**New local governors – how to prevent overwhelm!**

**Welcome to the Diocese of Gloucester Academies Trust**

Congratulations on your new role as a local governor with the Diocese of Gloucester Academies Trust (DGAT). You have joined the largest group of volunteers in the UK and your contribution will influence the future of pupils in the school where you are a local governor.

Volunteering as a governor can be overwhelming, especially for new local governors, but the good news is, this is very normal and the majority of local governors feel overwhelmed at some point in their term of office. Despite all of the information provided to prospective local governors, you never really understand what is involved in the role until you have joined the local governing board. Local governors are often also employees, parents or have other responsibilities to their extended families or communities and balancing all of those responsibilities can be a challenge.

This guidance will help you in your role as a new local governor to focus on priority areas, identify who can help you settle into your role, and prevent you feeling overwhelmed so that you enjoy being a local governor.

**Honesty is *always* the best policy**

Honestly; it is. Despite how confident, articulate or knowledgeable your local governor colleagues appear, they have all been where you are now. They have all felt like the new person, confused where to start and stared, mouth agog, at the email with 12 attachments the Clerk to Governors sent when your appointment was confirmed (it isn’t written in some lost language, that’s educational jargon for you!).

The most important thing is to firstly, be honest with yourself. Be honest about the time you can give to your new role and then plan your time – plan some time each week to read the information that you have been sent.

If you don’t know where to start, then now is the time to be honest with others. Contact the Clerk and ask them to prioritise the documents you should focus on, – make a note of these and plan when you are going to tackle each one. Make sure you have a notebook next to you to and note down any questions that you come to mind as you read through the documents.

When you join the local governing body, you will be asked to complete a skills audit. It is important that you remember that no one local governor is expected to hold all of the skills identified on the skills audit; effective governance is embedded in teamwork, and each individual local governor brings their own skills and knowledge to the team. When you complete your skills audit, be honest about the skills you have and, equally as important, be honest about the areas that you are not knowledgeable, confident or skilled in. This information will help the local governing board plan their collective training and development needs as well as yours and make sure that you are placed in the committee that matches your skill set.

**No question is a stupid question**

As the saying goes, the only stupid questions are the ones we don’t ask. As a local governor, one of your key tasks is to ask lots of questions – use your time as a new local governor as an opportunity to practise and hone this skill. Arrange a time to meet your mentor or the Chair of Governors to go through the questions that you noted when you were reading the documents the clerk sent you.

**Time to get organised**

Local governors receive lots of information, and unless your local governing body subscribes to a cloud-based storage system, this will be sent to you via email by the Clerk and your inbox can soon become muddled. Local governors have enough to do without having to sift through emails to find the last local governing board minutes. There are simple actions that you can take to stay organised and prevent overwhelm setting in:

* Create email folders for your local governing board meetings and separate ones for committees that you belong to. Also, set up individual folders for any briefings or newsletters that you receive.
* Create a folder specifically for governance documents. Again, organise into separate files for different meetings, training certificates, school development, and governance strategic plans etc.

Data protection is a really important consideration for all local governors, and you should take time to read the school data protection policy. Make certain that your emails and computer files are password protected and not accessible to anyone other than yourself.

**Develop your knowledge**

Whether you are a new parent, foundation, staff or co-opted governor, and however much you think you know the school, getting to know the school as a local governor is very different. As a local governor, you have to put on a completely new hat than you would as a parent, staff member or community member. It is important that you access good-quality governor induction training to develop your knowledge. Equipping yourself with this knowledge will stop the panic and overwhelm about all that you think you don’t know, and will help you identify any further training or support that you may need.

Use the knowledge and experience of the Clerk to Governors and your mentor – arrange regular times to speak with them or meet ahead of and after meetings to answer any questions that come up for you. The risk of overwhelm will be reduced if you have arranged time to benefit from this support.

Arrange to visit the school and ask to be shown around and introduced to all the staff and children. This is a key aspect of local governance and will help you to focus on why local governance is so important, it will also make you more comfortable when visiting the school for a meeting or monitoring visit.

There are a plethora of governance and education related blogs, briefings and newsletters available for free that are useful for governors to subscribe to. Ask governor colleagues which they subscribe to, or a quick internet search for key phrases – e.g. safeguarding briefing – will result in plenty for you to choose from.

**Expand your network**

As well as learning from your governor colleagues and seeking support from them, look wider for support and to widen your governance network. This will help you to realise that you are not alone in any feelings of overwhelm or uncertainty and will give you an additional route to support. Local governors need to be aware of both local and national issues, and expanding your network is a helpful way of achieving this.

Attend any DGAT local governor meetings and training opportunities. For the first couple of meetings, try to attend with another governor, so that you can have any queries explained.

**Be open and transparent**

There will be times when you will need to give yourself time to read information and prepare for meetings. At the start of your term of office, explain the time commitment of your new role to those around you. If you have a family, agree a time that suits everyone to set aside for your local governance work. It will be much less overwhelming if you have agreed this in advance and everyone is on board than if you feel like you are constantly trying to fit in an additional responsibility.

Local governors have the right to time off from their employment to exercise their local governance duties. This does not have to be paid time, but you have the right to unpaid time from work, although your employer can refuse if they deem the request unreasonable. Often, if local governors explain to their employer the skills they will gain from being a local governor and how these can impact positively on their professional role, then employers are willing to support the employee with paid time to carry out their local governance duties.

**Next steps**

This guidance is intended to assist new local governors to implement simple, yet effective action to minimise any overwhelm the new role brings. Take from the guidance the aspects that work for you.

Do not feel that to prove your commitment you must volunteer to join every committee or say yes to everything that you are asked to do; inequitable distribution of tasks leads to ineffective local governance and is unfair. It is ok to say that you don’t feel ready or equipped to undertake a task, instead ask if you could shadow someone more experienced and learn from them.

Finally, good luck and enjoy your new role!