

Governance what is it and why?

Members of Council are volunteers, freely giving time, knowledge & skills, to work as the school's governing body. Elmfield, as a not-for-profit charity, is obliged to have trustees with the duty to ensure the school does what it was set up to do, i.e. provide "education according to the principles of Rudolf Steiner", and, in doing so, meet the test of "public benefit" as defined by the Charity Commission. Similarly, Council members are also directors of a company "limited by guarantee", answerable to Elmfield School Association, which elects them. The word "Council" therefore integrates governance, trusteeship & director responsibilities in line with the schools constitution & legal framework.

That is why the Council is represented at the top of Elmfield's organisational structure, as it is in our strategic plan. Such charts are accurate enough but can be misleading unless you remember that trusteeship & governance are positions of service, and not, under normal circumstances, hands-on leadership. The Strategic Plan itself is a guiding document for Council and our School Leadership, setting out longer-term objectives in order to maintain and develop the work of the school. Thus, Council's leadership role is a matter of monitoring the work of the school against its strategy as well the school's stated aims, challenging lead staff when necessary & giving support as needed. Council's position in the organisation is that of a bird's-eye view, keeping watch over the school, as a whole, & providing essential checks & balances. The National Governors' Association uses the motto that, under normal circumstances, governors should be "eyes-on, but hands-off". Consequently, Council members need full correct information from employees, covering all- important matters for the effective running of the school, its business essentials, including overseeing school budgets & financial requirements, staffing, and, of course, all aspects of the education. Governors have to be prepared to read large numbers of reports & school policies, to question & think about these, & the school's operation, appreciatively, but also critically.

Elmfield's distinctive character, implied in what is said about the school's charitable purpose (set out our legal constitution, the Articles & Memorandum of Association), is important to Council. Elmfield is constituted as a Steiner-Waldorf school & that that entails ways of working significantly unlike those of any run-of-the-mill independent, or publically-funded school. If they are to their jobs properly, every trustee should be supportive of Waldorf philosophy & ethos. Individual trustees cannot, however, be expected to be experts in any, or all, Waldorf principles & practices. They do, however, need to be in sympathetic accord with Elmfield's values & culture. As long as at least some Council members are reasonably knowledgeable, that is ordinarily sufficient. Because Steiner-Waldorf schools work with an evolving philosophy, rather than a fixed ideology, and staff work collegially as reflective professionals engaged in contemplative action research, our staff are the real bearers and developers of the education, and Council stands beside them ready to help when needed.

While that is crucial to Elmfield's identity as a Steiner Waldorf school, there are also prior conditions for which the Council must carry some responsibility. In order to operate as a school, registration with the Department for Education is prerequisite. This involves meeting standards set out in what are called the "Independent School Standards". Compliance with these is subject to inspection (by Ofsted) and Elmfield's continued existence depends upon this. Consequently, each governor has a remit to focus on a particular aspect of the school,

linked to those regulations or to others that apply more generally to charities. In addition to key organisational roles, such as Chair & Treasurer, governor remits include overview of health and safety, learning support, safeguarding, boarding, teaching, and so on. Governors may be called in to meet school inspectors who evaluate the effectiveness of school governance as part of their assessment of school leadership as a whole. The current Chair of the College of Teachers, nominated staff trustees, and those with key leadership roles also attend Council.

The Council as a whole, led by the Chair, has a duty to unify individual responsibilities so that decisions can be made jointly, or corporately. To facilitate that, all Council discussions are held in confidence, although the outcome of discussions are openly communicated as appropriate to the wider school community. The "seven principles for public life" set out by Lord Nolan, "the Seven Nolan Principles", are widely accepted as applicable to school governance & Council members endeavour to be guided by these -

Selflessness, Integrity, Objectivity, Accountability, Openness, Honesty and Leadership

This last item, leadership, being concerned with leading by example, i.e. in behaving in such away as to exemplify the six previous principles. We should highlight here a practical issue that can cause problems negating the Nolan principles, one that is of deep concern to the Charity Commission, as it is a lurking danger in any organisation. Questions potential or actual of conflict of interest and loyalty cannot be removed entirely but must be addressed openly & managed.

Managing conflict of interest involves ensuring that personal wishes, preferences or prejudices do not determine how governors act. This may be particularly difficult for governors who are also parents of children, or close friends of staff or otherwise closely related to the school. Governors must act in the best interests of the school, which may not always be suit their personal preferences or allegiances. It is, of course, all too human to be influenced by the personal. Governors' collective responsibility is one defence. At Elmfield, ensuring that there are always some "independent trustees" (i.e. people with no current and direct connectedness to the work of the school, or community) serve to strengthen Council objectivity. In addition, and in line with Charity guidance, a register of potential conflicts of interest or loyalty is kept based on self-declaration prior to appointment and each meeting starts with members being asked to declare any potential conflict based on meeting agenda, which is made available in advance.

Elmfield school relies upon the high quality and commitment of its staff, but also on the contribution of the Council. The following page contains further context, references and sources of information about trusteeship and school governance. If you are interested in becoming a member of Council, please consider the information included here and see the school website for vacancies, following the contact information and application process indicated. School governance may not be easy, but it is rewarding.

Addendum: Context & Sources

What's in the mix? The factors governance of a Steiner Waldorf school needs to take into account, or which exert influence on the conduct of governance:

- Commonsense - contemplative reflection/meditative practice
- Rudolf Steiner's indications - scattered across different lectures & records & interpretation of these in publications by senior Waldorf school leaders, advisers & researchers. In particular -
 - Clarity of intention
 - Self-governing, "micro-level" social forms
 - Reflective practice at the heart of pedagogy & school organisation
- Statutory requirements under English law (education is devolved)
- Lessons from independent & publically-funded schools UK-wide & educational leadership research, e.g. British Education, Management & Administration Association (BELMAS).
- Lessons from international sources, including Waldorf schools worldwide
- The general tradition of law & governance within the UK

About Charity Trusteeship: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-essential-trustee-what-you-need-to-know-cc3>

School Governance: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/governance-handbook>

Also: <https://www.nga.org.uk/Knowledge-Centre/Vision-ethos-and-strategic-direction/Being-Strategic-A-guide-for-governing-boards.aspx>

Conflict of Interest & Loyalty: <https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-d&q=charity+commission+conflict+of+interest>

Also: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/manage-a-conflict-of-interest-in-your-charity>

Overview written for Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship:

https://www.academia.edu/39549163/Not_Only_But_Also_And_the_difficult_art_of_Waldorf_school_governance

Elmfield Strategic Plan: <https://elmfield.com/the-school/key-info/strategic-plan/>