



National College for  
Teaching & Leadership

# **Effectively managing headteacher performance**

**Research brief**

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## Headteacher performance management reports

This document is one of a set of reports about the study of the effective management of headteacher performance in schools in England.

This report is the research brief which is a summary of key areas for consideration by governors and those directly involved in the process of headteacher performance management.

We recommend that you read all the reports to understand the research fully. These documents are available on from gov.uk. The complete set of reports includes the following:

- **Research brief**  
A summary of key areas for consideration by governors and those directly involved in the process of headteacher performance management.
- **Full report**  
The full report, including the executive summary; details about the framework and design of the study; a review of the international literature on performance management of senior leaders in education and related sectors; analysis of empirical data collected for the study; discussion of significant issues arising from the analysis; and a summary of main findings and implications drawing on the analysis and review of literature.
- **Case Studies (Annexe A)**  
Ten case studies drawn from the research to illustrate approaches to headteacher performance management in a variety of schools and school groups around England.
- **Vignettes (Annexe B)**  
Twelve examples of important research themes contextualised in specific school settings.

## Introduction

Good governance is at the heart of effective headteacher performance management. Conversely, ineffective headteacher performance management may be a symptom of ineffective governance. Effective oversight of the headteacher is the most important part played by the governing body in the overall governance of the school. But it is also a complex and demanding process and one size does not fit all. Nonetheless, much is known about effective approaches, and how governing bodies can take steps to improve their processes for the needs of their school and its various communities.

This summary, based on research carried out in academies and maintained schools by a team from three universities, highlights the most important implications for governing bodies in designing, putting into place and sustaining effective headteacher performance management.<sup>1</sup> It begins with a definition of performance management and an outline of the headteacher performance management process. It then identifies key challenges to implementing effective headteacher performance management. Each challenge has suggested recommendations for governing bodies to consider. Following a conclusion, the summary ends with a list of ten characteristics of effective headteacher performance management.

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<sup>1</sup> The Education (School Teachers' Appraisal) (England) Regulations 2012 set out the legal framework for the appraisal of teachers and headteachers and apply to all maintained schools, including maintained special schools, and to local authorities in respect of unattached teachers. The regulations do not apply in academies, free schools, other independent schools, or sixth-form colleges although they are free to use them if they wish.

## What is performance management?

The term performance management is used to describe the general process by which an employee and her or his line manager evaluate performance and negotiate objectives as well as developmental goals for a specific time period. Our research revealed that many governing bodies considered the annual performance review or appraisal meeting as the totality of performance management yet the appraisal meeting should be seen as one moment in a continuous and comprehensive cycle of performance management.

Performance management, then, conveys the broader sense of a manager taking responsibility for a subordinate's proper performance in the organisation. This responsibility is not merely operational, in the sense of a 'tick box' exercise to demonstrate simply that it has been done. Effective performance management entails strategic responsibility for the performance of individual staff in relation to a clear and coherent view of the current state of the organisation and its future trajectory. Thus, effective headteacher performance management strikes a balance among the personal and professional development of the individual and the development of the school as an organisation.

The governing body has the strategic responsibility of overseeing the translation of priorities into challenging yet achievable objectives for its headteacher.<sup>2</sup> Performance information is the evidence used to measure performance against objectives. Pupil attainment is one measure of school performance, and this is widely used for measuring individual as well as organisational performance. However, effective performance management depends on a range of objectives that are tailored to the priorities of a specific individual and the school in which they serve as a leader. Thus, performance information needs to be drawn from many different sources, such as student and parent opinions or information about school climate, including pupil engagement with extracurricular activities.

There is no single set of school or individual priorities and indicators of performance. Performance management needs to be systematic and rigorous but also dynamic and adaptive to meet the changing needs of the school and the people who work and learn within it.

A common template does not exist for effective performance management but our research found characteristics that exemplified good practice in a wide range of settings. The section that follows describes the basic elements of the process around headteacher performance management.

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<sup>2</sup> The Education (School Teachers' Appraisal) (England) Regulations 2012 specify that headteachers are assessed against the Teachers' Standards (2011) as well as objectives set by the Governing Body.

## The process

Our case studies showed that schools identified as following good practice were conducting headteacher performance appraisal in a similar way and were making use of existing guidance. An appraisal panel appointed by the governing body annually reviews the headteacher's performance. This usually consists of three governors such as the chair of governors, the chair of the committee that oversees staffing and/or finance and one other governor who has particular expertise in performance management and/or education.

The work of the appraisal panel is embedded within a wider set of interactions that comprise headteacher performance management leading up to and beyond the formal annual review. There is a standard rhythm to these interactions:

- An external adviser is commissioned.
- The appraisal panel meets to discuss points to raise.
- The external advisor meets with the headteacher.
- The external advisor, headteacher and appraisal panel meet together.
- The headteacher and appraisal panel meet.
- The external advisor summarises the results of the meetings in a review document.
- The appraisal panel makes recommendations about headteacher pay for other governors to make a decision about.

Many of our case study schools were integrating the processes of headteacher appraisal into broader processes of managing the headteacher and the school through the astute use of performance information. We consider this more holistic approach and integrated use of performance information to be a hallmark of performance management, which encompasses robust performance appraisal. Performance management continues throughout the year with ongoing monitoring. This typically occurs as part of regular interaction between the headteacher and chair of governors as well as committee meetings that have oversight of aspects of the school (eg standards, finance, staffing) that relate to the headteacher's objectives. In addition to these meetings that typically focus on school performance, at least one formal mid-year review meeting of the appraisal panel and headteacher is recommended to check specific progress of the headteacher against his or her objectives.

## Challenges

This summary identifies 20 challenges identified by the research organised under six broad themes of logistics, pay, commitment, external advice, capacity and underperformance.

### Logistics

#### Challenge 1: Time

Scheduling the sequence of meetings amongst headteacher and panel governors is one of the most challenging aspects of the process for many schools. Difficulties scheduling meetings causes substantial frustration with the process and significant delays. Where scheduling is very challenging, mid-year reviews - an essential aspect of good practice – are less likely to occur.

Recommendations:

- The process is time-consuming but governors and headteachers must be committed to seeing it through in its entirety.
- The process needs to be a priority for all involved.
- Interim reviews need to be integral to the process.
- Reviews need to focus on the headteacher, not on the school as a whole, and should be a standard feature of the annual cycle.

#### Challenge 2: Setting objectives

The setting of objectives is among the most challenging aspects of the process. For maintained schools, the Teachers' Standards (2011) establish the minimum requirements for headteachers' practice and conduct. Appropriate objectives are the keystone of managing the school's progress and managing the headteacher. The breadth and precision of the headteacher's objectives, the quality of performance information and productive engagement of stakeholders in the definition and setting of objectives reflects the experience, maturity and quality of overall school management processes. For all schools, external accountability and visibly demonstrating progress serve as the overarching motivation for setting ambitious objectives and appropriate uses of performance information.



Recommendations:

- Specificity and precision of objectives should be a goal. They should be SMART – specific, measurable, achievable yet challenging, relevant and time bound. The best governing bodies elaborate precise and individualised objectives that specify clearly what needs to be done and how progress will be measured.
- Challenging objectives should be coupled with a strategy for appropriate support and clarity around how and when progress against objectives will be measured.

### **Challenge 3: Competence**

The ability to knit individual and school developmental priorities together is a demanding and complex aspect of governing. Although many appraisal panels do this very well, there are examples where lack of experience in professional management and relevant support mean that this key activity is not undertaken competently, with an over-reliance on the headteacher and/or the external advisor.

Recommendations:

- Governing bodies need to be acutely aware of their school context and how it relates to the national picture.
- Governing bodies need to assess realistically their modes of operating in relation to the headteacher.
- Effective performance management will depend on ensuring that the relationship is one that puts the governing body in its proper relation of oversight.
- Enabling the governing body to assume a role of oversight should also entail assessing available competence and addressing gaps.

### **Challenge 4: Clear procedures and documentation**

The clarity of procedures, coherent documentation and links with school objectives are essential components of the overall process of headteacher performance management but not always found.

Recommendations:

- Headteacher performance management should be a dynamic and evolving process, not one that simply settles into a familiar pattern year upon year.
- Procedures and priorities need to be regularly evaluated and adapted if needed.
- Procedures may need clarification, priorities honed and documentation made more straightforward.

## **Challenge 5: Identifying and interpreting appropriate performance information**

Data for use as performance information is a core issue. There is a proliferation of performance data (e.g. RAISEonline, data dashboards, Fischer Family Trust governor dashboards, league tables). However, governing bodies often struggle to use data effectively to identify core issues around leadership. Moreover, most schools do not consider sources of information that go beyond official data sets, such as parent, staff and pupil surveys and 360 degree feedback, as is done in other sectors (e.g. healthcare leadership management).

Recommendations:

- Valuable resources exist to help governing bodies meet this challenge but they need support to find and make use of these resources, identifying those most relevant for their particular settings.
- The external advisor should provide guidance on how the school can translate its priorities into appropriate objectives measured by relevant performance information.

## **Challenge 6: Promoting professional development**

Many schools do not make robust use of objectives for the headteacher's *personal* development in connection with professional and organisational goals.

Recommendations:

- Attention to personal and individual professional objectives by governing bodies reinforces trust and good relationships.
- Appropriate personal objectives that aim towards quality of life and/or broader learning goals are important to consider. The most developed forms of performance management paid close attention to the headteacher's personal and career objectives.

## **Challenge 7: Ensuring continuity of effective headteacher performance management**

Cultivating successors for those governors currently serving on the appraisal panel or for those with performance management expertise is an important consideration. A well-established and long-standing headteacher performance management panel membership may create difficulties in identifying successors.

Recommendations:

- Effective headteacher performance management involves an ongoing effort to broaden the base of those with performance management experience and knowledge. Clear succession strategies, identifying governors to take part in training and development opportunities, who would then serve on the appraisal panel for two-year terms are needed. This will help develop governing body expertise to undertake headteacher performance management and to oversee performance management more broadly.

## Pay

The linking of performance with pay is one of the most sensitive, challenging and controversial issues within headteacher performance management. Governors need to maintain objectivity and fairness, while remembering that the needs of the school come first. Governors may not always be able to give headteachers exactly what they want.

### Challenge 8: Competition

Some governing bodies may 'over-pay', because they fear that their headteacher might be 'poached'.

Recommendations:

- Where possible, establish an idea of relevant salary benchmarks.
- Manage expectations clearly from the time of recruitment onwards concerning what the rate of pay increases are likely to be.
- Be very aware of the pay relativities between the headteacher and other staff members.
- Consider the competing demands on the school budget and overall capacity when making pay awards.

### Challenge 9: Pressure

Governors can feel 'pressurised' into having a more positive view of the headteacher's performance in order to make a pay award.

Recommendations:

- Draw on the external advisor to evaluate fully how effective the headteacher's performance has been in comparison to what might be reasonably expected.
- Separate the appraisal process from the financial decision on pay by using separate committees.

## **Challenge 10: Avoidance of conflict**

Governors may agree to insufficiently challenging objectives to avoid conflict; or the review may be insufficiently candid, because the headteacher does not want to put their pay rise at risk.

Recommendations:

- External advisors should help governors set sufficiently challenging objectives and review them rigorously.
- Ensure that the links between the achievement of various objectives and the level of pay is clear at the beginning of the process.
- Governors need a realistic view in advance of any negotiation with the headteacher of the salary budget available to them, to ensure that they will have the funds to reward exceptional performance.

## **Challenge 11: Pay for system leadership**

A growing number of headteachers have responsibilities beyond their own school, for wider system leadership. Where there is specific funding for both the National and Local Leaders of Education (NLE and LLE) roles, governing bodies have to decide the allocation of this funding between the headteacher personally and their school. The school may wish to be compensated financially for the loss of time but such activities have the potential to benefit the school, and to improve both the headteacher's performance and, crucially, their motivation.

Recommendations:

- Governors should take a realistic view of their school's capacity for system leadership, and the degree of compensation the school would require for this. This assessment should be shared with the headteacher.
- It is helpful to be comprehensive and open-minded about the benefits, including non-quantifiable advantages that the school will receive from the headteacher's outside activities.

## **Commitment**

Commitment to headteacher performance management for the good of the school is vital. The crucial relationships in effective headteacher performance management are those between the headteacher, the chair of governors, the appraisal panel and the external advisor. Effective headteacher performance management hinges on mutual respect,

trust, candour and willingness among all to challenge and to be challenged for the good of the school.

## **Challenge 12: Commitment**

Relationships that allow for a clear focus on the work to be done are crucial for effective performance management. The headteacher's commitment to the process is vital. If the headteacher or governing body does not view the process as useful then it is likely to be ineffective. As a result, headteacher performance management processes will be undermined. The inverse is also true: headteacher performance management can be a way to tighten up the functioning of governance as a whole.

Recommendation:

- Clear headteacher performance management procedures and reliable performance information are essential to productive relationships. Clarity and accuracy help the headteacher, chair and the external advisor focus on their task and what is needed to move the school forward.

## **Challenge 13: Mutual respect and trust**

Effective headteacher performance management depends on mutual respect and trust in the relationship between the headteacher and the chair, in particular, as well as the governing body as a whole. Trust and respect enable them to move beyond a sole focus on appraisal to more extensive and intensive uses of performance management as a coherent management tool for internal accountability. Ineffective headteacher performance management is most often characterised by a too-cosy relationship among the headteacher, chair and/or external advisor or a chair unwilling to challenge the headteacher, sometimes by questioning the appointment of an external advisor well-known to the headteacher.

Recommendations:

- Mutual respect enables challenge. A healthy relationship between headteacher and chair of governors is crucial. Effective chairs of governors must actively seek to promote healthy relationships that balance support with challenge.
- Headteachers also have a responsibility to promote challenge. They may need to take the initiative to develop the governing body's capacity for appropriate challenge; the effort to do so will cultivate greater respect.
- Governing bodies need to consider explicitly how to develop trust and mutual respect in ways that will encourage, not constrain, and appropriate challenge.

## External advice

### Challenge 14: The role of the external advisor

Governing bodies benefit substantially from the participation of an external advisor with appropriate expertise. The vast majority of governing bodies use them but it is not a requirement for academies and free schools. The external advisor as currently practiced combines several roles, helping to sharpen the process as well as clarifying the links between internal and external accountability, headteacher development and governance.

Effective external advisors have respectful and trusting relationships with the governing body and respectful, yet independent, relationships with the headteacher. The desired characteristics deemed to add value such as knowledge of the school, understanding of performance management as process and ability to help governors challenge the headteacher appropriately are highly dependent on the school's current needs.

Recommendations:

External advisors should:

- summarise data to give a clear understanding of how the school is performing
- analyse the headteacher's evidence of progress against objectives
- support the governing body in interpreting information and pupil performance data
- bring to bear broad experience working with a number of governing bodies and headteachers
- support, question and challenge the headteacher
- understand the importance of headteacher performance management and performance management in schools
- be able to gather sufficient knowledge of the school, its history and its context in order to develop the Headteacher in leading its development

### Challenge 15: Clear roles

The clear delineation of roles - between an adviser to the governing body and a mentor to the headteacher – prevents the potential lack of clarity about the external advisor's role and possible divided allegiances. The external advisor is an agent of the governing body and should not therefore have a closer allegiance to the headteacher.

Recommendations:

- External, independent advice is highly recommended (and mandated for maintained schools).

- Reliance of the governing body on an external advisor must be balanced by expertise on the governing body for evaluating the contribution of the adviser.

## **Challenge 16: Recruitment**

The recruitment of an appropriate external advisor may be a challenge with the reduction of such staff at the local authority level. The availability of appropriately qualified external advisors and enabling ready access to them may be a concern in the future.

Recommendations:

- Governing bodies should appoint external advisors, in consultation with the headteacher.
- Schools need support and guidance around identifying appropriate external advisors.
- Drawing on expertise from NLEs, LLEs and National Leaders of Governance (NLGs) as external advisors would be a way for some governing bodies to find suitable external advisors.

## **Capacity**

Effective headteacher performance management requires governors with experience and expertise around performance management and governing bodies often depend on members who possess such attributes. Some of this expertise, particularly in school settings, will come from the external advisor. However, the more effective governing bodies are those in which expertise is distributed in a way that allows them to understand and engage with the process in a robust manner.

## **Challenge 17: Developing capacity for headteacher performance management**

The mix of expertise and experience required of the governing body will vary depending on the school's context and conditions. Expertise may come from governors' work in other sectors and in other formal roles. Many schools struggle to recruit appropriate governors. This suggests that the governing body itself must find ways of developing capacity.

Recommendation:

- Rigorous and effective headteacher performance management should be undertaken by governors with sufficient expertise, who view the process as important and see performance management as a key part of school governance.
- The governing body needs to conduct a regular audit of governors' skills in order to understand where capacity is most needed.

- Regular training on headteacher performance management is important, especially for members of the appraisal panel.

## Challenge 18: Training

Governors, headteachers and external advisors have a wide range of training needs and these often point towards the most challenging ‘pinch points’ in the process. They need to be up to date with national trends and expectations, especially with the rapid pace of change in education.

Recommendations:

- The following are the areas of training that our respondents identified as most essential for governors:
  - the technical and legal formalities of headteacher appraisal
  - understanding data
  - issues around pay and performance
  - managing relations with the head
  - setting and monitoring objectives
  - benchmarking
  - evaluating external advice
- Sustaining the expertise required through succession planning and well thought-out approaches to induction are essential.
- The external advisor can play an important role in mediating between individual needs of the headteacher and organisational goals, as well as working with the governing body to develop its capacity to enact effective headteacher performance management.
- Drawing on expertise from NLEs, LLE, and NLGs as external advisors would be a way for some governing bodies to improve the way governors deal with the most challenging ‘pinch points’ in the process.

## Underperformance

Developing capacity for effective headteacher performance management is not so much a means of addressing underperformance as a proactive approach to ensuring that marginal performance is made explicit and addressed before underperformance can occur. Our study points to the need to develop robust performance management systems across the organisation in order to draw a clear line between the management of performance and capability procedures. In our case studies and interviews, we heard about how the impetus for developing robust headteacher performance management arose out of the shock of recognising underperformance, frequently due to a disappointing inspection report. Crisis situations may bring to light three types of



underperformance, initially that of the school and then the recognition that the underperformance of the headteacher and the governing body may have played a role.

### **Challenge 19: Recognising underperformance**

When school underperformance comes to light unexpectedly, governors typically find themselves underprepared to address this critical situation, especially with regards to appropriate process in relation to the headteacher. Gaps in oversight by the governing body may have contributed to the unanticipated results. This can lead to a rapid breakdown of trust on all sides.

Recommendations:

- Governors must have ongoing access to good HR advice, especially in terms of managing underperformance.
- Governors need training to have the kinds of difficult conversations that will ensure they are receiving and understanding information that gives them an accurate and complete view of the status of the school.

### **Challenge 20: Addressing underperformance**

School, headteacher or governing body underperformance may all be present at the same time, or become apparent independently.

Recommendations:

- If both the headteacher and the governing body are underperforming, resulting in school underperformance, then it is extremely likely that external intervention will be required, with replacement of governing body members and perhaps the headteacher.
- Also significant is the contribution of an external adviser, whose skills and experience are used to provide an accurate, objective view of the school's overall performance and progress and sometimes to provide additional school improvement support.

## Conclusion

Governing the development of the school as an organisation and managing headteacher performance are ongoing and intertwined processes for intelligent internal and external accountability. The headteacher performance management cycle should follow clear procedures and pay close attention to the ways that personal and professional goals mesh with school needs. Setting, monitoring and reviewing objectives should make use of appropriate sources of information. Formal interim monitoring consists not only of monitoring progress against school performance objectives but provides a moment to take stock of the individual performance of the headteacher against the full range of their objectives.

The external advisor can play an important role in mediating between individual needs of the headteacher and school goals, as well as working to help the governing body develop its capacity to carry out effective performance management. The breadth and precision of the headteacher's objectives, the quality of performance information and productive engagement of stakeholders reflect the experience, maturity and quality of overall management processes within the school. Providing recommendations for pay decisions is an important outcome of the process that is among the most challenging, even for governing bodies and headteachers with well-developed performance management processes. The challenge will increase as performance related pay becomes the norm throughout schools and across the educational system.

Questions to be considered by those directly involved in headteacher performance management should include:

- Who is responsible for the implementation, preparation and execution of headteacher performance management?
- What are the necessary competences of governors and headteachers to develop and carry out headteacher performance management effectively?
- Do we have appropriate experience and expertise available on the governing body to carry out headteacher performance management in a rigorous and systematic way? If not, how can this be obtained?
- How do we make use of external support, especially the external advisor? Is the external advisor appropriately experienced and independent to ensure that we are getting the best advice and support?
- Have we got succession planning in place to ensure continuity or evolution of the process?
- How can we best make use of results from self-monitoring?, e.g. governing body evaluation to identify areas of difficulty and refine, adapt, innovate headteacher performance management procedures

- What are our training, mentoring and other capacity building needs to use results effectively?

## Features of effective headteacher performance management

Successful headteacher performance management is characterised by ten features.

Effective headteacher performance management:

1. is integrated with the school development plan and the performance management of all staff
2. has a secure annual cycle of setting and reviewing objectives, together with interim monitoring
3. is underpinned by sound relationships, characterised by openness, trust and integrity, among all those involved
4. involves the setting of meaningful and challenging but achievable objectives for the headteacher
5. strikes an appropriate balance among internal and external accountability, development and reward
6. makes use of evidence from a range of sources to inform decision-making
7. is evaluated and adapted over time to meet evolving requirements of individual circumstances and shifting school needs within a dynamic context of governance
8. is appropriate for the stage of development of the school and the HT
9. is viewed as part of an on-going and wider process of working with the headteacher and all staff to ensure high levels of performance
10. is integral to the development of overall governing body capacity to meet the needs of the school.

Effective headteacher performance management is an attribute of highly effective governance.



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