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Journal version

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The Role of Chair of the School Governing Body in England

Introduction

The *1988 Education Reform Act* assigned governing bodies the responsibility for the conduct of schools in England. Subsequent legislation in the *1998 Standards and Framework Act* and the *2002 Education Act,* confirmed that responsibility. According to the school governance regulations, *"The governing body must elect a chair"* (DfE 2011a, 17). If the post becomes vacant, a new incumbent must be elected by the governing body at the next meeting. The chair of the governing body (ChGB) carries a number of specific legal responsibilities that relate to the performance of the school, the exclusion of pupils and staff disciplinary matters. The role-holder has in addition considerable emergency powers to act without the authority of the governing body *"if a delay in exercising a function is likely to be seriously detrimental to the interests of the school"* (DfE 2011a, 17). Clearly, the role of the ChGB of schools in England is important and recent and forthcoming legislation, which will change the educational landscape in England, is likely to augment its importance. The conversion of schools to academy status which accords enhanced autonomy (enabled by the 2010 Academies Act); the potential for the development of chains of academies (DfE 2011b) and federations of a variety of kinds; and the scaling back of the role of the local authority in supporting schools which will be ushered in by the Education Bill, that is before Parliament at the time of writing, all have very significant implications for school governing and therefore the role of the ChGB. The government's intention set out in the 2010 White Paper 'The Importance of Teaching' that "the National College will offer high-quality training for chairs of governors" (DfE 2010, p71) is perhaps a

reflection of the growing sense of the importance of the role and its enhanced significance in this new era.

Despite the importance of the ChGB, to date relatively little research has been reported on the role. This article intends to help to remedy that shortcoming. It draws on the outcomes of two projects that researched aspects of school governing in England. The first was funded by Business in the Community and the second by CfBT Educational Trust and both projects have already been the subject of preliminary reports (Balarin et al. 2008, James et al. 2010).

Following this introduction, we explore the literature on the role of the chair of the governing body/board in a range of organisational contexts and in educational settings in particular. We then outline the methodology of the studies before reporting the findings. A discussion of the findings follows and the article ends with some concluding comments.

A review of the literature

In this section, we explore what is known about the role of the governing body/board chair in non-educational settings before exploring the relevant literature on the ChGB role. We take the concept of 'role' to be the expected pattern of behaviours associated with a particular responsibility in an organisation (Mullins 2004), although we accept that the notion of organisational role is complex (Biddle 1986; James et al. 2007). Our interest is thus the role-as-practice in relation to the role-as-position and the way those roles-as-practice are performed (James et al. 2007).

The role of the board chair in non-educational settings

The significance of the role of the board chair has grown in recent times as the delineation of the chair and chief executive officer (CEO) roles has increased. In the UK in the mid-eighties, approximately 50% of the top 350 companies listed on the Financial Times Stock Exchange index had separate chairs and CEOs (Kakabadse and Kakabadse 2006). Twenty years later the proportion had risen to over 95%. This development was driven by the outcomes of the Cadbury Committee (Cadbury 1992), which was set up to investigate corporate governance. The Cadbury Committee concluded that the CEO post was full-time and carried the responsibility for: operational activities; setting and implementing the corporate strategy; and the company's performance. The chair was considered to be part-time, independent, and responsible for ensuring board effectiveness (Cadbury 1992). The chair's role involves monitoring and evaluating the performance of the CEO and the executive directors. The chair should be distanced from day-to-day operational matters (Cadbury 1992).

The debate around the separation of responsibilities of the chair and CEO continues (Coombes and Wong 2004). Benefits of separating the responsibilities include enabling: CEO power to be checked; the board to be detached and objective and able to scrutinise company matters; and the chair to provide a longer-term perspective. The disadvantages of separating the responsibilities, amongst other things, are that it: undermines the authority of the CEO; encourages the CEO to pursue shorter term gains; and weakens the chair's commitment to the role in part because of its part-time nature.

Effective chairs of for-profit companies amongst other things provide a *"platform for participation"* (Kakabadse and Kakabadse 2006, 14) by setting an appropriate tone in meetings and acting with integrity. This tone enables: difficult matters to be discussed openly; a clarification of roles particularly between the chair and the CEO; and the effective management of board dynamics. It creates *"the 'space' to draw to the surface the diversity of views, feelings and beliefs of each board member over particular issues"* (Kakabadse and Kakabadse 2006, 18).

The relationship between the chair and the CEO is widely recognised as important, especially for effective board performance (Burton 2000; Ng and De Cock 2002). The main underpinning of effective chair-CEO relationships appears to be 'psychological closeness' (Jones 1995). This feature enables the joint ability to interpret matters and events in *"a mutually synergistic manner, irrespective of their previous or current personal affiliation"* (Kakabadse and Kakabadse 2006, 21). Professional integrity, trust, and a balanced exchange of information were also important and contributed to board effectiveness.

The attributes of effective chairs of for-profit companies include: time to devote to running the board; knowledge of 'the industry'; willingness to play a behind-the-scenes role; independence; and experience of 'board work' (Coombes and Wong 2004). To that list, Kakabadse and Kakabadse (2006) add: the capacity to engage in and resolve disputes and minimise dysfunctional interactions; presence; a maturity that displays a sense of character and an ability to enable the board to reach a consensus.

In a study of the chairs of governing bodies of voluntary organisations and charities, Cornforth, Harrison and Murray (2010, 1) report that chairs who were experienced as

"*fair* (and) *open to ideas*"; focused on *"building high quality relationships"* with others; and *"encouraging team work"* had a substantial positive influence on board effectiveness. Various aspects of their general capability, social awareness and interpersonal facility contributed to their effectiveness. However, their general impact was considered to be more in terms of management - in managing meetings and providing information - than being a source of motivation and inspiration, which are arguably leadership qualities (Yukl 2009). Other qualities contributed to the effectiveness of chairs such as: fairness and impartiality; openness to new ideas; and ensuring the board's independence. Team-related capabilities, such as valuing and enabling team members and their different contributions and creating conditions where important matters can be discussed also contributed to chairs' effectiveness. These findings are consistent with those of Kakabadse and Kakabadse (2006) in the for-profit corporate sector.

The role of the chair of the school governing body

The responsibilities of school governing bodies

During the last 25 years, attempts in statute and guidance to clarify the tasks and responsibilities of school governing bodies have given rise to a number of definitions and specifications. The *1988 Education Reform Act* stated that governing bodies' responsibilities were: school administration; strategic planning; accountability and staff appointment and dismissal. The responsibilities set by the *1998 Standards and Framework Act* included: setting strategic directions; supporting or challenging schools; and acting as 'critical friends' by monitoring and evaluating schools' progress. These were subsequently confirmed by the Statutory Instrument (2000). In

2002, Ofsted sought to clarify the central responsibilities as: strategic direction; critical friendship and accountability (Ofsted 2002). The *2002 Education Act* specified that governing bodies: set the school's vision and strategic aims; monitor and evaluate performance; approve the school's budget; ensure the school is accountable to those it serves; appoint the headteacher and act as a critical friend by providing support and challenge. In the most recent attempt to clarify the responsibilities of the governing body, the 2009 Education White Paper '*Your Child, Your Schools, Our future: Building a 21st Century School System*' (DCSF 2009, 13) stipulated the main tasks of governing bodies as:

> *"Providing effective challenge and support,* (and) *holding to account',* and *'making effective use of data and information to manage performance and ensuring value for money"*.

The last two tasks, relating to the data use and ensuring value for money had not featured before in legislation or guidance. Further, although legislation and guidance has sought to clarify the strategic (as opposed to operational) responsibilities of the governing body, Balarin et al. (2008) argue that it has occasionally confused matters.

The chair of the school governing body

In England, the ChGB is a part-time responsibility while the headteacher is a full-time position. Further, the ChGB is an unremunerated volunteer, whereas the headteacher is a salaried employee. In terms of their personal characteristics, Scanlon et al (1999) reported that about 25% were professionally qualified and a relatively high proportion (26%) of ChGBs were retired from full-time, regular employment compared with 13%

of governing body members. This proportion was approximately twice the proportion of retired people in England generally (Office for National Statistics 2009).

Earley (2003) asserts the importance of the inter-relationship between the headteacher and the ChGB. In the schools he studied as cases, the ChGB often had a strong influence on the leadership team acting as a 'critical friend' or mentor. Interestingly however, Earley reports that 81% of the ChGBs surveyed reported that the headteacher was their most important source of inspiration and ideas thus indicating the potential for mutual influence between the headteacher and the ChGB. The headteacher-ChGB relationship varies (Ranson et al. 2005) which then affects the corporate nature of the body and gives rise to different governing body types. Deem et al (1995) report that the ChGBs of the 10 governing bodies they studied spent more time in their schools than other governors but that time was typically spent with the headteacher which restricted their knowledge of the school to organisational matters rather than to teaching and learning issues. Over one third of the teacher governors surveyed by Earley and Creese in 2000 felt that their governing body was dominated by the headteacher (38%) or the headteacher and ChGB (35%) (Earley and Creese 2000). Fewer felt the governing body was dominated by the ChGB (24%). Earley et al (2002) report that the most productive headteacher-ChGB relationships are between headteachers and ChGBs who had time to give to the role and who were knowledgeable about educational matters. Many of the ChGBs they studied had previously worked in education or in broadly similar work. The ChGBs spent up to one day a week on school matters.

More recently, the importance of having an effective ChGB has been asserted (see, for example, Balarin et al. (2008); James et al. (2010); McCrone, Southcott, and George,

(2011)), and illustrations of good practice have been published by Ofsted (2011a) and the National College for School Leadership (NCSL 2011).

Methodology

The research had two strands: a national questionnaire-based survey; and the case study of school governing in 16 primary and 14 secondary schools. The questionnaire-based survey data was collected in 2008 by a national web-based survey of school governors (Balarin et al., 2008). Of the 5000 governors who completed the questionnaire, 1007 were ChGBs. The respondents were invited to describe aspects of their role - those facets they found worthwhile and those that were not worthwhile - which enabled insights to be gained into both the role and how it was experienced by role-holders.

For the case study strand of the research (James et al. 2010), geographically spread primary and secondary schools were chosen using the Ofsted database of inspection reports that had high and low: governing body effectiveness; school performance; and socio-economic status (SES). Full details of the schools can be found in (James et al. 2010). In some of these categories, more than one school was investigated and, in addition, further schools 'at the extremes' of the governing quality, school performance and socio-economic context variables were identified. In each case: the ChGB, the headteacher and at least one other governor, were interviewed; at least one governing body meeting was observed; and relevant documents, such as minutes of meetings and Ofsted reports were scrutinised. The interviews and observations enabled insights into the role of the ChGB and in particular how it was experienced, to be gained.

The whole data set from the survey and the case studies was analysed for emergent themes which are reported in the following section. In describing the themes, when we are drawing on the survey data, we occasionally refer to the proportions of respondents where a particular theme was strongly evident to illustrate the relative prominence of a theme. Survey respondents are given the prefix 'R' and primary schools are give the prefix 'P' and secondary schools the prefix 'S'.

The findings

The central finding was that the role of the ChGB was very significant, complex and demanding. Its demanding nature was reflected in the time respondents gave to their responsibilities reflecting previous reports, for example Earley et al (2002). Thus, 'time', typically articulated as a substantial concern associated with the responsibility was a theme in the data, with R54 for example reporting, *"TIME! As volunteers, this is always a tricky one"* and R60 stating, *"The amount of time a chair can realistically contribute to the role is a problem"*.

Nine aspects of the role, which reflect aspects of the responsibility, emerged as important themes: being a governor; appointing the headteacher; working with the headteacher; acting as a change agent; active participation in the work of the school; organising the governing body; dealing with complaints; working with parents; and chairing the meetings of the full governing body. Each of these themes is explicated below.

Being a governor

ChGBs were of course governors and members of the governing body. One ChGB firmly asserted this aspect of the ChGB's responsibilities, *"Well you've got to remember, I am still a governor"* (S10), thus, indicating that although he carried a specifically designated responsibility, he was also carried a share of the collective responsibility for the conduct of the school.

Many ChGBs articulated the aspects of the governor responsibility that reflected a collective sense of the governing responsibility. Further, their views on the responsibilities tended to echo the requirements of 'good governing'. Thus, responses, particularly in the survey data, reflected normative descriptions of the governing task as discussed above. So for example, 306 (30.39%) survey respondents specifically referred to supporting the headteacher; 46 (4.6%) to challenging the headteacher; 56 (5.6%) references to acting as a critical friend, and 139 (13.8%) references to strategy in the aspects they found worthwhile. Often these references were articulated in sophisticated way. For example, one respondent felt that her/his role was centrally concerned with *"Making a difference for the children by supporting/challenging the headteacher"* (R151) - indeed the idea of 'making a difference' was a prominent theme. The strategic-operational divide featured in responses. For example, at S9, the ChGB was very firm, *"We* (the governing body) *will not interfere with the day to day operation of the school".* The distinction was acknowledged by some survey respondents as giving a 'strategic bias', for example, *'Helping the school focus on strategic issues as well as operational ones.'* (R10).

The scrutiny role, often in the guise of 'asking questions' (Ranson 2005a), was also deemed to be important and often linked to challenge in the minds of the respondents.

For example, R683 saw *"Challenging and asking questions"* as a worthwhile part of the role. The idea of 'asking questions with a purpose' featured, for example, *"Asking difficult questions to ensure the school is running properly and the children are being taught properly"* (R442), as did asking questions in relation to problematic decision-making for example, *"Asking the difficult questions to support difficult decisions"* (R45). In the case study data, there was evidence of ChGBs leading on scrutiny. At S11, a new ChGB had, according to the headteacher, changed the ethos of the governing body from one of *"Unquestioning"* to one of *"Scrutiny"*, which was clearly welcomed.

A significant theme in the survey data on the worthwhile aspects of the role reflected a concern with maintaining standards as the following responses indicate; *"Maintaining the standards of our school (and) increasing the academic performance of our pupils"* (R22)*; "Keeping up the high standards we have achieved"* (R61); *"Helping to move the school forward with its achievements and in its role of providing high standards of education";* (R2), and *"Taking the school forwards as regards overall standards of achievement"* (R334).

In the worthwhile aspects of the role, the ChGBs often articulated the support role generally, for example, *"Support the headteacher and staff"* (R854) and *"Supporting a small school within a rural community"* (R283). The idea of providing support was also quite narrowly focussed in some instances as in the example of R37, *"Using my expertise to support the headteacher when requested"*. In the case study data, supporting the school appeared to be taken as axiomatic especially in how the ChGBs interpreted their role. The ChGB at S9 felt it important to *"Support the head even if he is wrong"*. 'Providing support' was evident if the school's circumstances were

challenging as in the response of R283, *"Being able to support the headteacher in a very difficult job"*.

Analysis of the survey data revealed a number of aspects that made the role challenging. Approximately one in seven referred to aspects of managing the schools finances, typically as a less worthwhile aspect of the role. The persistent difficulty of maintaining and improving the school buildings was also a theme. For example, R39 referred to the challenge of managing *"Decrepit buildings that are not fit for purpose"*.

Interestingly, a significant theme in the survey data was the way respondents interpreted the ChGB task at a higher and meaningful level for example, *"Helping the life chances of pupils through involvement in the community"* (R452); *"Making a real difference to my community"* (R388); *"Making a difference in the children's lives for the better"* (R425); *"Advocacy for the potential of children"* (R477); and *"The feeling of helping the next generation in their education"* (R960). The way ChGBs of the case study schools talked about their responsibilities and acted during meetings often conveyed a strong sense that they were the leading custodians, supervisors and guardians of the school. The commitment of many of the respondents was evidenced in the considerable period that many had held the role. For example, the S4 ChGB had been a member of the governing body for 10 years and six years as ChGB. This 'governing career' was by no means exceptional. In a number of these cases, the expertise built up by the long-serving ChGBs gave them considerable insight into both the school and education matters.

Appointing the headteacher

Appointing the headteacher emerged relatively infrequently in the data but when it did, it was imbued with significance and was regarded as one of the more worthwhile aspects of being a ChGB. It was not a theme in the aspects that were less worthwhile. In the case study data, appointing the headteacher had been a significant moment, for example, at P6, S9, S6 and S8. In other case study examples, it had marked a moment of change for the school. At P10, the task of headteacher appointment had been particularly important following, as it did, a collapse of governing at the school, the resignation of the previous headteacher and the appointment of an interim executive board (DfE 2011) The appointment process had been the most significant and pre-occupying task of the incoming ChGB. The former ChGB of the S5, who was still a governor, recalled that she, along with a number of experienced governors, had managed the appointment of the new headteacher. The previous headteacher had been in post 20 years thus the appointment procedures had to be developed afresh. This appointment task *"took a huge amount of time"*.

Working with the headteacher

The benefits of close and productive working relationships between the headteacher and the ChGB were very evident in the data, reflecting previous studies, for example Earley (2003) in educational settings and Burton (2000) and Ng and De Cock (2002) in non-educational settings. Indeed, this relationship appeared to be pivotal in the governance of the school. Evidence indicated joint working on a wide range of matters.

In 307 of the survey responses – nearly a third – working with the headteacher was deemed to be one of the more worthwhile aspects of the chair's work. So for example, for R20 – *"The Head-Chair relationship"*; R27 – *"Frank and constructive discussion with the headteacher"*; R40 – *"Liaising and working closely with the Headteacher"*; R154 – *"Working closely with the Headteacher"*; and R264 – *"Being a listening ear and mentor to the Head"* were worthwhile aspects of the role. From the case study data, the ChGB at S10 felt that *"Being there for the head, being supportive, talking things through, acting as a sounding board"* were all important. The headteacher at P8 was very complimentary about the ChGB – he had *"Belief in the school and in me"* and was *"Brilliantly unwavering"*.

The relationship was not without difficulties however. R296 felt that *"Working with the Head can be a stressful job - even when you get on well together"*. For R400, *"Conflict with the Headteacher"*; R812 *"Being viewed as the enemy by the Head teacher"*; and R933 *"Total lack of respect from head"* were all examples of the less worthwhile aspect of the ChGB role.

In the case study data, high quality ChGB-headteacher relationships were particularly evident at P7, P13 and P16. The relationship at P16 was characterised as *"Professional respect between them. They have a good working relationship"* (Field notes). The headteacher-ChGB relationship was however very difficult to characterise. The interactions observed during the case study data collection were typically of an extremely high quality – business-like, serious, good-humoured, warm, valuing, genuine and positive. The notion of openness, especially on the part of the headteacher, was considered to be of significant benefit to the relationship. At P13, both the headteacher and the ChGB also felt that trust was important. Similar

sentiments were expressed at P2. A similarity of view on educational matters could strengthen the relationship. At P12, a school in a disadvantaged setting, both the headteacher and the long-standing ChGB felt that *"standards are everything"* (Field notes) which appeared to strengthen their relationship.

ChGB as change agent

Evidence showed that an effective and expert ChGB can bring about a radical change in the school. Involvement in change management was a significant theme in the survey data as a worthwhile aspects as these examples illustrate: *"Helping to manage change at the school"* (R245); *"Strategically changing the school for the better"* (R645); and *"Trying to change things within the school for the better"* (R987). At S5, the former ChGB gave a vivid account of her attempts to move the school forward. She felt that the school was *"coasting; it had all become very cosy. We asked the headteacher, 'What's your strategy for the school?' 'Where do you want it to be in five years time?'"* She also supported the headteacher in the dismissal of a head of faculty. The school had made substantial improvements since that time. At P6, the ChGB felt they wanted a new headteacher with *"a very different style and approach and with different priorities"* when the previous headteacher had retired. The previous headteacher had an *"avuncular approach to headship, SATs results were not of a concern to him, the buildings were not maintained as well as they could have been"* (ChGB). The school, which was in a disadvantaged setting, was not popular locally. The ChGB felt a new headteacher should have *"more of an eye to the SEF* (the school self-evaluation form (Ofsted 2011b)) *and Ofsted".* The new headteacher had *"said all the right things"* at interview according to the ChGB and had proved to be *"a good appointment"*.

The commitment and leadership of the ChGB could be particularly significant when a school faced a particular crisis of some kind, for example financial problems or pupil under-performance. For example, at P4, the school had faced a budgetary crisis, which had arisen through the requirement to fund increasing levels of English language teaching support staff. The student body had changed and had become more ethnically diverse over time. Support staff were providing English teaching that should have been provided by the teaching staff. The teachers were collectively and aggressively resistant to undertaking this work. The previous headteacher had found the conflicts with the teaching staff exhausting. The new headteacher, who was the previous deputy headteacher, was appointed. The ChGB and the vice-chair led the appointment process and the newly appointed headteacher had been instrumental in addressing the issue of teaching responsibilities and in 'turning the school around' as the most recent Ofsted report indicated.

Evidence showed that the ChGB can bring about substantial change in the constitution and ways of working of the governing body. At S2, the ChGB had introduced governing body skills audits had been instrumental in breaking up disruptive cliques in the governing body. The ChGB of school P10 felt the school had *"suffered from weak governance in the past"* which he felt had now been rectified by establishing a full and properly constituted governing body. Despite the progress, he was clear that *"It takes time to change a governing body"*.

In addition to the evidence of some ChGBs acting as change agents, evidence also indicated that a 'reluctant ChGB', for example as at P5, can be very damaging to the leadership of the school and can impede efforts to bring about improvements in pupil

achievement. It is as if the lack of an effective ChGB is a drain on the headteacher's resources and it undermines the headteacher's authority. The P5 headteacher said of the governing body, with a feeling of exasperation, *"There's not enough questioning of what I say or do"*.

Active participation in the work of the school

Active participation in the work of the school is a significant part of the role and was undertaken in a range of ways for various purposes. Evidence from the whole data set indicated that many of the more challenging and/or less worthwhile aspects of the role, such as resolving issues with the headteacher or dealing with complaints (see below) required the ChGB to be present in the school. At the same time, visiting the school emerged as a significant and worthwhile aspect of the role. A number of respondents referred to it directly and often in relation to: the pupils, for example *"Being in school, working with the children"* (R902); spending time in classes for example *"Visiting classes in school"* (R464) and *"Being in school for the monitoring role"* (R537); meeting with teachers, for example *"Spending time in school with the staff"* (R1007), or actively taking part, for example *"Participating in school activities"* (R686). Often responses combined these various references. The general sense of visits and their meaning was captured by respondent R948 for whom *"Being in school and seeing things ticking over nicely, happy children and good results"* was a particularly worthwhile aspect of the role. Participation in the celebration of pupil achievements also featured strongly, for example, *"Involvement in the presentation of Awards and Prizes"* (R186), something which many ChGBs appreciated. Indeed, the significance of visits of this kind was reflected in aspects of the role that were not so worthwhile as these responses indicate, *"Having less time to spend in school with the pupils because*

of increasing administration/bureaucracy" (R240) and *"As a Chair, I spend more time in school on business instead of spending time with the children at various events"* (R646).

The in-school presence/involvement of governors was significant and could be quite substantial as examples in the case study data illustrate. The S9 ChGB was often in school, and occasionally attended the daily staff briefing. He was involved in enterprise events and mentoring pupils. He and other governors *"take on the scally-wags"* as he put it. At the P8 governing body meeting, governors were urged to visit the school, something she did *"Quite often"* to become engaged with the school, and *"To get to know people"* (ChGB). The field notes for P9 noted a *"very present GB – in very often"* to indicate the close and frequent contact the members of the governing body – especially the ChGB - had with the school. The nature, purpose and meaning of the ChGB's in-school presence and participation contrasts with the findings of Deem et al (1995).

Organising the governing body

ChGB role in organising

Organising the work of the governing body was a key aspect of the ChGB role. The ChGB was important in: recruitment; induction; training; managing the governing of the school generally; and managing meetings. This aspect of the role was captured by the S10 ChGB as, *"Ensuring the governing body does its job"* and *"oiling the wheels"*. The S4 ChGB felt an important aspect of his role was *"to keep the whole GB on track (with the HT) and up to date"* (Field notes). The survey data indicated that

achieving effective governing body functioning was one of the more worthwhile aspects of the role as illustrated by R129, *"Maintaining an effective and involved Governing Body, with a broad range of skills"*.

Improving functioning

A sub-theme here was improving governing body functioning, for example, R339, *"As chair, putting the governing body on a sound procedural footing"*. In a small but significant number of survey responses, the task of improving functioning had been substantial, for example, R616 *"Helping to move the school forward from a very difficult position that it was in a few years ago, building a new governing body (2 years ago I was the only governor)"*. The development of the governing body was generally seen as a positive aspect of the role. For example, R809 felt that having *"the opportunity to support and encourage talented people (staff and governors) and bring them forward"* was a worthwhile aspect of the role. The headteacher and the ChGB of P14 were working to improve the capability of the governing body. They emphasised team-building and developing a collegiate approach along with the development of *"a clearer view of what the school needed to improve"* and ensuring that *"the governors were made aware of their role"* (Headteacher). This sub-theme clearly links with the change agent theme described above.

Ensuring a collective way of working

A very strong theme in the survey data related to close working with other members of the governing body, working with the school staff and working as a team. For example, for R52, *"Being part of a team of governors, teachers and staff who are all*

working together for the good of the school's children" was an important and positive aspect of the role. For others, for example R458, *"Leading an active, participating team of governors"*, was important and worthwhile. Achieving this level of team working was important for some, such as R595, *"Developing the governing body as an effective working team"*. The importance of team working also featured in the case study data with the ChGB at S14, reporting that the main task of the governing body was *"Working as a team (his emphasis) to support the work of the school"*. Relationships with other governors were a significant sub-theme here and the closeness of those relationships was also significant. For R187, *"Working closely with other governors"* was an important aspect of the ChGB role.

Maintaining the collective functioning of the governing body was important. The ChGB at S9 was clear that the collective sense of governing was significant and the shared sense of values was important. As he put it, as if expressing a 'rule', *"Don't let the culture shift"*. When recruiting new governors, a key concern for him was, *"Do the governors fit?"* He was clear, *"We put lot of thought into it"*. The commitment to school governing appeared to underpin its collective nature. Some ChGBs ensured the commitment and quality of the governing body by continually 'weeding out' those who lacked the dedication required. At P1, where there were co-ChGBs, one of the ChGBs said, *"I always emphasise the graft necessary, the commitment to participate in the life of the school and to attend meetings of committees and the full governing body"*. She had in the past approached governors who were not playing their full part and suggested that *"It might be better for them to leave"*.

Managing other governors, given the importance accorded to team working, was not always a positive experience. For example, for R4, *"Dealing with governors who do it*

[become governors] for the wrong reasons and don't contribute jack!" was a source of dissatisfaction. Similarly, R9 felt that, *"Dealing with maverick governors who act outside the remit of their position"* was not an aspect of the role he/she enjoyed. Mischievous governors who perhaps have strong concerns about a particular issue or who act inappropriately could be a problem even in governing bodies that otherwise generally functioned well. Such governors were usually referred to as *"Rogue governors"*. At S9, the headteacher said with some pride and relief that there were *"No camps or cliques, no sub-pockets"* on the governing body. He clearly felt this helped him in his work as headteacher.

Taking responsibility as the lead expert in school governing

A dominant theme in the case study data was the considerable expertise of the ChGBs, which was often accumulated over many years. The survey data indicated that maintaining this expertise – keeping up to date particularly with policy changes - was a significant aspect of the role. It was highly demanding but unlike some of the requirements of the role it also a source of dissatisfaction, which had a number of facets. The first aspect concerned the large number of changes in government policy, as the response of R5 indicates, *"Dealing with more and more initiatives from government"*. The task of dealing with policy changes was often ironically – if not sarcastically - expressed as the examples of R829, *"Following the plethora of Government inspired 'Policies'"* and R51, *"Keeping up to date with current legislation and the latest Government 'good idea for education'"* indicate. The changes in policies were often experienced as demands, *"Keeping up to date with the plethora of dictates and policies that schools have to cope with"* (R55). Other respondents expressed similar sentiments.

The second aspect concerned the level of reporting and auditing, for which the ChGBs clearly felt a burden of responsibility. Here the frustration was typically directed towards both the local authority and central government. R16 expressed his/her frustration with the *"Endless Local Authority and/or Government inspired audit forms many of which are poorly designed and/or patronising and waste vast amounts of time"*. R5 expressed it as *"the growing bureaucracy involved at local and national level.* 'Red tape' – a phrase used to describe the (excessive) auditing and reporting - was mentioned by 35 respondents as a frustrating part of the role.

Working with parents

Working with parents was significant theme in the whole data set. In the survey data it featured both as worthwhile and not worthwhile aspect of the role. Thus, examples where 'Working with parents' was a worthwhile aspect of the role included, *"Meeting parents"* (R322); *"Talking to new and old parents"* (R476); and *"Engaging with parents/carers on a regular basis"* (R740). Often engaging with parents was combined with working with other groups such as the pupils and staff. Thus, R306 found, *"Contact with parents, children, staff and teachers"* to be a positive aspect of the role. The notion of 'working with' was configured in a range of ways as: support (for example, R858, *"Support for parents"*); and representing parents views to the governing body (for example, R348, *"Being able to take comments from parents to the Governors' Meetings, and to feedback to them"*.

The ChGBs clearly found themselves managing relationships between the school/staff and parents as the responses of: R773, *"To support teachers and parents to resolve*

issues"; R979, *"Promotion of good relations between school and parents"*; and R835 *"Buffer role between parents and school, if needed"* indicate. The 'mediator' aspect of the role was illustrated by the response of R599, *"Involvement in disputes between teachers and service staff and (occasionally) with parents"*, which in this case was not felt to be one of the more worthwhile aspects.

Working with parents as not being a worthwhile aspect featured significantly as a theme in the survey data, *"Dealing with difficult parents"* (R255, R274); *"Having to deal with aggressive parents"* (R587) and *"Parents with an agenda that upsets the school"* (R886). Another dimension to this less worthwhile aspect of the role related to (some) parents' attitude to their children's education, for example, *"Failure of parents to respond to programmes designed to support them in supporting their children's education"* (R313) and *"Sometimes the attitude of parents who do not have high expectations for their children"* (R531).

In addition to dealing with parents generally, working with governors who were parents and managing them effectively emerged as a significant sub-theme. It was a very strong theme in data on the more satisfying aspects of the role and also featured, though arguably not so strongly, in the less worthwhile aspects. The two major issues emerged here. The first was when support from parent governors for the headteacher/school was lacking, for example, *"Not all parent governors are supportive of the Head"* (R53) and, *"Some parent governors do not give the support they should. Some parent governors miss meetings"* (R268). The second issue, which was experienced negatively, occurred when parent governors viewed governing of the school only from the standpoint of their own child's/children's experience, for example, *"Too many parent governors only looking at their child and not whole*

school" (R 423); and *"Having to deal with parents whose priority is solely their own children and don't bear the needs of the whole school in mind"* (R429). Managing parent governors was an aspect of the role of the ChGB at P16. The ChGB felt that a new parent governor was *"not the most discrete person in the playground"* (where parents wait to collect their children after school). He referred explicitly to *"shepherding the potentially troublesome parent governor away from controversial issues when deciding which committee she should go on"* (Field notes).

Importantly, relating to parents as a ChGB pointed to another theme in the data in the way the role was experienced. Being ChGB and a parent of a child in the school could separate the ChGB socially from other parents. For example, R363 felt, *"I am socially more isolated than I would like as a result of taking up the role".* At the same time, it was experienced as a public role which brought attention that may not be welcome. So, for example R112 found "*Parents seeing me in Sainsburys* (a supermarket) *on Saturday and wanting to talk about the school or their child"* to be one of the less worthwhile aspects.

Dealing with complaints

Dealing with complaints, particularly from parents, featured as a significant theme. It was the unjustified nature that was experienced particularly negatively, for example, *"Dealing with parents moaning based on misinformation/ignorance!"* (R397); *"Complaints from parents who have no idea what is really going on within school (and who are not interested in finding out)"* (R12); and *"Dealing with parents' complaints that the school and governors don't do anything for their children"* (R224). *"Petty complaints"* (R972) also featured prominently as did complaints that

were not followed up or resolved through the 'normal channels', *"Dealing with parents who seem unable to take up concerns via the normal channels"* (R942) and *"Responding to parents who pursue an isolated issue, e.g. damage to suitcase on a school trip, because they didn't gain satisfaction through normal channels"* (R596). Responding to complaints from parents whose view of parenting is at odds with their own was a particularly difficult aspect of the role, *"Listening to complaints from parents who clearly have little or no idea of the concept of taking responsibility for their own children's needs and general welfare"* (R636); and *"Dealing with parents who think their child can do no wrong"* (R597). Parents' complaints may not be resolved quickly which can lead to protracted periods of difficulty. For R112, such periods, which he/she described as, *"Tense times in school when a parent is being very unreasonable & sapping everyone's energy"* were not experienced positively.

Chairing the meetings of the full governing body

It was clear from the case study observations that chairing the meetings, especially meetings of the full governing body, could be a formidable task. It was especially daunting if: the committee business is to be covered is substantial; there is to be adequate scrutiny; and if the meeting is to be concluded in a timely manner. Chairing which enabled the completion of meeting business to time was evident at S9 and particularly so at P2, where the meeting that was observed had 19 items and the minutes of the previous meeting ran to 14 pages. However, such an approach to chairing was not valued by all the governors we interviewed. Some felt that it shortened the time available for longer discussions and scrutiny of substantive issues.

In the survey data, the management of meetings was a prominent theme. Meetings could clearly be a worthwhile aspect of the role and a source of satisfaction, for example, *"Open and constructive meetings"* (R139); "*Meetings that do not drag on and get things done & decided"* (R314); and *"Our meetings are friendly and tension-free, even when discussing contentious issues."* (R634) were given as worthwhile aspects. Meetings could also be experienced in the opposite manner, with a sense of dissatisfaction, for example, *"Meetings where too few governors have turned up"* (R37); *"Chairing meetings when members of the governing body are not challenging enough"* (R106); and *"Listening to some of our governors rant on about things they know nothing about"* (R964). The length of meetings featured in this theme, *"Meetings take far too long"* (R648); and *"Long meetings - if we get nowhere"* (R327). Uninteresting meetings also featured as aspects that made the task of the ChGB less worthwhile, *"Some of the process we are required to go through at the meetings is tedious and can detract from important issues"* (R511); and *"Dull meetings"* (R879).

Discussion

To recap, the analysis of the case study and survey data revealed a number of substantive themes in the role of the ChGB: being a governor; appointing the headteacher, working with the headteacher; acting as a change agent; active participation in the work of the school; organising the governing body; dealing with complaints; working with parents; and chairing meetings. In this section, we discuss a number of the substantive issues that emerge from the analysis of the role and the way it was experienced.

First, when the role is performed fully, it is a substantial leadership and management activity. It involves influencing others, a key leadership role (Cuban 1988) and taking responsibility, a central management role (Rost 1991), for the functioning of the governing body. The analysis of the data indicated that the ChGB <u>can</u> bring about substantial change and improvement in the school and <u>can</u> bring about substantial improvements in governing body functioning. The question arises as to how widespread exercising this potential set of activities is and what tensions arise with headteachers if ChGBs play a significant change agent role. Arguably, further analysis of the role and its impact on school and governing body functioning is required.

Second, the role of ChGB is broadly similar to the role in other settings: the characteristics required of the role holder; relationship with the headteacher – or CEO in other settings; the importance of managing the board in its widest sense – establishing relationships, ensuring proper functioning, and enabling participation. Further comparative research, of the kind initiated by Cornforth (2003) could bring further insights in the role of the ChGB generally.

Third, in non-educational settings the board chair-CEO relationship is significant for board and organisational functioning (Burton 2000; Ng and De Cock 2002; Kakabadse and Kakabadse 2006). The research confirms other studies (for example, Earley 2003 and Ranson et al. 2005) that the relationship between the ChGB and the headteacher is important and that it can enhance governing body and school functioning. The characteristic of successful headteacher-ChGB relationships reflect those reported in non-educational settings (Kakabadse and Kakabadse 2006). Evidence indicated that it can be a source of satisfaction yet even when the relationship is sound engaging in it

can be taxing. Given its significance, a greater understanding of the relationship is required.

Fourth, the position of ChGB, the role and the way the role is experienced demand a great deal of the role holder; it is a significant responsibility. Although managing meetings is an important aspect of the role, it is but one aspect. Further, the role is complex, which is indicated in the varied way the responsibility is experienced. Many aspects of the responsibility can be experienced as worthwhile and as sources of satisfaction yet those same aspects have the potential to be experienced in the opposite way. Given its challenging nature, further analysis of the role and more research into the sources of support ChGBs draw on to fulfil their responsibilities and the precise nature of ChGBs' development needs is required to ensure that the training of chairs is of the high quality that the government expects (DfE 2010).

Finally, working with parents can be a significant aspect of the role. As with many aspects, it is complex. Working with parents can be both a source of considerable satisfaction and substantial dissatisfaction. The ChGB's engagement with parents may be complicated by the fact that 'parents' are key stakeholder with a very real and substantial interest in the school and they may also be governors. Further working with parents can be significant in how the responsibility is experienced. Performing the role of ChGB may separate the role-holder from parents and be isolating. At the same time, it is a 'public role' attracting potentially unwelcome attention. Further, the data indicates, perhaps unsurprisingly, that parents may be a significant source of complaints about a school.

Concluding comments

The research reported here has sought to analyse the role of the ChGB in England. It extends a preliminary analysis of case study and survey data collected in two studies of school governing in England and takes forward contributions by other researchers. This analysis supports the view that the role of ChGB in the education system is substantially under-played and given insufficient status and that, *"Being the chair of a school governing body is a significant educational and community leadership responsibility"* (James et al. 2011, 3)

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