



Applying for HT/DHT/AHT roles

A guide to help school middle or senior leaders self-review their application for HT/AHT/DHT roles.

This document is to help middle leaders understand the application and selection process for HT/DHT/AHT roles from the perspective of governors; who are the recruiters. These are different processes than middle leaders will have encountered.

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About the author

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Martin has contributed written evidence to the House of Commons Education Select Committee inquiries on governance and academies.

He completed the first Master of Arts in Education focussing on governance.

On Twitter (@mm684) he regularly contributes to discussions @SLTchat, @ukgovchat and @headteacherchat.



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This guide is dedicated to my daughter Kate, her art work and support has enabled me to produce a better document. She's not that bad for a teenager ::p



Introduction

There are many discussions about supporting applicants to leadership roles. As someone who has recruited numerous senior leaders I approached this guide with the intention of supporting applicants to be the best they can be.

All senior roles **HAVE** to be recruited by governors in maintained schools. Senior teacher recruitment is different from teacher recruitment which is done by the head teacher with delegated authority from the governing body.

This document is a summary of my personal experiences and many discussions elsewhere. Many thanks to all who have made suggestions to support applicants.

Governors only ever want the best candidate for their school. We don't want the best interviewee we want the best person for the job.

If there is any way we can encourage and facilitate better applicants we do our best to support them. That's why we use a variety of tasks and elements to enable people have a chance to shine in areas which show different skills.

Governors in most maintained schools are drawn from a wide range of stakeholders. There are no regulations which exclude any category of governor from being part of head teacher recruitment, except the existing head teacher.

Governors are human too and they understand that candidates are likely to be nervous. Having sat on both sides of the "table" it's glib to say relax and be yourself. See the whole process as different ways to showcase your skills and abilities.

If you are applying for a DHT/AHT role then when the decision is made the HT has one vote among the governors present.

Governors can ask to observe you in your current school. Please take this visit seriously and use it as an opportunity to show the teaching exemplar you are.

Many governors are on more than one governing body. Don't be surprised to see us again if you have more than one interview.

At the moment in some respects it is an applicant's "market". Don't be seduced by wanting *that* role anywhere. If at any stage you come to the decision that the school you have applied to isn't for you withdraw your application. Being professional includes self-reflection in applications too.

One of the biggest divides in governance at the moment is if a head teacher should be expected to teach. Few schools are small enough to see a head teacher teaching full time. The dilemma is to what extent a head teacher is more a manager than a leader if they don't teach? The issue of credibility among staff of head's who don't teach is often discussed by governors. There isn't an answer which fits all schools.

Written application: *Target your application*

Applicants for senior leadership often forget one of their strongest skillsets when writing their application. Teachers are very skilled in targeting their delivery to students. Target your application to the audience reading it; governors.

Get to know the governors in your current school and it is likely the governors at a school you are applying to will be very similar. Understand their motivation and their role and you will see how they select the successful candidate.

If you are applying for DHT/AHT do not target your application solely to the HT in post. It would be a foolish governing body that ignored the advice of the HT when recruiting those crucial roles but ultimately the decision is made by all the governors.

- Suggestion:
Avoid excessive use of arcane education jargon
- Suggestion:
Be clear but not patronising
- Suggestion:
Know your audience limitations
- Suggestion:
Avoid unnecessary TLA's
- Suggestion:
Remember that governors are the target audience.
- Suggestion:
Spelling, grammar and punctuation errors are not acceptable



Who are governors?

Governing bodies have one function: to ensure each and every child in their school has the very best education. All other aspects flow from this. This single aim is the heart of what motivates people to be good governors.

Governors dislike people who are disparaging, disrespectful or patronising to them or their school.

When a new appointment is necessary the panel is set by the governing body. There are three or more people selected. If school tells you which governors are on the panel research may be interesting but it's unlikely to have much impact because the decision is collective.



Governors come from a range of stakeholders but they are not delegates they are representatives. They don't ask their community how to vote.

When you are at the selection day there may well be other people bobbing about like HR, diocese or LA. They are there to advise and do not form any part of the actual decision making process.

Governing bodies I know have no single group disproportionately represented. Ages range from 20's to 70's and governors are drawn widely different backgrounds.

The role of Chair is different from governor. Research into chairs shows an average chair is; 40-50 years of age, male, professional/managerial and white British. That reflects the average English school and should come as no surprise. Be very careful though. I know many excellent chairs that are not from this group.

Chairs are very different from head teachers. They have to lead a committee of volunteers, none of whom they select and who may walk away if they choose. They have to work closely with the head teacher and understand the boundaries of responsibility. They may be deselected by their governing body at the next meeting!

Governors care about *their* school. The more you relate what you have to offer to *their* school the happier they are. Mention what you have seen, any networking links you already may have through courses, colleagues or cluster events. Similarities between your current role and the challenges facing their school will be very interesting.

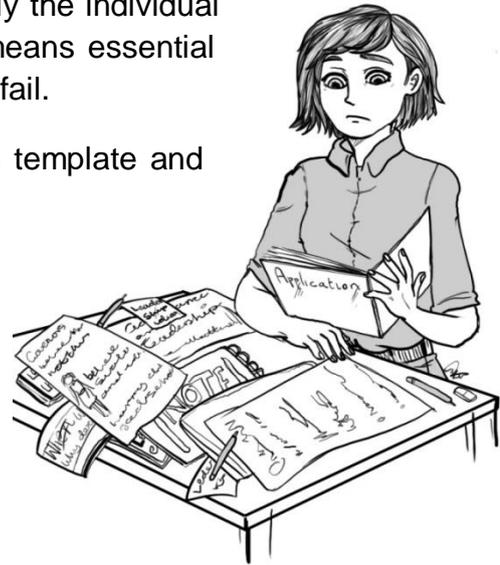
Tailor your application: *Person Specification*

Before the job advert is published governors often spend a very long time discussing what should go into a person specification. The wording can be argued about significantly so please take seriously the individual nuances for each school. If it says essential it means essential and ignoring that may mean the application could fail.

Governors often start with a person specification template and amend that to meet what their school needs.

Recycling the person specification from a previous application may not work well unless you edit it carefully.

The person specification may indicate areas which appear as tasks/questions in the interview stage. The tasks may be varied but what the governors are looking for may be clearer.



Suggestion: Match your application letter section by section to the person specification. Governors cross reference a matrix of essential and desirable aspects to decide who is interviewed. We take this very seriously but if the application is jumbled and out of sequence to what we expect an important part may be missed.

Sometimes applicants feel very strongly about a particular management style. There is nothing wrong with that but omitting any mention of “I have...” and always referring to “We have...” gives the impression the applicant hasn’t personally lead anything.

Suggestion: Vary what you say in answer to aspects of the person specification. Where you have lead state that and what impact you collectively and personally achieved. Where you were part of a team that collectively achieved impact explain how that worked. Both aspects are important.

Suggestion: Ask a person you trust to proof read your application to ensure you are clear, put the best image of yourself forward and ensure there is variety of responses.



COMMON MYTHS

- That the length of the application will have a direct impact on who is interviewed
- You can write too much or too little
- The details of a person specification are set nationally and never alter
- Essential doesn't mean "essential"
- The details in the person specification are open to interpretation by the applicant
- The target audience understand all education abbreviations and jargon
- Leadership and management are the same
- The informal visit to school has no bearing on the outcome
- Observing you teach/lead assembly are only a minor part of selection

Tailor your application: *The school*

Governors ideally want to employ someone who cares about their school and children. Research the school and tailor your application to show you have taken the time to know the school context and history. This equally applies to the interview and application form.

Suggestion:

Mention parallels between your context and the context of the school you want to move to.

Suggestion:

Mention successes you have had and the impact on school – draw parallels.



The application form: *The form*

Every panel should have at least one person trained in safer recruitment. Safer recruitment training advises to reject an application if the form is altered.

The standard application form is designed to enable quick cross referencing and to make sure safeguarding checks are not missed. Changes made may be perfectly innocent but we are unable to go back to the person to check. Do not alter the form.

Spelling, punctuation and grammar mistakes often spoil a good application. It gives a sense of a lack of attention to detail and professionalism.

Suggestion:

Do not remove pages if they do not apply to you. Clearly state they are not applicable.

Suggestion:

Do not change fonts, resize or change the position of sections.

If you want to add more text keep on typing.

Suggestion:

Do not save the form to a different type or format.

Governors may not be able to view alternative formats.

Suggestion:

Use actual examples of what you have recently achieved and the measureable impact on progress and attainment



The application form: *Leadership and management*

Governors strive for the very best, not the best locally or in their town, the very best. No excuses, every child deserves the best we can provide.

Governors have work experiences from outside education and these skills and experiences often enable governors to see the difference between leadership and management quite clearly.

Ofsted view leadership and management as separate and if you have the opportunity to show these in your application please tell us. Personal examples which show skills you have used demonstrating impact matter most. We understand that everyone is a team member at times and working collaboratively is also important.

Suggestion:

Make explicit where you have managed and where you have lead.

Suggestion:

If you have chance to show what style of leadership and management you follow please tell us.

Suggestion:

Impact on progress, attainment and achievement are very important. Demonstrate how you have achieved this.

Deadlines

Governors understand that applicants are human and sometimes life intervenes and an application may be late. If you have a genuine reason why your application is late send it as soon as possible and explain why it's late.

Be aware that often initial application sift happens on the day the application closes so a very late application is unlikely to be included.

The application; *visit to school*

Schools encourage candidates to visit after they have been shortlisted. Please take this seriously it is an aspect of the selection process.

The visit is for two purposes; to enable school to showcase themselves to you to encourage your application and for them to see you first hand.

Any adult you meet may be a governor. Parents, lunchtime staff, support staff and teachers can all be on the interview panel if they are a governor.

Often the school council is part of the selection; any child you meet may be interviewing you later.

A good candidate looks at displays, teaching styles, the behaviour of children, topics being studied and many other things.



Suggestion:

If you see a great display, mention it at interview.

Suggestion:

If you see a teaching style you can help develop mention that at interview.

Suggestion:

If you see an aspect of school where you have successfully had impact in your current role use it as an interview example.

Suggestion:

Listen to what the existing post holder contributes to the whole of school. Can you offer a similar level of commitment?

Suggestion:

If the school turns out to be not what you expected and you wouldn't be happy working there withdraw your application.

After visiting you don't feel that the school is for you withdraw your application. It's the professional thing to do.

The application; *the interview day*

Congratulations. If you are invited to interview it means the governing body sees you as a credible candidate who potentially they would employ in their school as a senior leader. This is a significant compliment to you.

Governing bodies sometimes choose to shortlist no one and re-advertise. If the new advert does not state “previous applicants need not reapply” then it’s up to you to amend your application and reapply if you want to.

Governors do not need to tell candidates to turn up looking and behaving in a professional manner. Neither do they have a preconceived idea of how someone should look.

I often get asked how professional the decision making process is with a governing body made up of volunteers. To be clear; any remark which is inappropriate among governors is not tolerated.

As a team we have high expectations of each other and casual sexism or any other ism is rebuked promptly. If you hear a governing body behaving like that please seriously consider if you want to work with them.



The application; the interview day; organisation

There is not proscribed list of tasks, interviews or procedures a governing body has to follow to select the successful candidate.

The process does have to be reasonable, fair and legal which is why HR support is there.

I have seen processes which range from one 30 minute interview to a three day selection ordeal.

My perspective is that a candidate must have a range of opportunities to demonstrate skills we are looking to see. The style, format and focus of tasks should have sufficient variety.

To some extent being a head teacher is a frame of mind. The confidence to lead and feel comfortable answering leadership questions comes across very clearly.



Tasks can include:

- A data task centred on an aspect of a school with concerns
- A letter of introduction to parents
- A letter to parents explaining a new initiative
- A focus group of governors asking in depth questions
- A seen presentation
- An unseen presentation
- A formal interview
- A school council interview – these are great students can ask almost anything
- A workshop with students
- A financial task
- A pupil tracking task
- A staff discipline task
- A safeguarding task
- A pupil premium task
- A SEND task
- A teaching task
- An Ofsted review task



.....or anything else the imagination of the panel can dream up!

Suggestion:

If you have a “seen” task the expectation is that it will be sparkling. It has to be the absolute very best. Often these tasks are open ended to enable governors to see the personal philosophy of the candidate. Stick to the technology and time parameters set. If you are unsure ring school and check.

Suggestion:

If you have an unseen task, be yourself. As a teacher this kind of task should be second nature to you and the content should already be familiar. These tasks often enable governors to see the personal philosophy of the candidate.

Suggestion:

If you have a written task and you are unsure phone a friend. Any new senior leader has to know when to seek advice. This is not a weakness and governors should be reassured by your self-awareness and support network. Any new leader would not be expected to work in isolation and interview is not a memory test.



The application; the interview day; *Interview questions*

I most frequently get asked what questions are used at interview. Any quick search online will reveal a standard set of questions about safeguarding, data, finance, progress, attainment, staff discipline etc. These are NOT agreed either locally or nationally and governors do not have to use any of them.

A good governing body selection panel will look at the skills they need from the candidate and skew the questions to explore if the candidate has these qualities.

Sometimes governors will not ask a usual question because they assume all shortlisted candidates will already have these skills. It shows faith in the candidates being interviewed.

Governors will have agreed which questions to use well in advance.

When we write things down it is either a resonance to an issue or you have said something which is a key point of the question. Do not draw an implication from either writing or focussing on you. Neither is a key indicator.

Suggestion:

If the panel asks a supplementary question it's often because they want you to expand on something you briefly mentioned. Pause, take a deep breath and expand on your answer. If you feel confident enough ask which aspect of your answer governors would like further information about.

Suggestion:

Panels expect people to be nervous. Do not see this as a disadvantage. Acclimatise yourself to governors by meeting with the governors at your current school.

Suggestion:

Do not assume either a short or lengthy interview is a good or bad sign.

Suggestion:

Learn answers to common questions – key phrases or words are important.



Suggestion:

Please never do what a candidate did recently and stop half way through and state that we weren't asking the questions they had researched.

Suggestion:

If there has been publicity about school the governors will expect you to know. Do not shy away from being honest if the situation arises.

Suggestion:

Consider questions to understand what challenges school faces and then support school to overcome these barriers.

The application; the interview day; *References*

References are read by governors. Frequently the governing body is the employer and they have a duty of care to read all the relevant documents.

If you have the opportunity please discuss your references with your referees. I have seen many badly written, rushed and occasionally unintelligible references which disadvantage a candidate. They give the impression the referee does not value the process or the candidate.

Suggestion:

Ask your referee if you can discuss the reference with them.

COMMON MYTHS:

The length of an interview is an indication of how well it went

Feedback from different governing bodies is consistent

Internal candidates are automatically favoured

Governors have a set list of questions

The application; the interview day; *the decision*

Governors do not have use a set method to arrive at their decision.

The first question every time is “do we feel we have a candidate we can appoint?” If the governors are not unanimous at that point the process ends there.

How governors arrive at their decision can be unique to the governing body. Some matrix task results others eliminate candidates one by one in an x-factor style or have a discussion.

The days where an LA can lean on governors to appoint a particular candidate are largely gone.

Any governing body which favours an internal candidate is not doing their school justice. Governors should have the same expectations of every candidate. Governors use the evidence presented to them at application and interview to make their decision.

If you are an internal candidate treat the selection process with respect. Refer to governors as they are introduced. Take tasks seriously and expect the same level of expectation as every other candidate. You have to demonstrate on the day you are the best, the same as all candidates.



Feedback

If you apply for more than one post and you receive contradictory feedback please do not be disheartened.

Governors can find it difficult to express why they have chosen one candidate over another. I once received feedback that governors chose another candidate because they lived five miles closer. Please don't try and make sense of things that are unusual.

The difference between one candidate and another can genuinely be marginal. We make what we feel is the best decision on the day. That may not be the case but we make the decision with the best interests of our school at heart.

If you want extensive feedback ask for the HR provider. Frequently they will see the depth of discussion the governors have been through and may well be able to explain how the decision was arrived at.



Conclusion

Congratulations when you are successful.

That will be the first step on a long journey with the governing body. Rest assured if they have confidence in you to be head teacher they will support and challenge you in equal measure.

Don't lose heart if you are unsuccessful there are many delightful schools in different contexts throughout our country.

The recruitment process is not perfect and governors make the best decision they can on the day. It's extremely unlikely there will have been shenanigans behind the scenes but if you think that would you really want to work there?