

Fewer emails; better communication: The transformative impact of technology on school governance



Governors' Virtual Office (GVO) is transforming the way governors and governing bodies work. We asked governance expert David Marriott to find out what real heads, clerks and governors have to say about it...

It's amazing that tens of thousands of ordinary people continue to give up their free time to serve as school governors. It's even more amazing that many of them carry on doing it even when their governing body isn't well organised, wastes time, reams of paper and seems stuck in the mud of old ways of getting things done. It doesn't have to be like that.

Governors' Virtual Office harnesses the power of modern information technology to streamline the management of governing body business – to everyone's benefit. Even better, those using it are pioneering new ways of working not anticipated even by School Leadership Systems, who invented it.

"The head used to read out his report during the meeting – it took ages. Now GVO makes the report available well in advance of the meeting

so that governors spend their time asking relevant questions, not wasting valuable time listening to the report." Shillingstone primary school's chair **Susie Poë** also tells how, before they used GVO, a building project had led to more than 200 emails being exchanged between colleagues, making it incredibly hard to keep track of who said what and when. *"It could never happen now that GVO provides a central location for communication."*

It's not just at Shillingstone that precious time is being saved. Governors often spend far too much time writing and rewriting policies, circulating and re-circulating drafts and redrafts.

Peter Surtees chairs the governing body at Storrington First School in West Sussex and he told me how the process of signing off a school policy was shortened dramatically by posting a draft on GVO's discussion zone. All governors contributed to the e-discussion so that by the next meeting the new policy had already been agreed. No confusion over which was the latest version and no time wasted in the meeting going through the policy line-by-line. The efficiencies and time saving aspects of GVO helped



Peter recruit a new clerk for the governing body. She can now carry out her work when it suits her and she doesn't have to go into school regularly.

“GVO has had a huge impact....I’m always telling other clerks how good it is”

It's often the Clerk to the governing body who bears the brunt of any inefficiency in the way the governors operate, so they are usually the people who most fully and directly appreciate the benefits of GVO: *“GVO has had a huge impact. We definitely wouldn't go back to how we used to do things and I'm always telling other clerks how good it is”* says **Karina Tasker**, Clerk at Staverton primary school in Wiltshire. She adds that her governors have *“a young attitude”* and GVO keeps communication very fluid.

Anita Shelton works as the Clerk at St Mary's RC primary school in West Sussex and says that *“governing body meeting agendas often have 20 or more supporting papers with them. GVO means I don't have to copy and send out masses of paperwork, saving lots of time and money”*.

Because every governor can access GVO, none of them can say to the clerk that they weren't sent a particular document, so it makes everyone more responsible and accountable. If and when she moves on, it will be so easy to handover to the new clerk, because of GVO.

Chris Whitfeld, the Clerk at Shillingstone primary school, says minutes of all committee meetings are now accessible by all governors, so the whole

governing body is more aware of everything going on. He likes being able *“to put things on the site quickly and let governors know they're there – it's all done in a flash.”*

Getting new governors up to speed quickly is a doddle with GVO. The induction of new governors at St Nicholas' primary school in Oxfordshire includes access to GVO which allows them to look at relevant documents at their own pace. Clerk **Jane Dymock** says that she recently provided access to GVO to a new governor on a Saturday and *“by Monday morning he was well enough informed to ask some pertinent questions about aspects of the governing body's work.”* **Peter Surtees** agrees: *“I run two induction evenings for new governors and I've adapted them to include a look at GVO. This gets them up and running straightaway.”*

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Some governors are pushing the envelope even further.

Working toward paperless meetings, **Susie Poë** and **Sarina Wickens** (Chair at St Mary's RC primary school in West Sussex) both use an electronic whiteboard during governing body meetings to display the agenda, minutes and other

documents on GVO, which ensures mainly paperless meetings and focuses governors' attention, guaranteeing that "we're all looking at the same document".

Can a head use GVO to improve governance?

Headteacher **David Jackson** (St Nicholas' primary school, Oxfordshire) decided that one of his personal development targets would be to introduce and use GVO as a way of involving and motivating every member of the school's governing body. He sees it as "almost Facebook for governors". He says "I regularly post something on GVO and check to see who's commented on it and what they've said. About 80% now log on regularly, most of them now add comments and they are really embracing new technology."

Can GVO even help governors get a better inspection grade?

Ofsted says in outstanding governing bodies "time is used efficiently...systems are in place for sharing information and reporting back to the full governing body...meetings are well organised and governors receive the information they need in good time....a clear structure for the work of gov-

ernors...ensures that their time is used appropriately." During a recent inspection **Peter Surtees** gave Ofsted inspectors a temporary password so they could access GVO for themselves and see just how active and well organised the governors are, for example, by their training record and documentation of their self-evaluation. The inspectors had a thorough look at this electronic evidence base and were very impressed with the contribution of the governing body to the effectiveness of the school, leading to an outstanding grade.

Everyone I spoke to agreed that GVO means more efficient (therefore money-saving) administration; more efficient meetings; improved communications; greater access by all and a huge reduction in paperwork. "It's superb!" says **Susie Poë**.

David Marriott is an independent education consultant. Until recently he was Head of Governor Services at Wiltshire County Council and Chair of National Co-ordinators of Governor Services (NCOGS). He is the author of several books on effective governance and has contributed articles on governance for Times Education Supplement; School Governor Update; and Matters Arising. His website is at www.thegovernor.org.uk

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