
BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION FOR UNDER-REPRESENTED GROUPS IN SCHOOL GOVERNANCE

Angela Ellis
Institute for Volunteering Research

Introduction

Despite a lack of consistent national statistical data, available evidence suggests that certain groups are under-represented as school governors in the UK (see for example, Bird, 2002 & 2003; Sharpe and Attan, 2000; Scanlon, Early and Evans, 1999). The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) commissioned the Institute for Volunteering Research to carry out a study to discover the reasons for this, particularly focusing on six groups which were identified as being under-represented in school governance. These six groups were people from black and other minority ethnic groups, young people, disabled people, lone parents, people on low incomes and people who are unemployed, and business people.

Background

Over the past 20 years there have been considerable changes in the way that schools in England and Wales are governed. As a result of these changes school governing bodies have gained an unprecedented number of roles and responsibilities. For example, they must take responsibility for the financial and staffing management of schools, be accountable to their stakeholders (e.g. staff, pupils and parents) and have their performance inspected.

At present there are four major categories of governors: parent elected, staff elected, LEA appointed, and community co-opted. In March 2003 new legislation was introduced, with changes to the proportion of governors in each category, and the creation of sponsor governors and associate members.

Recruitment of governors takes place on a number of levels, but there is little evidence on which to judge the effectiveness of any of the methods. Available evidence does, however, suggest that existing recruitment methods are failing to create a group of governors that are representative of the wider general population as certain groups are apparently under-represented as governors (see for example, Sharpe and Attan, 2000; Bird, 2003; Scanlon, Early and Evans, 1999).

Aims of the study

Research was commissioned to assess recruitment difficulties among the identified groups and to explore the reasons behind these, focusing on issues pertinent to groups of the population that have been identified as being particularly under-represented as school governors.

The overall aims of the research were to:

- Provide a review of the literature on the participation of target groups (groups mentioned above) with regard to their under-representation in governing bodies and other volunteering groups;
- Identify barriers to participation in governance for under-represented groups;
- Provide suggestions for future recruitment and retention of governors based on removing those barriers highlighted by the research, including an examination of current recruitment materials and practices.

Methodology

The research was conducted in three phases:

- **Phase 1:** A literature review was undertaken reviewing, condensing and analysing approximately 110 books, articles and other literature, dated 1983 and onwards, on school governance and volunteering more generally. The aim of the review was to identify commonly reported barriers to participation in governing bodies and other volunteering groups and to bring disparate evidence into clearer focus for making progress in research, policy and practice.
- **Phase 2:** Interviews were undertaken with a total of 19 organisations representing each of the six under-represented groups and with umbrella/membership organisations specifically representing school governors.
- **Phase 3:** A total of 33 interviews were conducted with individuals who were school governors and who belonged to one of the six under-represented groups. Respondents were identified through a number of sources; many put themselves forward to be involved in the research after being contacted through established governor networks, others responded to a call for research participants placed in various newsletters. A majority of the interviews were carried out over the telephone; a small number were carried out face-to-face.

Key Findings from the research

The research was able to identify a number of barriers, of which the majority were cross-cutting for most under-represented groups in governance. The literature review and the interviews with organisations draw on evidence about general barriers to volunteering in addition to particular evidence on barriers to participation in school governance. While the literature review and the interviews with organisations identified some barriers which were specific to certain groups, the interviews with governors found that many of the groups faced common barriers to participation in governance. Many of the barriers identified through the interviews with governors were broadly similar to those with organisations. However, the evidence from the interviews with organisations tends to highlight more practical barriers while those with the governors tend to highlight more attitudinal and experiential ones.

Key findings from Phase 1: Evidence from the literature

- The following groups are currently under-represented in school governance: black and other minority ethnic groups, disabled people, people with low incomes and people who are unemployed, young people, lone parents and (to a lesser extent) business people. There is, however, a lack of evidence on the underlying factors causing low levels of involvement in school governance.
- Having enough time is one of the key common barriers to participation in school governance. Potential volunteers lack the time to participate or perceive that volunteering will take up too much of their time leaving them unwilling to commit.
- Recruitment materials are insufficient in many respects: lack of targeted recruitment materials and practices as well as the unrepresentative use of language and imagery within existing recruitment materials were key barriers identified.
- The organisation of volunteering is seen to create a barrier as some governors faced problems around access to meetings and the costs involved, opportunities for meaningful contributions and the lack of informal support structures.
- A lack of knowledge about volunteering and school governance creates a barrier to participation.
- Issues surrounding the attitudes of existing volunteers (and staff) towards certain sections of the population are also raised within the literature, particularly highlighting a lack of cultural and disability awareness, and negative attitudes towards young people.

Key findings from Phase 2: Evidence from interviews with organisations

- A general lack of publicity in school governance was identified through the interviews with organisations as a major barrier and as contributing to the persistence of stereotyped images of volunteers on governor bodies being dominated by white, middle class, middle aged members of the community.
- The cost of volunteering in school governance and the lack of reimbursement of out-of-pocket expenses created particularly serious barriers

to participation for certain groups (people on low income and people who are unemployed, lone parents, disabled people).

- A lack of time and/or competing time commitments was identified as a key barrier for a number of the under-represented groups (lone parents and people on low incomes).

Key findings from Phase 3: Evidence from interviews with governors

Perceptions of involvement in school governance

- Respondents felt that many members of the public hold stereotyped perceptions of who school governors are (white, middle class, well educated, prominent figures of the community) and what they do leave many people feeling insecure about their abilities to fulfil the requirements of the role, or to fit in with existing governors. As the role is seen to be one with high levels of responsibility, school governorship is not something that all people can identify with.
- The perceptions of existing governors, who were seen to make judgements about the eligibility of groups and individuals to become governors, also created barriers.

Capacity for involvement in school governance

- A lack of confidence or self-esteem, and alienation from the education system, left some people feeling unable to volunteer as governors.
- The formal recruitment, application and election procedures may potentially create barriers for people who feel they lack the necessary skills.

Awareness of opportunities for involvement

- There is an apparent lack of knowledge and general awareness about school governance, which leads to a misconception of school governors and leaves people unaware of opportunities for involvement.
- A majority of existing governors had found out about involvement through word of mouth, but this was acknowledged as being problematic and exclusionary.
- Some of the language and imagery used within recruitment materials was off-putting and did not make it clear who could get involved in school governance and what the role would entail.
- The benefits of volunteering in school governance, to both the volunteers and the

schools are considerable. For example, taking part in school governance had led to a sense of satisfaction, a sense of pride, new skills, friendships and networking opportunities, personal development and, for some people, enhanced employment prospects.

The cost of involvement

- Governors incur costs in terms of travel and childcare expenses, and these costs are a barrier to many people.
- Many schools had policies to reimburse expenses but a majority of governors did not claim them. The reason for the low take up of reimbursement was the lack of ring-fenced budgets for volunteer expenses, leaving governors feeling guilty if they took much needed resources from the school.

The time for involvement

- Competing time commitments create barriers to participation, both in terms of the availability of 'spare' time and also in terms of conflicts with work time.
- The usual term of office for governors is four years. Some respondents felt that, even though governors can resign at any time, this length of tenure may be off-putting for some as they may feel obliged to serve for the whole period.

Accessibility

- A lack of physical access to buildings and facilities created barriers to people with certain disabilities, particularly for people with mobility-related and sensory impairments.
- A further barrier for some people was the lack of transport to meeting and training venues.
- The format and wording of documents and reports created barriers for some individuals.

Conclusions and recommendations

The findings of the primary research (interviews with organisations and governors) largely confirmed the findings of the literature, but some differences emerged in the issues identified. Several concluding issues, and solutions, can be found through combining all research elements.

- Volunteers within school governing bodies do, at present, tend to be drawn from certain sections of the population. Ensuring that school governing bodies are representative of their

communities should be a key aim for all stakeholders (e.g. staff, pupils, parents), but care is needed to ensure that it does not become tokenistic.

- According to the interviewed organisations and governors there is a relatively low level of knowledge among the general public on school governance in general, and an even greater lack of knowledge on who gets involved and how. There is a need for widespread promotional campaigns to address this issue.
- The research highlighted the need for meaningful opportunities for volunteers, which reflect the range of different motivations and expectations, draw on individuals' expertise and develop their skills. This also requires the need to recruit and match individuals to specific tasks/roles and build up appropriate support structures for volunteers.
- The most common way people get involved in school governance is through word of mouth, but this is perpetuating existing diversity problems. New tools to effectively 'ask' more people (and a more diverse group of people) to get involved are needed. One possibility would be targeted outreach work to tap into networks and community groups that exist for those groups currently under-represented in school governance.
- The messages presented to potential governors also need refining. Despite generally positive responses to existing recruitment materials there are improvements to be made. For example, the benefits of participation in school governance should be stressed within recruitment materials, as should the value of diversity. This furthermore requires the use of appropriate language within tailored messages in targeted campaigns.
- Capacity building is needed to enable people to get involved and stay involved in school governance. For example, a lack of confidence is a barrier to involvement, which could be overcome through capacity building initiatives. Retention of governors could be improved by providing ongoing support, training and recognition for the contributions they make.
- Some governors were put off getting involved by a perception that they would be required to commit considerable amounts of their time. This could be addressed by being clear in recruitment materials about time commitment required and potentially by working with

employers to support volunteering among employees.

- The cost of volunteering in school governance is a further barrier to participation. This could be overcome by ensuring all expenses are reimbursed. However, evidence suggests expenses will not be claimed unless they are ring-fenced within school budgets.
- The issue of access is of key importance if governing bodies are to become more inclusive. In particular there is a need to make school buildings physically accessible, an issue which is currently being addressed through the Disability Discrimination Act.

Additional Information

Copies of the full report (RR500) - priced £4.95 - are available by writing to DfES Publications, PO Box 5050, Sherwood Park, Annesley, Nottingham NG15 0DJ.

Cheques should be made payable to "DfES Priced Publications".

Copies of this Research Brief (RB500) are available free of charge from the above address (tel: 0845 60 222 60). Research Briefs and Research Reports can also be accessed at www.dfes.gov.uk/research/

Further information about this research can be obtained from Elif Aksit, Area 6S, DfES, Sanctuary Buildings, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BT.

Email: elif.aksit@dfes.gsi.gov.uk

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education and Skills.