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# The relationship between chair and head

**Clare Collins and Emma Knights**  
look at ways of making this vital  
partnership a success



**T**he importance of the role of the chair of the governing body is being increasingly recognised, including by the National College being given a remit last year for a development programme for chairs. Good chairing is one of NGA's eight elements of effective governance, and we hope this article will provide food for thought for chairs and heads beginning a new professional relationship or reflecting on an existing one.

Effective accountability is more pressing than ever with the greater autonomy being given to schools. There are multiple accountability routes for schools: schools are accountable to the secretary of state (either directly or through the local authority), through published data, inspection, press interest and a market approach to school provision with choice by parents, in addition to the role of the governing body as the school's accountable body.

The regime for schools is very much coloured by inspection. Ofsted is almost always considered to be the premier form of accountability whereas the governing body's central role in school accountability is often not fully acknowledged and sometimes not even accepted by headteachers. This can lead to insufficient time and

reflection being devoted to governance and umbrage being taken by governors.

However, it is far better for a head to be regularly challenged by a governing body, rather than left unchallenged until faced with an Ofsted inspection. And as Russell Hobby, general secretary of the National Association of Headteachers (NAHT), said at the recent all-party parliamentary group on school governance and leadership: "Governors owe heads the professional respect of holding them to account."

## **Checks and balances**

The relationship between the head and the chair is the axis of this system of checks and balances between the body that sets the strategic direction for the school, and the staff that delivers that vision. The chair, with the prominent role in leading the governing body and being the first point of contact for the head, sets the tone for the governors' relationship with the head. Professor Chris James of the University of Bath in his recent literature review of the role of the chair stresses the importance of this relationship: "It is not just board functioning that benefits from a high quality chair-CEO relationship, the organisation benefits also."

In theory, the governing body's role largely mirrors the role of boards in other sectors – it is the body which sets the vision and purpose of the organisation, and hires (and can fire) the chief executive/headteacher who is tasked with delivering the vision. In addition the governing body must undertake the headteacher's appraisal and performance management. Professor James' literature review concludes that: "The role of the chair of a school governing body does not appear to be distinctly different from the role in other settings." Although, whatever the setting, the role of chair is not entirely defined, comparing practice across sectors shows that we in schools have something to learn.

## **Mutual respect**

We believe that if the notion of accountability is fully acknowledged and respected, and if the role and responsibilities are known and understood, then negotiation of the relationship will be built on mutual respect and trust. A working relationship has to be negotiated between the two individuals with a mutual understanding of the expectations on both parties.

The context in which negotiation takes place will affect both the way in which it is carried out and the outcome.

And in schools the notion of the hierarchy, of the board being “the boss” and being able to “command” the head, is not a view commonly held by senior leaders, or even accepted when pointed out. Compared with other sectors, heads can be reluctant to accept the authority of the governing body and, in turn, the importance of the role of the chair. We can only speculate on why this may be, perhaps due to the lack of kudos associated with school governance as opposed to other board or trustee roles? Or maybe the way in which governors, and chairs in particular, are appointed, or a head’s experience of a lacklustre governing body?

Furthermore, some heads have difficulty accepting someone from outside the education profession being not only in a leadership role in a school, but also the lead influence in determining the “expert’s” career progression and remuneration. This approach is the norm in other sectors, with chief executives being held to account by non-executives, and in other jurisdictions, such as the United States, where democratically elected community school boards hire, performance manage and fire.

### Outside knowledge and wisdom

The school sector can be very internally focused, and there is often an arrogance in dismissing the knowledge and wisdom governors may bring from their own employment or other experiences (the majority of chairs are themselves professional people). In any seminar or roundtable on governance, we will put money on governors being described by at least one headteacher as “do-gooders” or “amateurs”, often prefixed by “well meaning”, which does nothing to reduce the degree of patronisation. At one such recent discussion in Westminster, a headteacher who chairs an influential grouping argued that lay accountability meant unskilled, unprofessional people.

This attitude is unlikely to be heard among chief executives in the third sector who perhaps have a better understanding of the role of the board in ensuring accountability, but also have far more respect for the concept of volunteering – not simply equating a salary with value. Our long experience in the third sector points to chief executives having more respect for the position of chair – even if the incumbent does not live up to every expectation – than headteachers generally have.

With greater autonomy being given to schools and with academies holding both charitable status and being limited companies, the similarities with other sectors is heightened. There is now an expectation from government that accountability must be well embedded in schools. Heads can acknowledge – and welcome – this through developing effective relationships with the governing body and the chair; this in turn shows the world – and Ofsted – that the organisation is doing its job well.

For an effective relationship to develop between the chair and the head, there must be an agreed understanding of the roles and responsibilities, thus preventing the opportunity

### WHAT THE CHAIRS AND HEADS SAID

“Make time for discussion outwith formal procedures and get to know each other. Spend time exploring experiences and skills that are mutual and complementary. Understand each other’s roles in the school improvement process, share views of the school together, and identify common thoughts and those that differ.”

SHEILA ROSS, CHAIR, AND LYNNE ACKLAND,  
HEAD OF HEATON MANOR SECONDARY SCHOOL

“Share both joys and disappointments, while maintaining sufficient confidentiality about individual staff issues. Don’t surprise each other in meetings by taking an unexpected direction. Be honest about the difficulties and the people – including governors – who need guidance.”

RAY HARRIS, CHAIR, AND NICK WHITE,  
HEAD OF PARKWOOD HALL SPECIAL SCHOOL

“If there aren’t times that you disagree then something is wrong with the relationship. Governors aren’t there to just agree with and endorse every decision or opinion the head has. Remember you have a common goal – to provide the best education possible for your pupils.”

LINDA DU-ROE, CHAIR, AND TIM SOAR,  
HEAD OF DEER PARK PRIMARY SCHOOL

“Agree a clear vision for the school with governors, share that vision with staff and then work collaboratively to achieve that vision. Have a clear understanding of your own role and use the individual strengths of other governors. Never hide: delegate and empower.”

DAVID GRIFFITHS, CHAIR, AND TRACY CAMPBELL,  
HEAD OF PLANTS BROOK SECONDARY SCHOOL

“We have high expectations of each other, governors, staff and pupils.”

SUE HOWLEY, CHAIR, AND JENNY STONE,  
HEAD OF FAIRFIELD PARK LOWER SCHOOL

for confusion. The law is clear – it is the governing body which is responsible for the good conduct of the school, and for promoting high standards, and the governing body’s more specific duties are laid down in regulations for local authority maintained schools and in articles of association for academies.

As schools minister Lord Hill says on page 10, the governing body is the “top strategic body in the school”. It is helpful if the head recognises that there is a conflict of interest at work, for (unlike almost all chief executives in the third sector) the head is a both a member of the body which sets the vision that s/he then has to deliver, and which will also performance manage her/him against the delivery of that vision.

However the role of the chair is not clearly defined. The chair of a governing body – like the chair of other boards –

← performs a range of functions including leading and developing both the governing body team and its business, and facilitating a range of relationships among the governing body and its clerk. As well as a leader, the chair may also be a mentor, manager, critical friend, cheerleader, ambassador and possibly coach.

Even this list can underplay the role a good chair plays in ensuring the governing body is active in driving the strategic direction of the school. Some headteachers see this as a threat to their role, but an effective head would be expected to propose a strategy to the governing body based on an effective self-evaluation and planning cycle; discussions with the chair should have helped shape the proposal being put for decision. This process will be more intensive and time-consuming for chairs in particular instances, such as schools with low pupil performance.

When the relationship is working at its best, it can provide inspiration as well as support to the headteacher. The variety of roles adopted by the chair depends on the

## “In theory, the governing body’s role largely mirrors the role of boards in other sectors”

situation at hand, in particular the experience and strengths of the headteacher. For example, a chair may sometimes be used more often as an external spokesperson for the school where their skills or experience in this area are more extensive than the head’s.

The chair will usually have more involvement than other governors with particular tasks, such as complaints,

and is also likely to visit the school more often. However the chair has very little power specific to the role (“chair’s action” can only be used “if a delay in exercising a function is likely to be seriously detrimental” and key matters are excluded). NGA’s *Chair’s Handbook* provides a manual for new and aspiring chairs, but is also a useful introduction for heads and aspiring heads. Being a staff governor or a governor at another school can also greatly help middle managers develop an understanding of governance before taking on headship.

### Professional discussion

During the appointment process, too often prospective heads talk with governors about building sound relationships – only to get into the job and, amid the myriad of other duties and initiatives, fail to invest time or thought properly in developing such relationships. This may manifest itself in a range of other behaviours, for example, not having papers ready for distribution in advance of meetings, failing to provide the requested information in the appropriate format, failing to act on governing body suggestions, sidelining governors, swamping them in detail, wasting time by pointing the way down blind alleys, or involving the governing body in other pro bono activities rather than self-evaluation and setting the strategic priorities of the school.

A good chair will seek to address such issues with the head, and in order to avoid these pitfalls, a new head or new chair must begin with an open but confidential, professional

discussion on what each expects of the other. This should include the means of future communication, including how often they will talk or meet. They should also seek to clarify with each other and the clerk, the custom and practice of the governing body’s business.

Establishing an open and honest dialogue very early on will make it much easier for the chair and the head to discuss whether the governance arrangements, and the whole myriad of related processes (for example, the headteacher’s performance management, school evaluation cycle, financial reporting) are acceptable to both parties, and if not, how to move towards a different and more effective approach. As the lead professional, the head can easily access the information, advice and guidance which can be used in conjunction with the experience of the chair to move governance forward and ensure effective accountability.

In addition it is crucial to reach agreement on that which is strategic and that which is operational, and on what information and in what format and on what issues (including, for example, the quality of teaching or pupil progress) is required. The head must be prepared to be questioned on this information, to facilitate the appointment of external advisors to the governing body, and to initiate and respond to other information gathering exercises carried out for the governing body (such as parental surveys or student focus groups).

The head can play a role in ensuring the development of the governing body, and should address any issues that arise with the chair. The head can use their professionalism to address governance training needs (for themselves, staff and governors), to enable prompt payment of expenses, and by being open about succession planning (for both the staff and the governing body).

### Work/life balance

As a good chair takes note of the head’s work/life balance, a good head should give consideration to the chair’s commitment to the school and other aspects of their life. Good chairs value and thank professional school leaders, and the paid professional should also acknowledge the work of the volunteers.

Although the governance and accountability framework may at first be daunting in its multiplicity, complexity and lack of clear definition, by investing time and thought in the actions described here, this very framework should become to be seen as a protection – to both the head and the school – rather than a threat. ☐☐

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*Clare Collins (below left) is a NGA trustee and chair 2008-11. Emma Knights is NGA chief executive. This article is an edited version of a piece written for the National College, which emerges from NGA’s wide*



*exposure to governors, and is also backed by research and by practice of boards in other sectors (private, public and the third sector)*