pulls together for the common good. In this context, conflicts and difficult situations which threaten the family are unwelcome. There is also a sense that, although governing bodies may not be locally representative, they play a valuable role in bringing to bear a good deal of local knowledge about the school and area, perhaps acquired over many years, and useful for guiding headteachers who may be new to both. There is also evidence that governors can challenge decisions taken beyond school and area, with varying degrees of success. No-one we spoke to is in favour of radical reform of governing bodies.

Implications for the future

The paper engages with competing options for the future of governing bodies, such as partially replacing governing bodies with a centralised state organisation to monitor public interest, and with the possibility of locating much more power with governors through increased local decision making. We can see three options for governing bodies in future:

Incremental reform. This option is based on the assumption that governing bodies should continue in largely their present form, but that steps should be taken to address some of the problems they face. In particular, this might mean accepting that the most successful aspects of governors' work currently in the areas we study tends to be based on a 'localising' approach, and that it might be better to reduce the managerialist demands where possible in order to enable this to be undertaken more effectively. This might involve: increasing the level of professional support available to governing bodies (e.g. through clerks, school improvement partners and/or 'beefed up' governor support services) so that they can carry out the more technical aspects of their role; increasing the mentoring of new governors and networking between bodies to develop their skills; putting in place proactive schemes to enhance recruitment, particularly from low-participation groups; strengthening the links between governor support services and other community development structures; reviewing governing body tasks to identify any that are unnecessary and overly-technical, and allocate these to other bodies (e.g. the local authority); making information more accessible and less technical; formalising the division between more and less active governors by establishing a (paid?) executive group reporting to a wider 'scrutiny' group; exploring alternatives to bureaucratic decision-making processes, drawing for instance on expertise in community consultation procedures; requiring governing bodies to undertake formal consultation exercises with local people using these techniques, and perhaps supported by new-style governor support services or a national toolkit.

Structural reform. This assumes that governing bodies in some recognisable form should continue, but that their problems demand the reform of structures rather than minor modifications to processes. These might include: locating governance at the level of school cluster on the grounds that the individual school level is

impossible to populate effectively; embedding school governance in the overall governance of public services at local level, on the grounds that strategic interagency approaches are needed in disadvantaged areas (and required by Every Child Matters); moving from school governing bodies to a mixture of managerial accountability exercised professionally (e.g. through local authorities or some agency established expressly for this purpose) and formalised local consultative processes. Again ECM does not apply to Wales, although there are moves towards integration.

Radical reform. This assumes that the basic problem is in the 'mixed role' model of governance and calls into question the nature of the (currently remote) democratic control of public services. It might involve devising new forms of local control as part of a radical reconceptualisation of how public services are governed and of how democracy in England works. Models for this currently do not exist in England, but elsewhere it is not unheard of for schools to be controlled more or less exclusively by local people. The Education Bill currently envisages a strengthening of non-governmental and non-local-authority control, through trusts and/or parents' groups, but pays little attention to the democratic implications of these proposals. Nonetheless, it opens up the possibility for more radical resolutions than might hitherto have been considered possible.

At this juncture, it is difficult to identify a single, coherent way forward that would command an appropriate degree of consensus. Probably what is most needed now is a more open public debate on these matters.

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