

# Partnership Project

WORKING TOGETHER TO SUPPORT HEADTEACHERS

October 05

## Governors supporting Headteachers well-being



A DTI FUNDED PARTNERSHIP PROJECT



## Introduction ::

---

This document is one of the outcomes of a DTI funded project 'Working Together To Support Headteachers', a partnership between the LEA, Professional Associations (NUT, SHA, and NAHT), Governors, Diocesan Authorities and headteachers. Heads have already helped to compile and been circulated with a document giving suggestions on how they can help themselves. **This publication suggests ways that governors can assist heads in achieving an appropriate work/life balance and reducing the levels of stress associated with the role.**

## Background ::

---

The Project uses an action-research approach. Its objectives are to identify sources of stress and support, and then to make recommendations to all the partners on ways they might work together to improve the experience of key people in the Authority. The data generated is very extensive; over 70% of heads completed a wellbeing questionnaire, about 20% were interviewed and over 60% attended one of eight regional events to generate suggestions for change. The information presented here represents the views of headteachers from all phases, circumstances and parts of Lancashire.

The long-term outcomes of a proactive approach should be a reduction in absenteeism through stress-related illness, improvements in recruitment and retention and raising standards of education through more motivated and effective leaders. In the short-term we hope that heads will feel that they are supported by all partners in carrying out their responsibilities, and that they feel fulfilled in their role.

The suggestions made by heads to governing bodies have been reported in recent editions of 'The Lancashire Governor'. They have been raised at governor training events, discussed with Governor Services and considered by the Lancashire Association of School Governing Bodies. **However, it is the specific relationship between an individual headteacher and their governing body which is much more significant.**

This document is designed to give governors the 'big picture', and to raise their awareness of the general concerns of headteachers. There are discussion points and questions raised in each section. Hopefully Governing Bodies will find these useful in focusing discussions on the particular circumstances of their own school.

**The document is written from a headteacher perspective. Clearly any discussion or decision will need to take into account the perceptions of the school's governing body so that mutually agreed arrangements can result. The key purpose of this report is to stimulate debate, even if the outcome is that all parties regard current arrangements as ideal.**

## The Role of the Governing Body ::

---

In general, headteachers enjoy excellent relationships with their governing bodies, and often have a particularly good rapport with the chairperson. Of those interviewed in the project, 39 heads cited governors as being a major source of support, representing 30% of the sample. Governors came 4th on the list of sources of support, behind headteacher colleagues, the LEA and families. Despite this, not all governing bodies and heads will have discussed, clarified or reviewed their respective roles, so the potential for misunderstanding and disagreement still exists.

The governing body is responsible for the strategic development of the school, while the head is charged with day-to-day management. The governing body has specific and clearly defined statutory responsibilities, including a requirement to conduct an annual performance and salary review of the headteacher. Under the National Agreement the governing body also has a statutory duty to maintain an overview of headteacher well-being to ensure an appropriate work-life balance.

### Discussion Points

- Are the governing body and the headteacher clear about their respective roles and responsibilities?
- When were these last discussed, reviewed and clarified?
- Are they documented?
- Has the governing body discussed and agreed an appropriate strategy for ensuring the well-being and appropriate work/life balance of the head?
- Are performance and salary reviews carried out effectively?

## Part A

### The 'Big Picture': What Causes Head Teacher Stress? ::

In the interview phase of the Project there were over 350 responses to the question "What are the stressors in your job?" These were then grouped under four headings which are commonly used in research about work-related stress, so that comparisons can be made with other studies and other professions:-

Time stressors	27.3 %	
Encounter stressors	29.9 %	
Situational stressors	27.3 %	
Anticipation stressors	15.0 %	(0.5% not classified)

#### Time Stress

Time stressors involved both work overload (19.7%) and lack of control (7.6%). The main concerns relate to the inability to establish own agendas and focus on the core element of the role (i.e. the strategic management of teaching and learning). Bureaucracy, trivia, irrelevant meetings, perpetual interruptions, the demands of others and reactive responses to new initiatives were the most significant issues here.

### Discussion Points

- How can the governing body assist the headteacher in developing time management skills?
- Is the head supported by sufficient and effective administrative and clerical staff?
- How can national initiatives be customised to the school to regain a sense of control and autonomy in school improvement?
- Is the governing body aware of the conflicting and pressing demands on the head's time?
- Has a member of the governing body undertaken a 'shadowing' exercise to understand the typical working day of the headteacher?

#### Encounter Stress

These are stressors related to dealing with other people, and can be subdivided into:-

##### *Role conflict (5.9%)*

Principally this is the expectation of other people about the role of a headteacher. The perceptions of staff, parents, students, governors, the local authority and the community may not only conflict in themselves, but also may not align with individual personality or style.

### *Issue conflict (4.9%)*

This is conflict generated by particular policies or developments, of which the most significant is the speed of change required of heads. Governors and staff are sometimes perceived as being unresponsive to innovations suggested by the head, though there can also be an interesting tension with heads' perceptions of imposed change (either from government or the governing body) which can be a major cause of stress; in short, "my change is okay; your change is not!"

### *Interpersonal conflict (19.1%)*

This is by far the most significant aspect of encounter stress. Parents are sometimes regarded as demanding, unreasonable, violent and litigious. Staff conflicts may involve the head as initiator or receiver, but, more often, as a referee or mediator. Student conflict often results from indirect intervention in support of a colleague where there is a perceived breakdown of discipline. These interventions are time consuming, and may generate a negative reaction from teachers when apparently lenient sanctions are imposed. Governors are not immune from interpersonal conflict; some 7.9% of all the reported stressors faced by heads related to unsatisfactory relationships with at least one member of the governing body.

#### **Discussion Points**

- How can the governing body assist the headteacher in developing the necessary skills for the management of conflict?
- Are there established protocols to support teachers when dealing with difficult and aggressive parents?
- What vehicle exists within the governing body to identify, discuss and resolve perceived grievances from the head or an individual member?
- Has the governing body agreed a code of conduct for all its members, including the head?

### **Situational Stress**

Unfavourable working conditions account for most situational stress. This does not usually refer to the environment or the school buildings, though, clearly, good facilities can remove staff demotivation. Situational stress relates mainly to issues like the budget position, staff recruitment and retention, falling rolls, the perceived lack of appreciation and support and the extent of teaching commitment. In many schools there is an unrealistic expectation of the teaching load of the headteacher. Dedicated headship time is a requirement of the National Agreement, yet a recent Lancashire survey of the introduction of PPA time showed quite clearly that in many primary schools the head is increasing their teaching load to introduce PPA time or provide cover due to the current budget position. This is contrary to the spirit of the Agreement and, in the long-term, counter-productive and potentially damaging.

#### **Discussion Points**

- What impact has the National Agreement had on the head's teaching load?
- How has the governing body demonstrated support during difficult periods of recruitment, budget problems, falling rolls etc.?
- When did the governing body last express their appreciation to the head?

## Anticipation Stress

Anticipation stress is divided into unpleasant expectations (11.6%) and fear (3.4 %). The former would include Ofsted inspections and the publication of league tables or examination results if these fall short of predictions. While these are obviously unpleasant expectations, this category can also include interviews with difficult parents, staff disciplinary hearings and heads' own performance management reviews, particularly if governing bodies are reluctant or not effective in conducting these.

'Fear' includes feelings of guilt (when not working), the isolation and loneliness of the job, slowing down with age and a desire to retire. One key issue which emerged during the interviews was the concern of experienced and successful heads about career development within and beyond headship. Many felt trapped, and in need of mentoring, coaching and training for themselves, though they were often asked to do this for less experienced or less competent colleagues.

### Discussion Points

- Are governors aware of key times in the year when heads may be under more pressure?
- What support is provided to the head during inspections?
- Are governors aware of the professional development needs of the head?
- Is the head given opportunities for his/her own professional development through courses, visits, secondments, exchanges etc?

## Part B

### Headteacher Suggestions for Governing Bodies ::

---

Suggestions made by heads on the ways governing bodies can provide support came from two sources:-

- 1 Some of the headteacher messages to themselves were described in terms of "work with governing bodies to ..."
- 2 Specific recommendations to governing bodies at both County and school level were made at the headteacher events.

It will come as no surprise that a significant number of suggestions related to the timing, conduct and length of MEETINGS; over 25% were concerned with some aspect of this routine element of the relationship with heads. Many headteachers would prefer all meetings to take place in school time, but recognise that there are competing demands on governors' time too. However, every effort should be made to ensure that meetings are concise and effective, recognising the potential impact on the heads' working day.

Suggestions from heads included:-

- Always start meetings on time.
- Ensure that meetings have a guillotined deadline time to finish.
- Assume that governors have read all papers before the meeting.
- Ensure meetings are no longer than a football match.
- Delegate items to committees for longer discussion and debate.
- Avoid delegating matters to the head and chair.

- Meet at more flexible times, for example at the end of school.
- Amalgamate committees or run them 'back to back'.
- Recognise that most meetings result in a long working day for heads and some governors. Don't expect to socialise after the meeting.
- Review the committee structure; remove unnecessary committees.
- Decide if the head is required at every meeting. Can the governing body be serviced by another senior member of staff, providing excellent staff training whilst reducing the demands on the head?
- Understand the implications for time when the governing body requests the head to prepare papers or policies.

Whilst meetings are an obvious issue for heads and governors to address, the largest number of suggestions fell under the heading of **THE ROLE OF GOVERNORS**. Ideas here are subsumed under three broad headings:-

- A) Relationship with the headteacher. The theoretical division of responsibilities into strategic development and day-to-day management is rarely clarified in practice, and can lead to tensions. Heads suggestions to avoid this included:-
- Governors/heads should know respective briefs and stick to them.
  - Following appointment engage in discussion specifying working relationship and understanding. Review at regular intervals.
  - Governors should have reasonable expectation of head's teaching load.
  - Heads – especially in small schools – should have protected leadership and management time.
  - Ensure the head is well supported with admin staff and P.A.
  - Heads should not routinely be required to write reports and policies for which governing bodies are responsible.
- B) Salary issues and performance management arrangements are obvious areas for potential disagreement between heads and governing bodies. The LASSH survey on secondary heads salaries revealed wide discrepancies between the salaries of heads with comparable experience, capability and school context. Messages in this group included:-
- Take the responsibility for heads' performance management as seriously as the head does for the rest of the staff.
  - "P.M reviews in my school are a waste of time".
  - Governing bodies need to understand comparative ISRs in order to set an appropriate one for the school's context.
  - Need to be more flexible, realistic and proactive in paying heads what they are worth.

C) The behaviour of governors. Governors are 'critical friends' to the head. This involves maintaining a balance between a sound knowledge of the school and a lack of interference in its running, described by heads as:-

- Come into school more often when invited.
- Send apologies.
- Have a greater involvement in the life of the school.
- Get a real insight into the school by, for example, shadowing the head for a day.
- Be involved – but don't interfere.
- Ensure you know what words like 'challenge', 'control', 'consult', 'responsibility' mean as a governor.

In order to understand and properly discharge their role governors need **TRAINING AND PREPARATION**. Over 8% of all the recommendations related to the need for governors to attend training activities. Lancashire Governor Services run a comprehensive programme, and further details can be obtained from:

**Christine Hustwick**

*Governor Training and Development Officer*

Lancashire Governor Services, PO Box 61, County Hall, Preston, PR1 8RJ

Tel: 01772 530906

Email: Christine.hustwick@ed.lancscc.gov.uk

There is a particular need for training to enable governors to fulfil **STATUTORY RESPONSIBILITIES**. Headteachers feel very strongly about statutory obligations being delegated to them; some 12 % of the comments related to this issue. Examples show the strength of feeling of some colleagues: -

- "Write reports and policies **they** have responsibility for".
- "Be accountable for **their** responsibilities instead of leaving it to me!"
- "Write **your own** report, and minute **your own** meetings".

The Project is concerned with headteacher stress and wellbeing so it will be no surprise that the statutory responsibility most raised was **THE WELL-BEING OF THE HEADTEACHER**. Ten percent of comments related to this issue alone. The governing body has held this responsibility since the National Agreement was signed, though hopefully there was a supportive culture before then. As pressures on headteachers increase, it becomes even more important for governing bodies to take seriously the well-being of the head, and to discuss with them ways of supporting the achievement of a 'reasonable work/life balance'. Many governing bodies already do this; hopefully this document will stimulate debate and may be used as the basis for further discussion.

An important contributor to well-being is the feeling of being appreciated and valued, and no doubt governing bodies already find ways to express this appropriately. The importance of **APPRECIATION OF THE HEAD AND STAFF** cannot be underestimated; as one head put it "it does not take much to thank and praise people – perhaps I should do it more myself!" So here goes .....

**Lancashire headteachers would like to thank all governors for their support, commitment and dedication to their individual schools. Being a governor can be a thankless task. Heads share the concerns about governor recruitment and having governing bodies which are representative of the community. They do, however, appreciate the contribution that so many governors make. Thank You!**

## Conclusion ::

---

The Chartered Institute of Management conducted a recent survey on employee stress. Its main conclusion was that the profession most likely to experience stress-related illness was – surprise, surprise – teaching. Headteachers are even more vulnerable than other staff. The 'Working Together To Support Headteachers' Project is not about providing tea and sympathy; it is concerned to ensure that unnecessary stress is minimised so that the leaders of Lancashire schools can do their job effectively, and enjoy the privilege of making a difference to the lives of young people.

Some of the suggestions made by heads to governing bodies may appear critical. Most are practical and achievable. More extreme views such as "Abandon governing bodies, they serve no purpose" are rare; most heads recognise and value the contribution that governors make and appreciate the commitment of all who take on this role.

We hope that this document will encourage discussion in your school, and that, as governors, you too will be .....

## **WORKING TOGETHER TO SUPPORT HEADTEACHERS**

Additional copies of this publication can be obtained from **The Well-Being Team**

By telephone 01772 532653

By email [wellbeing@ed.lancscc.gov.uk](mailto:wellbeing@ed.lancscc.gov.uk)

By post ECS Personnel PO Box 61 County Hall Preston PR1 8RJ