

Mutual benefits

Darren Vertigan explains how giving staff paid time off to govern creates a win-win situation for employers and employees



Governors and trustees can learn a lot from each other

See www.inspiringgovernance.org/employers for tips on setting up an employer scheme

FOR THE PAST five years I have run the Aviva governor network. Every six weeks, between 15 and 20 of us meet over coffee to discuss our practice.

We give tips, share concerns and work things out. There's always plenty to talk about – both good and bad. For example, at the last meeting we talked about governor monitoring and we looked at what exactly we all do when visiting our individual schools.

It helps to talk to someone who isn't on your board and you can come away feeling empowered and motivated to go back to your own board and talk about what others are doing and how your practice can be improved.

We also run a recruitment day every year to encourage more of our colleagues to become school governors and trustees. Judith Hicks visited us recently to talk about the Inspiring Governance service, which was extremely useful.

As Aviva employees, we have a broad range of skills to offer and we know governing boards need these skills. Each of us contributes a vital discipline to our board – be that in marketing, human resources, procurement or something else. We are used to sitting in business meetings, managing people, tracking projects and being strategic.

New skills

That said, we all get something out of it too – skills and experiences that are directly relevant to our careers. For example, my discipline is financial management. I am used to working on relatively short-term projects of three to six months. But by governing I have the opportunity to contribute to strategy development and I'm responsible for an organisation with over 200 employees.

“Each of us contributes a vital discipline”

Governing gives many of us opportunities to do things that would never normally form part of our work. I've helped to recruit a headteacher – arguably the most important decision a governing board will ever make.

But what makes governance special to me is that I am able to champion issues that I think are important for our community. In particular, I want to narrow the achievement gap between disadvantaged children and their better-off peers.

Being a governor is being part of a team and getting the right people around that table is very important. All governors are different and each of us brings our own experience to the board. Everyone has a voice and we are all equally important.

Small groups

Getting all documentation out seven days in advance is critical. This is not just about following regulations – it allows the more reflective thinkers to read everything and feed their questions back in advance, which then informs the agenda. It allows the team to work as a whole. My board uses part of our meetings to separate into groups, where people might be more comfortable sharing thoughts about the reports we have received.

I think the biggest challenge for us as governors and trustees is to keep up to date with all the changes in education policy. There are also significant financial challenges offered up by increases in pension contributions and national insurance, which are squeezing budgets even tighter. These present constant pressures.

Sometimes it is hard to stay motivated, but the Aviva governor network helps and it is always encouraging to see that people have so much to give. ●

AT THE HEART OF THE COMMUNITY

Aviva is a FTSE 100 company and one of the biggest employers in Norfolk. It gives each employee three days of paid leave each year to get involved with their communities, give back and learn something. Volunteering



to be a school governor/trustee is one of the best ways to do all three of these.

Darren Vertigan is a governor at two schools in Norwich and IT finance partner at Aviva

