

Supporting Chairs of Governing Bodies

A Framework for Action

- a short guide for those setting up a mentoring scheme

Supporting Chairs of Governing Bodies

Issues to consider before setting up a mentoring scheme

Introduction

This framework provides guidance for those involved in setting up a mentoring scheme to support chairs of governors. It aims to give practical support as well as highlighting good practice and guiding principles.

What is mentoring?

Mentoring is a process in which a more skilled or experienced person supports a less skilled or experienced person in developing confidence and expertise in a role. Support is offered in a non-judgemental way in the context of an on-going supportive relationship. Mentoring usually takes place face-to-face, although telephone and email can also be used.

“Mentoring concerns activities that give people the tools and confidence to take control of their own pathway. It is about empowering people to plan their own future and capitalise on their own potential.”

(European Community)

Mentoring activities include:

- listening
- exploring problems
- discussing current issues
- acting as a sounding board
- identifying options
- comparing experiences
- looking ahead
- focusing on priorities

(Thurrock Governor Services)

What mentoring is not

A coach

- There is often confusion between the terms coaching and mentoring and in some cases they are used interchangeably. However, coaching is more usually defined as directly concerned with the improvement of performance or skills by a form of tutoring or instruction.

A legal adviser

- The mentor should not be providing professional or legal advice but should be able to decide whether it is appropriate to refer a mentee for advice elsewhere. Mentors are not appointed to provide professional or legal advice and do not carry professional liability insurance.

An additional governor

- Section 64 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006 provides local authorities with the power to appoint additional members to a governing body if a school is “eligible for intervention” (that is, has either been issued with a warning notice by the LA or has been placed in an Ofsted Category). This is a formal mechanism to improve the skills and effectiveness of a governing body and while additional governors may undertake some mentoring that it is not the prime purpose of their appointment.

A counsellor

- Counselling is primarily a remedial activity intended to help individuals to come to terms with issues in their personal or working lives. The close friendship that so often develops between a mentor and the colleague being mentored, and sometimes between coach and learner, is specifically avoided within the counselling role; it is essential that the counsellor does not become closely involved. Counsellors are specially trained to help people think about issues that may be troubling them, so that they can understand them better and explore ways of resolving them.

A director

- The mentor should respond to the mentee’s requests/needs and must not impose their own agenda or views.

Experience, skills and qualities needed by mentors

A range of skills, and qualities and experiences are needed to be an effective mentor. These might include:

- empathy
 - enthusiasm
 - tact
 - sensitivity
 - listening skills
 - ability to develop a relationship
 - ability to maintain confidentiality
 - a non-judgemental approach
 - ability to ask open questions
 - ability to build confidence in the mentee
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- recent positive experience of chairing a governing body
- recent experience of dealing effectively with challenging issues as a chair
- recent leadership training, such as 'Taking the Chair'.

Situations where mentoring of chairs could be useful

Mentoring can be a useful tool for supporting all chairs in a range of situations. It may be particularly useful to:

- a new chair
- a chair of a new school or fresh start school.
- where the chair is supporting a new headteacher who has little experience of working with a governing body

Mentoring can also be useful in certain new or challenging situations, such as:

- where a chair is asked to take over from an Interim Executive Board
- where chairs are leading the governance of extended services
- where a chair is attempting to implement training or change within the governing body.

Finally, there may be difficult situations where a range of support services may be appropriate, one of which may be mentoring. These may include:

- support for chairs in schools which have been identified as a local authority cause for concern or have been placed in an Ofsted category
- where there is potential breakdown of relationships between the chair and the headteacher
- where there is potential breakdown of relationships between the chair and other members of the governing body

Good practice in developing mentoring schemes

It is recommended that the following issues are considered when developing a mentoring scheme:

Aims and Objectives

It is important that you decide at the outset what your objectives for the scheme are.

- What do you hope to gain by the use of mentors?
- What support, funding and time will be allocated to the programme?
 - Will it be enough?
- How will you manage demand?
- Is there enough call for a mentoring programme?
- Will you have to restrict the programme to new chairs or chairs of a new school?
- How will you measure success for the individuals involved?
- How will you measure success for the scheme as a whole?

Mentoring projects which fail usually do so because they fail to set realistic objectives, are under-resourced or do not target their programme effectively.

Covering the costs of the scheme

The costs of the scheme need to be identified and decisions made about whether the scheme will be self-financing.

Identification, nomination and referral

How will you identify those requiring mentoring? Will they be?

- Self-nominating
- Referred
- Both

Remember, mentoring can only be effective if all involved are willing participants.

Selection of mentors

How are mentors to be recruited – not everyone who has the relevant governor experience will be a suitable mentor. As with mentees you will need to decide whether potential mentors can be self-nominating or must be nominated by governor services/governor associations/others. Whichever method you choose you will need to consider what qualities and skills the mentor will need, as well as what experience. Criteria you may wish to consider setting for mentors could include:

- recent effective experience as a chair of governors
- at least 3 years' experience as a chair of governors
- undertaken leadership training – e.g. Taking the Chair
- good interpersonal skills
- good listening skills
- appropriate references or recommendation
- attendance at a training course for mentors
- agreement to comply with a Code of Practice for mentoring linked to the scheme.

You will also need to establish a means of dealing with those applicants/nominees who are not deemed suitable to be mentors in a fair way.

Training for mentors

It is recommended that you ensure training is available for potential mentors so that they have an opportunity to develop a shared understanding of your scheme and of the skills and techniques required. Training also provides an opportunity for potential mentors to consider whether they really do want to commit themselves to the role having gained an in-depth understanding of what is involved.

Training may be devised and delivered by a range of suitable providers, for example, your local authority HR department who may have experience of supporting mentoring across a range of services. Various voluntary organisations also have expertise in providing training for mentors. The Mentoring and Befriending Foundation can provide training packs, guides and DVDs about mentoring. They can be contacted via their website at: <http://www.mandbf.org.uk/>.

Training should cover the skills and qualities needed by mentors, the principles covered by your Code of Practice, strategies for dealing with difficult situations, and sources of support. A half day workshop may be appropriate.

See the section entitled “Support and Recognition” for the ongoing training needs of mentors.

Training/information for mentees

Mentees will need to be provided with clear information about the role of the mentor, what the mentoring relationship can and cannot do for them and what the boundaries are. Mentees will also need to know what is expected of them in the process and to set realistic goals of what they hope to get out of the process. While the mentoring process should not be subject to rigid timescales, nor is it intended to be an indefinite arrangement. Without clear goals being set at the beginning there is a danger of this occurring.

Matching of mentors and mentees

Factors to consider when matching a mentor to a mentee include geography and accessibility, experience of a similar type of school e.g. primary, special, fresh start, faith etc, experience of challenges similar to those facing the mentee and whether any conflict of interest exists between the mentor and mentee. The mentee should be given the opportunity to ask for an alternative mentor if not content with the suggested mentor. When developing your mentoring scheme it is recommended that you consider carefully who will be responsible for such matching, and the skills and knowledge required for this role. It may be desirable for such a person to take part in the training for mentors.

Even with the best matching criteria mentoring is based on human relationships and some combinations which look ideal on paper just do not work in practice. You will need to have plans in place to deal with mentor/mentee relationships which do not work.

Dealing with sensitive situations

Mentors may be asked for help in dealing with difficult or sensitive situations. In such circumstances mentors need to be especially careful that they do not try to give professional or legal advice. Training for mentors should address such issues to ensure that they know where to direct mentees for appropriate advice. This may be to their local authority or to GovernorLine.

Code of Practice

It is always best that you adopt a Code of Practice so that mentors, mentees and scheme co-ordinators have a shared understanding of the underpinning principles. The following is an example of such a code:

- the initial contact between the chair of governors and the mentor should take place as soon as possible after that link is agreed
- the nature or frequency of contact will be mutually agreed
- chair and mentor will maintain total confidentiality in all matters
- should either partner feel that there is a mismatch, an alternative mentor can be found
- mentors cannot provide professional or legal advice
- in exceptional circumstances it may be necessary to provide a mentor who is outside the immediate geographical area of the chair's school
- should a mentor behave in a way contrary to this Code of Practice, [scheme organiser] reserves the right to withdraw that mentor from the scheme.

(Based on the Essex School Governors' Association Code of Practice)

Implementing and evaluating your mentoring scheme

Issues to consider when implementing your scheme include:

- advertising the scheme and encouraging uptake
 - some schemes have reported low take-up so it is recommended that you consider how to describe the service, how to access it, that it is confidential and whether it is free (such a service could be provided as part of the overall LA governor support package, or could be bought in as required).
 - make sure that headteachers, SIPs and clerks are aware of the scheme as they may be in a position to identify chairs who would benefit.
 - include information about the scheme in relevant literature, e.g. GB self-evaluation materials/Quality Mark literature materials
- co-ordination of the scheme on a day to day basis and who will undertake this role
- whether mentors should be paid or volunteers
 - the claiming of expenses
- on-going support for mentors
- collecting feedback from mentors and mentees in order to evaluate the scheme's effectiveness
- allowing mentors to learn from sharing feedback
- maintaining confidentiality in all of the above

Support and recognition

It is recommended that you set up a mechanism so that mentors receive ongoing support. This should include opportunities to:

- share good practice
- offer mutual support
- reflect on experience

It is also recommended that you look for opportunities to recognise and celebrate the mentors' work. This could include a letter of thanks. You may also want to consider recognising mentors through any awards schemes for governors or through articles in your newsletter.

Sustainability

In considering the sustainability of your scheme you will need to:

- seek feedback from both those who have used the scheme and also those who have not, to establish what the barriers to uptake might be for example, cost, confidentiality concerns, etc.
 - review the costs to mentors themselves in terms of time and expenses and whether this is having an impact of the length of time mentors will sustain the role.
 - continue to promote the scheme and seek to recruit new mentors.
 - continue to promote the scheme to maintain uptake of the service.
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Annex A

Some examples of current mentoring schemes

Case Study 1: Essex School Governors' Association

An example of an independent formal scheme run by a governor association with the co-operation of the LA

Essex School Governors Association (ESGA) operates an independent scheme accessible to all governing bodies. The LA Governor Services Department supported the Association in setting up the scheme. Mentors are trained by the local authority HR department which includes a briefing on issues such as confidentiality, the difference between the role of a mentor and someone offering professional advice and mentoring techniques. Protocols have been devised, together with handbooks for mentors and mentees, model letters, expense claim mechanisms, and other supportive documentation.

Mentors self-nominate and supply an appropriate reference. Mentors commit to adhere to the Code of Practice for the scheme. The Code of Practice outlines the timescale for initial and on going contact, where confidentiality will be observed, the issues of mismatching, that professional advice cannot be given and what happens if a mentor behaves contrary to the Code. .

If a chair of governors wishes to obtain mentor support, they contact the nominated contact on the ESGA Executive. In order to provide the most appropriate mentor, information will be needed about the circumstances facing the governing body. Once a potential mentor has been identified, the chair of governors will be given their details before contact is made. This gives both parties the opportunity to identify any conflict of interest that may not be immediately apparent and an alternative mentor found.

The nature of the support provided is determined by the needs of the chair of governors and the capacity of the volunteer mentor e.g. by telephone, meetings and/or an exchange of documentation.

The time scale over which the support will be available is determined by the needs of the chair of governors, the nature of the issues facing his/her governing body and the capacity of the mentor scheme.

Mentors are reimbursed by ESGA for travel expenses, and telephone/postage costs where appropriate and agreed in advance.

Case Study 2: Surrey Advanced Skills Governors

An example of a LA scheme to develop advanced skills governors who provide support to governing bodies which can include mentoring

Governor Services in Surrey are contracted out to a private provider, 4S. They run an Advanced Skills Governor Scheme whereby experienced governors can volunteer to become an ASG once they have successfully undertaken the required training. The training includes modules on support, training, the role of the additional governor, chairing temporary governing bodies and mentoring. One of Surrey's most experienced governors who has been an ASG for some years comments:

Last year I was put into a school in special measures as an additional governor to support the governing body but found that much of my role involved, and still involves, mentoring the chairman.

Key to this scheme is the matching of the ASG to the governing body. Governor Services personnel develop an understanding of the skills of the individual ASGs so that they can place them appropriately. Not all ASGs undertake the mentoring role.

Case Study 3: Derby City

An example of an intensive support programme for chairs provided by the LA, a strand of which is mentoring

Derby City Governor Support has created a pool of experienced and effective chairs. They were identified by Governor Support staff, school improvement officers and other education officers who have knowledge and positive feedback on the work of the chairs.

Meetings were arranged for the mentors so that the outline strategy for mentoring could be explained. Expectations, time commitment, advice and support were also discussed. Another meeting was arranged for new chairs, their clerks and heads at which the mentoring strategy could be explained to them.

Subsequently Governor Support matched the mentors and mentees, and individual meetings were arranged at which an action plan for the first three months was agreed. The details remained with the mentor and mentee, but an outline was fed back to Governor Support.

Feedback has shown that communication is primarily through email and telephone; that meetings take place about twice a term and that shadowing (the new chair attends the experienced chair's governing body meeting) is proving to be very successful. Due to the success of the shadowing arrangement, it has been extended to include attending a committee meeting.

Derby City takes the support of new chairs very seriously and mentoring is within a wider programme of support. All are requested to attend the Taking the Chair course which runs twice a year and Governor Support arranges one-to-one meetings with each new chair, although due to time pressure these may take place on the phone.

Case Study 4: Wiltshire

An example of a formal LA scheme using paid governor consultants to support schools causing concern, a strand of which is coaching and mentoring for chairs

Wiltshire provides an occasional matching service for new and experienced chairs. This happens on request or if a need is identified. A team of Governor Consultants is deployed to support chairs and governing bodies in schools causing concern and they work in conjunction with the head of school support. The Governor Consultants work very closely with the chair, in effect providing a coaching and mentoring service.

The Governor Consultants are all experienced governors and they are paid and have contracts. They are recruited through personal knowledge and are matched to schools causing concern through the school support route. They meet once a term with the head of governor services and the head of school support, although more informal contact takes place between meetings. Training on specific issues is arranged as necessary.

The head of governor services comments:

Experience shows that coaching and mentoring the chair is usually the quickest and most effective way of improving the effectiveness of governing bodies in schools concern.

Case Study 5: Hackney

An example of whole school support for a school in difficulty, a strand of which was mentoring for the chair of governors

Education services in Hackney are run by a private provider, The Learning Trust. Experienced chairs of governors have provided support for other chairs through both formal and informal arrangements at the request of the Learning Trust. Hackney Governors' Association provides an example of support to schools in difficulty through parallel support for the governing body and for the senior leadership team. In one example, a year long link, an experienced chair of a successful school set up training for the governing body of a school in difficulty, became the chair's mentor, worked with the committee chairs and generally supported the governing body in becoming more pro-active. At the same time one of the assistant heads of the successful school also worked with the school in difficulty as acting head with support from their own headteacher. This support, from the chair, head and assistant head of a successful school was effective in supporting the school in difficulty.

Hackney Governors' Association run small group workshops at their meetings to share good practice and offer mutual support. Mentoring for chairs and for new governors has been prioritized.

Case Study 6: Thurrock

An example of a LA/Association mentoring scheme for new governors which could be adapted for chairs

The LA has a mentoring scheme for governors, particularly those who are newly appointed. The initiative has the potential to be adapted to meet the needs of chairs. It is operated in partnership with the Thurrock Association of Governors (TAG).

The Thurrock scheme defines mentoring as an enabling and supportive relationship which is confidential, based on a non-judgmental approach, and which is flexible and responsive.

The scheme aims to enhance the effectiveness of governors by developing their self-confidence, their ability to reflect on their experiences, and to apply their knowledge, skills and understanding to the role.

The mentor is responsible for establishing and maintaining contact and for co-coordinating any meetings. Contact can be through phone and email contact as well as face to face meetings.

TAG maintains a list of experienced governors who have volunteered to act as mentors. The LA/TAG Training Group meet volunteers before they are added to the list and will offer training and support as appropriate.

Mentees are supplied with brief details of mentors and are given the opportunity to make a choice. The proposed mentor will be notified by TAG and will make the first direct approach to the mentee.

The mentee and mentor agree the objectives for the relationship and the arrangements for contact.

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