

'We do struggle to attract people' - Norfolk schools look as far away as Essex in search for governors

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Shortfalls in school governors has seen Norfolk schools launch a recruitment drive and consider applications from as far afield as Essex.

Governing boards play a vital role in the effective running of schools, but hundreds of places across the county remain unfilled, a position made worse by the pandemic.

School governors are responsible for a huge variety of tasks including appointing headteachers, examining how money is being spent and scrutinising the progress that students make.

But the position is unpaid, and it is hard to recruit volunteers, especially in rural Norfolk and villages with high proportions of second home owners.

Jill Wakefield, head of governance for the Diocese of Norwich Education Services, said its 110 schools and academies had about 200 vacancies, 20pc fewer governors than they should have. "Particularly in the rural areas, we do struggle to attract people," she said. "In Norwich there is probably less of a problem, but most of our schools are in those small village locations and some in areas of higher deprivation, which tends to



Jill Wakefield, head of governance for the Diocese of Norwich Education Services

Picture: TIM ROGERS

make it more difficult to attract people."

While over 100 new governors have been recruited at diocese schools and academies since September, and 70 governors reappointed for a second term of office, the pandemic has made the need to bring in new blood more urgent.

A Governance Strategy Group has been formed with Norfolk County Council, Norfolk Governors Network and Educate Norfolk to raise the issue of governance and attract more governors into schools.

The shortfall has also seen the diocese launch a pilot project with national governance recruitment agency Inspiring Governance to seek remote governors from areas further afield

"We have been looking at areas where they have a waiting list of people wanting to become governors, which seems a dream to us, to direct some of those people across to us," said Mrs Wakefield. "We have people in Essex interested in becoming governors at our schools.

"We are arranging to meet those people to have a chat about how that would look, feel and what commitment they can give."

Becoming a Norfolk governor despite living in elsewhere in the country has become a possibility after the success of a year of enforced online meetings, though the role will still involve actually visiting the school.

"We can clearly see that going forward our governor meetings will be a mixture of remote and face-to-face," said Mrs Wakefield. "There won't be a necessity for

people to leave their cosy homes on a cold winter's night and sit in a draughty school hall to have a meeting.

"We know that if we have one governor who doesn't live locally there are still things they can contribute to the governing body."

There is also a drive to boost the diversity of governors recruiting from a variety of backgrounds, including ethnic backgrounds.

"Some of our schools, for example our two schools in King's Lynn, the number who attend who have English as a second language runs at just over 40pc," said Mrs Wakefield.

"We would love to have people from Lithuania, Portugal, Russia and Poland, because those are the language backgrounds that those children have."

Governors have to be over 18 but they need not be a parent. The role involves monitoring visits and regular meetings, as well as attending school events like Christmas plays, sports days and parents' evenings.

People bring diverse skills to the role – some might be experts at figures, like spotting year three girls are outperforming boys from a committee report, while others have specialist skills on issues like health and safety or wellbeing.

Though unpaid, people volunteer to give something back to local communities or to boost their own professional development.

"It does look really good on your CV and you do get the chance to do things that you wouldn't necessarily be able to do at a certain stage in your career," said Mrs Wakefield.

Paul Dunning, director of education at the Diocese of Norwich, said: "People do voluntary work because they want to make a difference and we know that people who are doing those roles get a lot of satisfaction out of it.

"It is very much a leadership role. Schools are run by governors, they have a responsibility to make sure schools are run effectively and monitor the headteacher."

Anyone interested in becoming a governor at diocese schools or academies can email governance@donesc.org.

Find out more at [Norfolk School Governors, Inspiring Governance or Governors for Schools](http://NorfolkSchoolGovernors.org)



Pupils at Harleston Church of England Primary Academy. Inset left, Paul Dunning, director of education at the Diocese of Norwich

Pictures: JAMES BASS/DNEAT

'It's an opportunity to serve your community'

The Rev Matthew Price, vicar of St Mary Magdalene Church in Gorleston, has been a governor at Peterhouse Academy since 2018.

He said: "It's a key role within the community and an important one to help be a critical friend to the teachers and provide support as well as being able to help young people.

"This is a deprived area where you can make a difference. It's an opportunity to serve and invest in your community."





'I feel honoured to be making decisions to benefit children'

Sam Lee, who has three children aged 12, nine and four, was formerly a governor at Chapel Break in Norwich before becoming a governor at Blue Sky Federation, made up of two small, rural primary schools in Erpingham and Northrepps. He said: "I became a governor as I wanted to have a positive influence on the delivery of education that my own children would be exposed to. I wanted, and still want, my children to be in an environment that helps them achieve their potential and teaches them life skills that will set them up well for the future."



'I find it really rewarding being part of the school'

Sandy Clark, a former HR senior manager who now runs her own holiday let business, has been a parent-governor for three years at Dickleburgh Church of England Primary Academy, where her five- and eight-year-old children attend. She said: "I find it really interesting and rewarding being part of the school. Being part of the bigger picture and seeing how the children and teachers interact and having some influence on that. "Some schools are good, some or not so good but it is about making things right and making the best decisions. I feel honoured to be part of it."



Above, a student at Open Academy Norwich

Picture: JAMES BASS PHOTOGRAPHY

'There are times the role is more demanding'

Ruth Robinson, who runs a financial services consultancy and has two daughters, aged 15 and 12, became a governor at Swanton Morley VC Primary while working at Aviva, which encouraged community volunteering. She said: "I felt I could add value to as well as feel part of an important aspect of our children's futures. Immediately I realised the role of a school governor would not only support that goal but really use the skills I

had learnt within my career to the benefit of others. "I have been a governor there now for 10 years and have been chair of governors for six years. "There are times the role is more demanding, such as dealing with head teacher recruitment or a complaint. Ultimately, we are there to deliver the best education for the children at the school."



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