



## Thought Leadership – The Nolan Principles and School Governance



According to the [Governance Handbook](#) it is recommended that all governing bodies adopt a governance code of conduct which sets out the purpose of school governance and the expectations of individual governors and the governing body as a whole. There are numerous model codes which schools and academies can adopt or adapt to suit their circumstances, but a common factor in most codes is a reference to the [Nolan seven principles of public life](#), even if the reference to the actual principles is not always explicitly stated.

### **What are the Nolan Principles?**

The seven principles have stood the test of time and are as vital today as they were when first published.

The seven principles and some examples of how they might apply in school and academy governance are as follows: -

1. **Selflessness**

Holders of public office should take decisions solely in terms of the public interest. In school governance this means governors taking decisions with prudent financial budgeting and with a constant focus on pupil benefit.

2. **Integrity**

Holders of public office must avoid being obligated to people or organisations that might inappropriately influence them in their work. They should not act in any way that provides financial or other material benefit for the office holder or their family and must declare and resolve any conflict of interest and relationships. This is why is a particular emphasis on governors completing an annual declaration of interests in a register and declaring actual or potential conflict in any business conducted by the board – withdrawing from decision-making if necessary.

3. **Objectivity**

Holders of public office must act and take decisions, impartially, fairly and on merit, using the best evidence and without discrimination or bias. For governors this means receiving and analysing the evidence base for any decision or action and in turn recording these in the minutes. The term “bias” does not mean that governors/leaders should not address individual pupil shortcomings in progress or subject knowledge. For example, the use of pupil premium funds is for the benefit of the whole school, even if it is based on principles of pupil deprivation – this is not bias.

4. **Accountability**

Holders of public office are accountable for their decisions and actions to the public and must submit themselves to the scrutiny necessary to ensure this accountability. In school governance terms this means that governors are accountable to internal stakeholders such as pupils, staff and parents and they should strive to take account of the views of these stakeholder groups in their decision-making. Governors are also accountable to external stakeholders such as the Department for Education, Ofsted, local authority and the Education

and Skills Funding Agency and are expected to be open to scrutiny by these and other “regulators”.

#### 5. Openness

Holders of public office should act and take decisions in an open and transparent manner. Information should not be withheld from the public unless there are clear and lawful reasons for so doing. There is often a conundrum for many governing bodies in that openness and transparency are the default as demonstrated in the minutes of their business being properly recorded and published, but there are compelling reasons to withhold certain aspects of decision making from the public record - particularly those matters that may contravene confidentiality obligations towards, for example, staff or pupil's data protection interests. A successful board is one that balances the principle of transparency with the adherence to confidentiality obligations

#### 6 Honesty

Holders of public office should be truthful. If an individual governor or a board is not truthful or perhaps worse still is mendacious in its dealings this will go to the root of public confidence in the board and will likely result in a wholesale change of membership of the board. It will also cast a cloud over the credibility of individuals involved in untruthful conduct well beyond their school governance role.

#### 7 Leadership

Holders of public office should exhibit leadership in all they do and be willing to challenge poor behaviour wherever it occurs. Governing bodies are part of a school's leadership team and should demonstrate their individual and collective governance leadership at all times. Governors should also have the confidence in their leadership skills to be able to constructively challenge one another and their school leadership team which in turn is a demonstration of their leadership credentials.

### **In summary**

Ask yourself – do I as a governor adhere to the seven Nolan principles and does my governing body and school leadership similarly adhere to these principles?

If you do see any non-conformance in yourself or your fellow governors or in the school leadership team, think about how this impacts on your schools governance code of conduct and how these shortcomings might be addressed and corrected.

An effective board is one that is compliant with its code of conduct and with the Nolan principles.