

CASE STUDY: CARRE'S GRAMMAR SCHOOL, SLEAFORD

In 2013 Ofsted inspectors judged governance at Carre's Grammar School to be 'Outstanding', up from 'Good' in their previous judgment on the selective academy in Sleaford, Lincolnshire. 'The governing body has a very clear understanding of the performance of the school and its priorities for improvement,' stated Ofsted's inspection team in its 2013 report. 'It is well led and is thorough in its work and organisation.'

Governing body chair Andrew Hutton reckons that the introduction of GVO undoubtedly helped the governors demonstrate to Ofsted the abilities they had developed, and how it had used them to improve their performance. The Governors Virtual Office (GVO), an online space for school governors to store and share documents and information, exchange ideas, hold virtual meetings and communicate together has allowed them to become more efficient and timely in their



deliberations.

'The lead inspector did particularly make mention of the system and how impressed he was,' recalls Andrew, explaining that the governing body (GB) allowed the inspector free access to the secure system. This

enabled him to see for himself how Carre's governors use GVO to run their affairs: for example by keeping all documents in one place, providing a single central and ordered record of the GB's business, automatically alerting members to new

policies, providing a space for online collaboration and using the GVO calendar to organise GB and committee meetings.

'That night he went off to his hotel and was able to roam the whole lot of documents, discussions and data. The fact that we felt able to give him access to the system shows how confident we were that everything was in order,' explains Andrew, adding that a key

benefit is the ability to tailor the system according to the GB's structure – for example by filing documents according to committee.

'[The inspector] was able to tell quickly that we are well-organised and all the governors know what they are doing - an "ordered system, ordered mind" type of view. He could access anything from one central place and tell just from looking at it that everything was up to date. He was also impressed with the overall functionality.'

Andrew first learnt about GVO in an email from School Leadership Systems (SLS), the company behind the software: 'When I got

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the note I was interested. I was aware that we spent an awful lot of time and money printing out documents but that in reality some governors would turn up without them, and I was concerned about whether some people were actually reading them. It was very hard to control.'

Debbie Scott, the governing body's clerk, concurs: 'GVO came in very soon after I took over as clerk... so I didn't ever get into the routine of printing everything out. However, my predecessor did everything in hard copy

so that's an awful lot of paper and postage.'

It wasn't ideal for the governors either, according to Andrew: 'Most of us had filing cabinets at home with documents piled up everywhere. It wasn't an easy way of doing things.'

After arranging an online demonstration of GVO with School Leadership Systems, Andrew and his colleagues were sold. 'We knew as soon as we saw the demonstration that it was worth it,' he recalls, adding the software's affordability meant he didn't bother with a cost benefit analysis between the old and the new systems. 'We felt we were fools not to get it really. For the amount of money it costs we felt it was well worth the investment.'

Besides impressing Ofsted and saving time, money - and trees - Andrew says GVO makes it far simpler to fit governance duties into busy lives and frees up time in meetings to get on with the business of governing. 'It makes it easy for us to know that all governors have everything they need before the meeting and can read it at their leisure. They can be on a train, at the airport – they can be doing whatever they like. As chair, I've been pushing to reduce the amount of protocol and administration in meetings – such as reading out the agenda – so there is more time to discuss strategy.'

GVO has also eliminated 'stop start' governance since members can easily stay on top of school business between GB

meetings. Carre's has chosen to set a weekly alert: on Sunday mornings members receive an email detailing all new updates.

'Governors know instantly what's going on and don't have to wait for the bi-monthly meeting to find out,' says Andrew. 'You are managing on a continuous basis rather than always being two months behind. It makes

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governance much more proactive.' And the fact that everything governors need to know is accessible 24/7 has helped new board members get up to speed faster than in the past. As Andrew puts it: 'It's all there at the press of a button.'

Plans are now afoot to get even more from the 'virtual office'. The school has recently installed technology allowing governors to view the GVO on a white board during meetings, as well as remaining able to access it from hand-held devices. And Debbie plans to encourage members to make best use of the system's potential for collaborative working. 'There's a great discussion facility.'

Help will be at hand should members need it, adds Debbie. 'There's a very straightforward crib sheet that they can

access very quickly [via GVO] and I'm available for any other queries. Also Heather and Michael at School Leadership Systems are always extremely helpful and very quick to respond to questions.'

As for Andrew, he has one final suggestion for governing bodies wondering whether to take the virtual plunge. 'You should arrange a GVO demonstration because that's how you get a handle on it. You do need someone who's IT literate to set it up, but after that it's pretty idiot proof. It's so much easier and quicker than what we were doing before. It makes governing a live operation rather than a bi-monthly operation. It becomes an integral part of the management of the school.' No doubt the lead inspector would agree.

Andrew Hutton would be happy to answer questions about Carre's Grammar School Governors' Virtual Office. He can be contacted by email at andrew.hutton@Carres.lincs.sch.uk.