



External Review of Governance

Commissioned by Wirral Council

Black Horse Hill Infant School

September 2023

Chris Forrest

D1	Q1	Final	DA	FC	FD
28/9/23	4/10/23	4/10/23			

NLG	Chris Forrest
School	Black Horse Hill Infant School
Chair	Corrie Brierley
Head Teacher	Julie Morris
Governance professional	Debbie Harris
Key contact	Corrie Brierley
Commissioned by	Wirral Council
Date review commenced	6 June 2023
Reason for the review	
<p>This review has been commissioned by Wirral Council due to the schools Ofsted report of 12 February 2020 which rated the school's overall effectiveness as requiring improvement and gave the same rating for the effectiveness of leadership and management.</p>	
Background information	
<p>Black Horse Hill Infant School is located immediately next door to Black Horse Hill Junior school and serves the small seaside town of West Kirby on the Wirral peninsula and is located on the edge of a rural area. The most recent Ofsted inspection report (12th February 2020) reports the school as Requiring Improvement.</p> <p>As an infant school there is no nationally published information about primary performance.</p> <p>According to GIAS (Getting Information About Schools), the school had 166 children on roll, with a capacity for 180. Of the pupils at the school, DfE's find school performance data service shows that in 2021/22, 0.58% pupils had an educational health and care plan (EHCP) compared to a national average of 2.27%, 8.19% pupils had SEN support (compared to 13.02% nationally) and 2.3% pupils did not have English as their first language (21.21% nationally) and 21.64% pupils were entitled to free school meals (compared to 25.5% nationally), however GIAS shows that at school this has risen to 23.1%.</p> <p>The DfE schools financial benchmarking service shows that for 2021/22 the school had a revenue reserve of £82,900 and an in-year balance of £13,100. The school has maintained a positive revenue reserve since 2017/18.</p>	

The governance framework

Currently publicly available information shows the following:

Governors	School Website	Listed On GIAS
Chair (Co-opted)	Corrie Brierley	Yes
Vice (Parent)	Jennifer Merrin	Yes
Headteacher	Julie Morris	Yes
Staff	Annabel Underwood	Yes
Co-opted	Linda Palmer	No
Co-opted	Stuart Dagnall	No
Co-opted	Jane Jones	No
Parent	Brooke Bianco	Yes
Parent	Craig Lofthouse	Yes
Parent	Daniel Blizard	Yes
LA	Daniel Stenhouse	Yes

The school website clearly shows that Mr Dagnall, Mrs Jones and Mrs Palmer's terms of office have now ended.

The information above is consistent with the school's instrument of governance of 21 November 2014 and there are now three co-opted vacancies.

The school operates with three standing committees which meet three times per year, as does the full governing board.

Clerking services are provided by Debbie Harris who is also the school secretary.



The external review process

Review activities included:

- An initial scoping meeting with the chair and headteacher
- Detailed research and document reviews of all governance documentation and meeting papers for the past 18 months
- Semi structured interviews by video or phone call with the chair, Headteacher, four governors and the clerk to the board
- Observation of a full board meeting
- This report and accompanying action plan

Key message

This is a board which cares deeply for the school and the community it serves. Governors have a very good understanding of their school, their role, and how the school can support the pupils and the community. They appear to know the school, its strength and weaknesses very well.

Meetings are well planned, clearly structured, and well chaired by a chair who is skilled, experienced, and professional. Relationships are constructive, positive, and professional and the clerk effectively supports the board and enables excellent governance at the school.

Governors have worked in partnership with the headteacher to make rapid and sustained improvements to governance, and the leadership of the board by the chair and headteacher has driven this improvement whilst strengthening already positive relationships within the board and with the school staff.

The accompanying action plan shows several minor adjustments and amendments to governance practice however there are no significant recommendations to be acted upon.



Findings

Findings are organised with reference to the DfE's Competency Framework for Governance and the six features of effective governance.

1. Strategic leadership

The board are very clear on their short to medium term strategic objective – to improve the schools Ofsted rating. This simple, clear objective has united the board and the school staff into a cohesive team pulling in the same direction, and despite feeling disappointed with the judgment, they quickly accepted the report and focused all their considerable energies on school improvement.

The board are also considering the longer-term future of the school, for example they are monitoring national policy developments and local changes to school status, whilst also actively speaking with a number of multi academy trusts about how those trusts might help them improve the education for their children. This has become particularly pronounced since the neighboring junior school (Black Horse Hill Junior School) chose to join a local multi academy trust.

Governors however are very clear that any change in school status must strengthen education for the children and match their clearly stated and widely supported school vision, aims, and values which have been recently reviewed and are clearly displayed on the website.

Governors are ambitious for the school, the pupils, and the community, and they should continue to think carefully about the future of the school and work with the head and her team to identify with clarity what they believe are the most compelling features of their school, and how they are going to further develop the school for its children and the community in the coming years.

2. Accountability

Conversations with governors, a review of the minutes, and the board observation show that governors hold the head to account carefully and appropriately. Minutes and the board observations show a range of questions and challenge to the head, and the head welcomes and encourages governors to challenge her on all aspects of school life. Governors are also appropriately concerned with the well-being of the headteacher and her staff. Governors are focused on the issues identified in the school's self-evaluation and are therefore guided by, and very well briefed on the progress against the school improvement plan. This enables them to operate at an appropriate strategic level and ensures their focus is consistent with the strengths and weaknesses of the school.

The headteacher provides detailed information in writing and verbally for governors – both at meeting, with a comprehensive headteachers report to each full governing body meeting, and between them. Governors are welcomed into school to conduct appropriate visits and the record of these visits is appropriately shared with the rest of the board.

Governors also receive regular updates and reports from experts external to the school, for example the literacy specialists report of 31st March 2023 was shared with the learning and achievement committee on 24th May 2023, and the headteachers report to the meeting of 22nd March 2023 outlined the visit of two LA advisors in a mock Ofsted visit, and the visit of an inclusion lead in February. This external information enables

them to effectively triangulate the information provided to them.

Governors regularly receive written updates from all subject leaders which is a very detailed update of each subject, covers progress and attainment data, and is broken down into intention, implementation, and impact. These are woven into governing body agendas and enable governors to have a very rich picture of each subject and hence the whole curriculum.

On occasion the minutes can give the impression that governors may become a little too operationally involved. For example, the minutes of the meeting on 22nd March 2023 record that a governor audited the website, and the minutes of the meeting on 29th June 2022 show that the chair conducted an equality and diversity audit. Likewise, governor visits are sometimes referred to as lesson observations. Discussions with governor suggest that this is more of a terminology issue – in that the website had been audited by school staff and the school was already compliant with equalities legislation and guidance, hence governors were assuring themselves that the evidence existed rather than conducting full audits. I would suggest that governors choose their language carefully to ensure there is no likelihood of them appearing to step into operational matters. Lesson observation as a phrase has very specific connotations in respect of a teacher's performance management and governors should avoid using such a phrase when conducting visits.

Full board minutes appear to show that updates from, and the minutes of, committees can take a large chunk of the time at their meetings. The board may wish to ensure that they do not replay and reopen conversations and debates that have previously taken place at a committee.

3. People

The board is constituted of skilled, experienced professionals from a range of backgrounds such as public sector managers, the rail industry, education finance, and teaching. They have an up-to-date skills matrix which has no significant gaps, and the board discuss their own training needs at every meeting. There is clear evidence of governors accessing training to address any perceived gaps, and the school has made significant efforts to ensure that governors have access to a range of training to help them in their roles.

Relationships on the board are friendly, respectful, and professional but do not inhibit robust discussion and debate. The experienced chair, whilst correctly driving the board forwards is careful to ensure all governors contribute to discussions and debates and has a positive, structured, and courteous approach.

There are three governor vacancies, and although meetings are quorate and all duties and roles are fulfilled, this creates a significant workload for the remaining governors.

The school takes governance very seriously and this can be seen in the role of the governance professional, who is experienced, skilled, and very effective. New governors benefit from an up to date and comprehensive governor induction pack which sets out their role very clearly. The governance professional is also a school secretary. As the governance professional is an employee with access to sensitive information, there is the potential for a conflict of interest – for example when boards are considering the staffing structure, performance management and pay, however this is well managed and the governance professional consistently declares any interests and ensures she steps out of

meetings when required and that this is clearly minuted.

4. Structures

The board utilise three committees – finance and personnel, learning and achievement and safeguarding, which like the full board meet three time per year. These committees have detailed and up to date terms of reference. The board also nominate and review link governor roles every year, and currently have the following link roles:

- English
- Maths
- SEND
- Safeguarding
- Looked after Children
- Pupil Premium
- GDPR
- Equality and Diversity
- Early Years and Foundation Stage
- Wider curriculum
- Website

This is a comprehensive list and could create a significant amount of work for the board and the school – especially in the light of utilising three committees. Whilst the governance structure works for the board at present, they may wish to consider slimming down the number and focus areas for their link governors – for example they may wish to use the targets contained within the school improvement plan or the categories of the Ofsted inspection framework as topics for link governor roles. The headteacher is very clear however that the workload generated by the actions and structure of the governing body is appropriate and manageable.

Previously, standing committees which rarely meet (staff dismissals, staff dismissal appeals, pupil discipline, capability, complaints, pay appeals, staff appointments, and staff grievance and disciplinary appeals) were populated with named governors, which was a longwinded and fruitless task for committees that never met, however the board have changed their approach and will now constitute those committees as and when required with suitably qualified and available governors.

The board have created a comprehensive and up to date induction manual for governors which is regularly updated and is an excellent source of information for governors which I would happily recommend to any other school as an example of good practice.

Governing documents are stored in a secure portal accessed via the school website and this is a very comprehensive and very well organised store of documents and information that appears to be valued and well used by governors. Documents are uploaded to this portal well in advance of meetings so that governors have time to review and prepare for meetings, and all documents are clearly numbered and well reference.

Actions identified at previous meetings are usually handled through the matters arising part of the agenda. On occasion this can lead to actions being missed or there not being a clear link between actions that are outstanding and the decision or item that led to that action being required. For example the minutes under matters arising from 22nd March 2023 record that “...Staff well-being still to be actioned...” but it is unclear where this arose from and what action is required, as it is not mentioned in the previous minutes. It

is also a matter arising on the minutes from the subsequent meeting on 22nd June 2023 but was not mentioned at the following meeting of 26th September 2023. Governors may wish to consider introducing a numbered action log as part of the minutes to ensure actions are precisely recorded and can be tracked between meetings.

5. Compliance

There are safeguarding and Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) governors in place which are the two statutory link roles, as well as a safeguarding committee. The head teacher's performance management committee only has the chair and school improvement partner as members (according to the minutes of 17th April 2022). Governors should appoint a further two governors to this committee. Staff performance management information is provided annually to the finance and personnel committee.

The board have also approved a decision planner at the meeting on 17th November 2022 which regularly reviewed. Policies appear to be in place and up to date and the school utilises either standard policies provided by the LA or for other, school specific issues base their policies on those templates available from the School Bus.

Attendance and safeguarding are regularly discussed and monitored in detail at governing body meetings, and the head provides a wide range of data on all aspects of school life which is carefully analysed - for example progress, attainment, behaviour, and attendance are often further analysed for vulnerable pupil groups such as English as an Additional Language (EAL), pupil premium, summer born, gender, SEND and protected characteristics under the Equalities Act 2010.

There is an up to date policy review schedule, broken down into each of the three committees which identifies and tracks when policies were approved and are due for approval or review. A code of conduct is reviewed and signed up to every year and all governors are regularly reminded of their responsibilities under this code of conduct.

Governors are aware of their safeguarding responsibilities and maintain an up-to-date training record. Some governors also participated in staff inset training for safeguarding at the start of term.

Finances are well managed, and the board are both aware of their responsibilities and carefully oversee the management of school budgets. The School Financial Value Standard (SFVS) is regularly discussed, debated and agreed by the board and any weaknesses are acted on appropriately.

6. Evaluation

The governors who participated in this review engaged enthusiastically with the reviewer and with their peers. They reflected thoughtfully on their role, the school, and the areas for development.

There is clear evidence in their governance documentation and in the minutes of how they evaluate their own skills, performance, and impact. The meeting of 26th September 2023 specifically required governors to set objectives for themselves for the coming year which they will link directly to the school improvement plan for the academic year.

Comprehensive information was freely and readily available for this review and all shared a common desire to learn from whomever they can to improve the school.



Recommendations

Vision and strategy

- Continue to monitor local and national developments and further refine the vision and ambitions for the school

Holding to account

- Continue to support and challenge the headteacher and ensure governors do not, despite their positive intentions, move into operational matters
- Appoint further governors to the headteachers performance management committee

Governance structure and practice

- Seek to appoint further co-opted governors
- Review their governance structure to ensure it remains viable and does not generate an unreasonable workload for current and future governors and the school staff
- Consider the minor improvements to practice shown in the accompanying action plan

Detailed actions to be undertaken

See governance action plan

Progress review

At governors discretion

Acknowledgments

The reviewer would like to thank governors, the head and the clerk for their openness and honesty throughout this review.

Date completed

September 2023