

The Wellspring / Springwell governance model and the importance of the link governor role

1. Introduction

The Wellspring governance model - and especially the Link Governor role - was originally conceived at Springwell in Barnsley over three years ago. It has been operating there ever since and it is well developed and embedded, and has been adopted by the Wellspring Trust.

Most GBs run with several committees - and often have what they call a link governor scheme. Those have varying degrees of effectiveness - in many cases although they may be an interesting addition, it doesn't really matter whether or not they are effective, because they are not central to the GB's work.

When people look at how Springwell GB works, they tend to focus on that fact that it does not have committees in the usual way, which can fragment a GB - but the really significant feature is the how link governance is operated. Because for Springwell, they are at the very heart of how the GB operates. And if link governance were not working, then the GB would struggle.

2. How it works in practice at Springwell

Each governor (except the staff governors) is linked to a senior leader - and to that senior leader's responsibilities. The pairing are expected to develop a relationship in which the governor becomes informed about those responsibilities and the aspects of the life of Springwell that they cover, and is able to question and challenge them. How they choose to do that is largely left to them.

When it comes to their turn to report to the GB - which may be anything from once to four times in the course of the year - they are prompted, usually by the Trust's Cluster Coordinator, that they need to meet to discuss the preparation of their report. To what extent that is written by the governor and / or the senior leader is a matter for them, as is which of them presents it to the GB at the meeting. What matters is that the GB receives and is able to interrogate and challenge a report which tells them key information about the school's performance and achievement in that area.

At this point it is important to refer to the Wellspring Governors Handbook. The checklists which it contains for the reports are immensely useful and if a governor follows them they will ensure over the course of the year that their reports will cover the full range of business - and the governor will not be scratching their head wondering what they should be reporting on each time.

One of the features of the Springwell approach is that unlike almost every other GB in the country, there is no regular Principal's report on the agenda. But that does not mean, of course, that the Principal is not still accountable to the GB for everything to do with the school. And he will frequently enter the discussion and debate around a report.

So at each of GB meeting governors consider 3 or 4 of these reports. Together with the Data Dashboard which precedes them, they make up the heart of the meeting - and the majority of its time as governors scrutinise them.

The dashboard is an essential part of the Link Governor model - in providing regular, consistent, concise, accurate, up to date data on which everyone can rely - and which the report writers know will be there.

The dashboard is perhaps the nearest thing Springwell GB has to a Principal's report, in that it concerns the whole of the life of the school, and the discussion around it will inevitably involve the Principal.

There is one final key part of the approach at Springwell - which is that in addition to the 6 or 7 formal GBs per year, there are informal meeting of governors every term, which is part of the calendar of dates. Governors use these for training, reflection, extended discussion, increasing their awareness and knowledge - in a situation where there is not the pressure of an agenda to be dealt with.

And they provide the vehicle for picking up issues which arise from any of the link reports. If the GB feels it needs to explore an issue in greater depth, the informal meeting provides the ideal time and place. Lastly, the informal meetings are helpful in building the governor team.

So the characteristics of the Springwell approach are:

- link governor reports
- data dashboards
- informal meetings
- and no committees

Taken together, these are the key elements of governance model which as been developed at Springwell and which forms the basis of the Wellspring model.

3. What are the benefits?

There are many, for lots of people.

For individual governors: they have a clear role and purpose; they gain an in-depth knowledge of a specific aspect of the school; alongside a good knowledge across the whole life of the school; they get to know the senior leaders; they don't only hear what the Principal thinks.

For senior leaders: experience of working with individual governors and the GB as a whole; enhanced responsibility as a result.

For the GB as a whole: no A and B teams; shared knowledge and understanding of the school; pacing the business through the year; having expert governors for all aspects of the school; ... and well prepared for Ofsted - but that is not the primary motivation.

For the Trust: confidence in the work of the LGB; no need to micro-manage governance; fulfils the Trust's principle of autonomy for its schools.

4. Support

There can be no avoiding the fact that this approach to governance places demands on governors. Just as governors expect high standards from their staff because they want them and their schools to be outstanding, so governors must also want to be outstanding GBs.

But where much is expect of volunteers, it is right that there is much support as well. And so it is with the Wellspring Trust. Some examples of that developing support are:

- the newly appointed Cluster Co-ordinators will liaise with you to set up the necessary meetings with the appropriate school staff,
- there are excellent guidance notes in the Governors Handbook,
- Link Governor Networks, supported by the Cluster Co-ordinators, are going to be set up, and
- information and potential training which is relevant to the Link Governors in each network will be signposted.

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