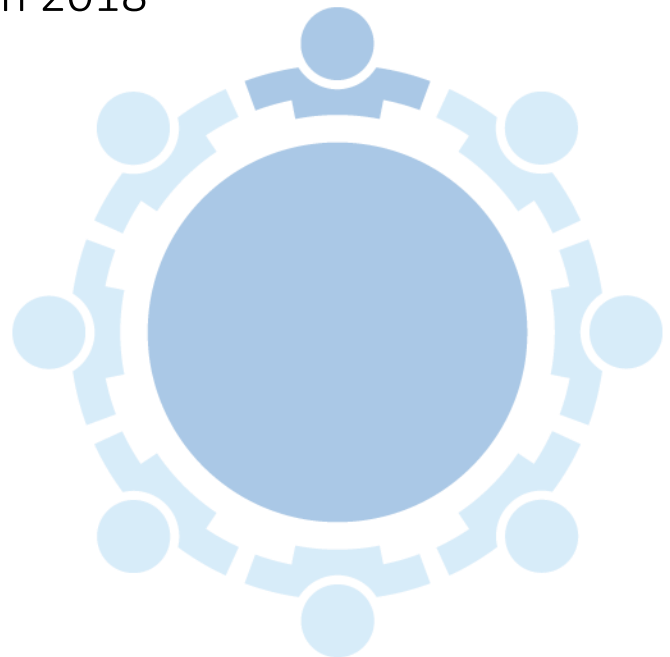


Taking Headteacher Appraisal Seriously

Executive summary of a report exploring the current headteacher performance appraisal landscape in English schools.

Tom Fellows, Research and Information Officer
National Governance Association

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National Governance Association

The National Governance Association (NGA) is an independent charity representing and supporting governors, trustees and clerks in maintained schools and academies in England. The NGA's goal is to improve the wellbeing of children and young people by increasing the effectiveness of governing boards and promoting high standards. It does this by providing information, guidance, research, advice and training. It also works closely with, and lobbies, UK government and educational bodies, and is the leading campaigning national membership organisation for school governors and trustees.

T: 0121 237 3780 | E: governorhq@nga.org.uk | www.nga.org.uk



Executive Summary

In the wake of changes to the educational landscape, this research has been conducted to explore how schools are currently conducting headteacher appraisal, including the challenges they face and the obstacles they need to overcome to ensure an effective, robust and meaningful process is in place. To do this, NGA surveyed 1,164 chairs of governors and trustees of state-schools in England and interviewed 10 headteachers, chairs of governors and external advisors.

Background

For over 15 years, those governing in English schools have played an integral role in performance managing the headteacher. However, a number of recent legislative and policy changes (outlined on pages 9-10 of this report) have impacted on how headteacher performance management is conducted in schools.

Firstly, the government introduced new appraisal regulations in 2012 designed to give maintained 'schools more freedom over managing their' headteacher (DfE, 2012). Secondly, over the past few years there has been a rise in the number of academies - schools which are under no statutory obligation to carry out appraisals and have the ability to set their own appraisal arrangements. As most academies are now part of multi-academy trusts (MATs), the majority do not conform to the traditional headteacher-governing body model and have different lines of accountability and management systems (NGA, 2016).

More freedom but little change?

Despite these changes, the data suggests that many schools are following historic practices, based on old regulatory procedures. When the findings from this study are compared to research by the National College for Teaching and Leadership (NCTL) conducted in 2012/13 (see page 11-12 of this report for a summary), there is little difference between the process used to appraise the headteacher today compared to the process commonly used six years ago (Spicer *et al.*, 2014). All survey respondents noted that their school used an 'objective-setting' (Jennings and Lomas, 2003: 369) approach to appraise the headteacher, with the survey also finding that:

- 94.7% of respondents said that their school, including a large number of academies, put together an appraisal panel of two to three individuals (although, even for maintained schools, the current regulations make no mention of an appraisal panel or its size) to conduct the headteachers' appraisal.
- 87% of academies still appointed an external advisor, with many maintained schools and academies also continuing the practice of using a school improvement partner (SIP) as the external advisor, or using an external advisor recommended by the local authority.
- The majority of schools continued to conduct the headteacher appraisal in the autumn term. Although some survey respondents had thought through the benefits of conducting the appraisal at a different time of year, and decided that the autumn term was still best, many suggested that the decision had not been thought through and was simply an 'historic' trend.

Following the procedures outlined above does not, in itself, constitute 'bad practice'. However, it does suggest that large numbers of schools have not actively considered ways to improve the headteacher performance appraisal process.

Obstacles to headteacher appraisal and NGA recommendations

When reviewing how headteacher performance appraisal is carried out, there are some areas of practice identified in this report (outlined below) which may hinder the governing board's ability to ensure that headteacher performance management is robust.

Accompanying these findings are some recommendations for those governing. These are taken largely from NGA's updated headteacher appraisal guidance which will shortly be published on the NGA Guidance Centre.



1. There was some confusion as to who should 'lead' the headteacher appraisal process

In a typical standalone school, the data suggests that the headteacher appraisal process usually involves three meetings between: the external advisor and headteacher; the external advisor and the appraisal panel; and the external advisor, headteacher and appraisal panel. However, the order and importance of these meetings varied from school to school, with some schools making decisions concerning the headteachers performance and objectives before all relevant parties had been consulted. For instance, one approach was for the headteacher and external advisor to decide upon the headteachers performance and objectives *before* meeting the appraisal panel. This raises questions around whether the balance between the various parties in relation to advice and decision making is sufficiently delineated.

The process in groups of schools (such as MATs) was often different to that of standalone schools. Here, executive leaders (such as the chief executive) often led the appraisal with support/advice from those governing. However, issues around who should have a stake in the process were also present, with the interview data highlighting confusion and tension around the role of those governing, or other executive leaders, in the process. This confusion was often due to unclear delegation processes and a lack of communication between the different layers of governance and management.

NGA recommendation one

Any decisions made concerning the headteachers performance, and future objectives, should be made in the final meeting (between the headteacher, external advisor [if using] and panel members) to ensure that all appropriate voices are heard. Any 'pre-meetings' involving the external advisor should revolve around collating evidence and collecting thoughts rather than making judgements or decisions.

In groups of schools, it is important that appraisal arrangements are clearly outlined in an annually updated scheme of delegation. This must be published on the groups' website and everyone involved in the appraisal process should be made aware of these arrangements. In line with other sectors, NGA suggest that executive leaders should line-manage headteachers/heads of school within a trust, but that those governing should be able to feed into the process proportionately.

2. There was disagreement as to whether all appraisal panel members need training

84.1% of survey respondents chose panel members 'to a great extent' or 'somewhat' based on whether they had experience in performance appraisal as part of their professional role. However, only 58.3% of respondents with less than one years' experience appraising the headteacher had received training. One interviewee implicitly suggested that this was because experience in a professional capacity is enough to ensure that panel members are competent enough to appraise the headteacher. Whether those with experience needed training was, however, a contentious issue. Other interview respondents emphasised that the purpose of headteacher appraisal training is to get those governing to understand how the process and regulations work in schools, knowledge that is not be transferable from other settings.

NGA recommendation two

All new panel members should receive some form of training. However, this should be proportionate to each panel members' experiences. Whereas those with less experience may benefit from more formal training, others may simply require an in-house coaching session, led by the external adviser, to introduce aspects of appraisal particular to schools. Whatever training is appropriate, all panel members should receive it well in advance of the headteacher appraisal meeting to allow them to ask any questions and make informed preparations.

3. There were issues around the role and appointment of an impartial external advisor

Nearly a quarter of survey respondents noted that their headteacher led the process of appointing an external advisor. Furthermore, the interviewees revealed that external advisors often conduct other roles



within a school, such as being the SIP and/or a mentor to the headteacher. One of the benefits of using an external advisor with knowledge of the school is that they may have a good understanding of how the headteacher has performed throughout the year. However, as the SIP will work closely with senior leaders in a school, conflating the SIP/external advisor role presents a potential conflict of interest.

Furthermore, survey respondents placed greater value upon external advisors that had been appointed by the governing board as opposed to those appointed by the headteacher. In addition, the survey data shows that nearly a quarter of external advisors were involved in making headteacher pay recommendations. As already touched upon, some of the external advisors interviewed also felt that they should 'lead' the appraisal process.

NGA recommendation three

The governing board is responsible for holding the headteacher to account. Where it is required to have an external advisor, or those governing have chosen to use an external adviser, the governing board must take ownership of the decision. It is not appropriate for the headteacher to decide who her/his external adviser will be.

The external adviser needs to have both a good understanding of school data and appraisal objective setting. The role of the adviser is to support and provide impartial advice, not to lead the process or have final say on the headteacher's objectives or pay.

The governing board should review the input of the external adviser on an annual basis and consider replacing the person at regular intervals.

4. Not all schools used appropriate data sources to judge headteacher performance

The survey identified a wide range of data sources used by appraisal panels to assess the headteachers' performance. Although the majority of those surveyed used 'hard' data (such as exam results), for some objectives 'soft' evidence (such as developing the ethos of the school) was considered more applicable.

However, it is important that those governing understand what does and does not constitute an acceptable source of data. One interviewee, for instance, noted that their governing board made judgements on the quality of teaching based on observations made through 'learning walks'.

NGA recommendation four

The governing board and headteacher should agree when the objectives for the year are set, what success will look like and what evidence will be used to assess this. The evidence should be easily accessible and available to governing boards.

5. Not all appraisal panels set their headteacher achievable performance objectives

Encouragingly, 99.3% of respondents linked their headteachers objectives to the schools' priorities. However, in an attempt to link school priorities to the headteachers appraisal, interviewees revealed a tendency to suggest unrealistic objectives or objectives outside of the headteachers' control (such as getting 'good' in the next Ofsted inspection, but an inspection not taking place in the appraisal period).

NGA recommendation five

Objectives must be realistic and achievable. They should be related to the school's priorities and there should be a clear 'success criteria' in place for each objective. Of course, there are always scenarios where an objective becomes completely redundant due to unforeseen circumstances.

Objectives should always be assessed at a formal sixth month review to check that they remain relevant. Where necessary, the objectives should be amended.



6. There was a tendency to neglect the headteachers' professional development

The survey data shows that headteachers who have been in post for a long period of time are, on average, less likely to receive a professional development objective as part of their appraisal. For instance, the survey found that headteachers who had been in post for five years were 10.7% less likely to have a personal objective compared to those new to the post.

NGA recommendation six

Governing boards should actively encourage headteachers to continue to develop at all stages in their career. The [National Standards of Excellence for Headteachers](#), published by the DfE, may be useful in helping identify areas for development. At the end of the appraisal period, the headteacher and governing board should consider what impact any development activities have had on the headteacher's practice.

7. Some headteachers were reluctant to share their objectives with the whole governing board

One external advisor interviewed for this study found that most of the headteachers she/he had worked with chose not to share their objectives beyond the appraisal panel – seeing this information as confidential and personal to them. However, she/he went on to emphasise that a key benefit of sharing objectives with the whole governing board was that this encouraged better challenge and support for the headteacher; allowing those governing to hold their headteacher to account against their objectives more appropriately.

NGA recommendation seven

Aside from some confidential personal objectives, NGA's view is that there is no good reason why the panel should not share the headteachers' objectives with the rest of the governing board. Ultimately, the appraisal panel act on behalf of those governing and the process should be used to focus the work of both the headteacher and governing board. If objectives are set correctly, they should not come as a surprise to other governors/trustees as they should be closely related to the strategic aims and priorities of the organisation.

8. There were more headteachers receiving pay increments than there were headteachers meeting all of their objectives

The survey data shows that there were more headteachers receiving pay increments (63.0%) than there were headteachers meeting all of their objectives (49.3%). Appraisal panels either recommended a pay increment for their headteacher, or could not because they were at the top of their scale, 83.9% of the time.

NGA recommendation eight

Governing boards need to ensure that those making pay recommendations have a clear understanding of the pay policy and how it relates to the appraisal policy. The pay policy should clearly set out what needs to be achieved in order to be awarded a pay increase. This cannot be a tick box exercise. If the headteacher has not met all her/his objectives then those conducting the appraisal need to assess whether there were extenuating factors. The pay committee should receive a written recommendation justifying any pay award being recommended, or indeed when it is not.



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