



# Effective Agenda Planning

An Independent Research Report

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Every governing board meeting should be accompanied by an agenda. This report investigates the role agendas can play in assisting governors and trustees to effectively fulfil the three core functions of governance. The report examines a range of issues such as 'long do we spend preparing agendas for meetings'; 'how much information (by way of documents to read and digest) are we expecting those with a responsibility for governance to read and digest', and 'how do we cover all the items on the agenda in an average meeting'.

Anecdotally, it is becoming obvious that although online meetings are being embraced for the benefits that they can bring, and that board paperwork software is widely used, the number of documents and reports accompanying the agenda is increasing or least not decreasing. For those of us who have been governors for a long time and remember receiving our papers in the post we often wonder whether there could perhaps be a more active relationship between streamlining for administrative effectiveness and streamlining for focus. The duty of care that governors and trustees should have for wellbeing should not only be for senior and executive leaders but for each other. Considering our own wellbeing in terms of time spent preparing for meeting adds an interesting dimension to the conversation about effectiveness.

While this research report does not purport to be academically rigorous it does offer a baseline from which clerks and governance professionals, chairs, committee chairs, headteachers and CEO can begin to consider the effectiveness, and potentially the usefulness of, their board meeting agendas.

The survey indicates that most of us who are responsible for preparing and finalising agendas spend approximately one hour doing so, we attach somewhere between 6 and 10 documents, that we design our own agenda (in that we do not follow the agenda set by the local authority or our multi academy governance trust leads) and that meetings last about 2 hours on average. A small proportion of boards defer items to the next meeting or report that the last few items are rushed. A more focused agenda would certainly help.

It is also clear from the survey that there is a significant minority of governing boards who receive their meeting documentation late and where clerks are chasing up senior and executive leaders for reports. Whilst it is fully appreciated that there are other, often competing, priorities governance cannot be effectively discharged if people are not fully prepared. As a counterbalance to this, several chairs and clerks reported that it was clear that there are governors who are not doing any meeting preparation. Some respondents, notably clerks, suggested that encouraging the use of cover reports and executive summaries was on their 'to do' list.

Clerks reported that whilst board pack software was being used effectively there was room for improvement both in terms of how boards were using the software and how this could be used to share information in a more streamlined and focused manner.

The report is interspersed with comments made by clerks and governance professionals; those who are overwhelmingly responsible for designing, compiling, and preparing agendas. These are in italics. There are also a number of suggested activities and reflection points. I hope you find them useful.

I hope this report offers some useful insights and I would like to thank everybody who completed the survey.

The findings should not come as a surprise and should offer some comfort to those who are wrangling with the agenda preparation on a regular basis.

*Fee Stagg*

National Leader of Governance and independent governance advisor.

April 2021

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank all the clerks, governance professionals, chairs, vice chairs, headteachers, CEO and Finance Directors and business managers who have contributed to this report either through completing the survey and by sharing their thoughts, concerns, and ideas in other forum. This report is totally independent and would not have been possible without your input.

Contributions are purposely anonymous and if you recognise your quote, I hope I have used it in the spirit in which you offered it.

*Thank you.*

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## INTRODUCTION

If we start with the premise that governing board decision making should not take place in isolation of the agenda, then we need to spend time giving and some active consideration to how we prepare and use our meeting agendas.

### What is an agenda?

At its most basic an agenda is a list of items to be discussed at a meeting. Items are listed in the order in which they ought to be discussed and should be in a logical order. It is important that all agendas, irrespective of the purpose of the meeting, contain the following information:

- Name of the school and/or Academy trust,
- Date and time,
- Meeting title - Full Governing Board, Finance Committee etc

They should also include several administrative items such as

- Minutes of the last meeting,
- Declarations of interest, and
- Confidentiality
- Date of next meeting

### How did governors and clerks describe agendas?

*An effective agenda gives direction in a meeting, so everyone knows what they're talking about.*

*The agenda is a tool to drive the meeting forward and give it structure and purpose.*

*We are always told we must demonstrate challenge well that just isn't about recording questions in the minutes, the way we construct our, who constructs them and what topics are addressed is also a really important part of how we challenge.'*

*The agenda can really help smooth the process of governance and help colleagues understand what is required before they get to the meeting.*

*I try to keep the agenda as clean and minimalist as possible! I include who is presenting but not a lot more. The use of Governor Hub has really helped to link documents to agenda items by simple numbering.*

*Thought should be given to the order of items not only in terms of making sure that those presenting items do so at the appropriate point in the meeting, (and) that agenda items are*

*listed in such a way put the meeting flows in a logical order each item has a separate number.*

*My heart sinks when I receive the termly agenda. It looks impenetrable, does not offer*

*any guidance on what type of decisions I need to make as a governor and sometimes feels a bit random.*

The ICSA, the Governance Institute<sup>1</sup> state that *an effective board will provide good governance and leadership by ensuring delivery of organisational purpose.*

Governing board meetings should '*be agile and maximise the potential of the people and resources available*<sup>2</sup>' and the agenda should support this agility by being focused, relevant and up to date.

**AOB or not to AOB?**

*Everyone should understand that AOB should be something that is really important but can't wait till the next meeting.*

AOB should be an optional extra. increasingly chairs are asking for this item to be removed from the agenda as it often gives rise to discussion on items which should have been on the substantive agenda and adds extra time to the meeting. Governors often complain that they do not have time to discuss the matters raised in enough detail to be fully effective.

**What elements make up an effective agenda?**

*'Yet when a clear purpose combined with a true willingness to communicate and adapt, meetings work and vibrant, engaging, and valuable...and enjoyable' Chapman, 2016 page 15.*

The 8 elements of effective governance (3) are widely accepted to be;

1. The right people round the table,
2. Understanding the role and responsibilities,
3. Good chairing,
4. Professional clerking,
5. Good relationships based on trust,
6. Knowing the school– the data, the staff, the parents, the children, the community,

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<sup>1</sup> [The Chartered Governance Institute is the professional body for governance \(icsa.org.uk\)](https://www.icsa.org.uk)

<sup>2</sup> Chapman H, 2016

<sup>3</sup> NGA [Effective governance | Eight Elements of Effective Governance - National Governance Association \(nga.org.uk\)](https://www.nga.org.uk)

7. Committed to asking challenging questions,
8. Confident to have courageous conversations in the interests of the children and young people.

*A suggestion...*

Underpinning these established elements why not have 8 elements of effective agenda planning...?

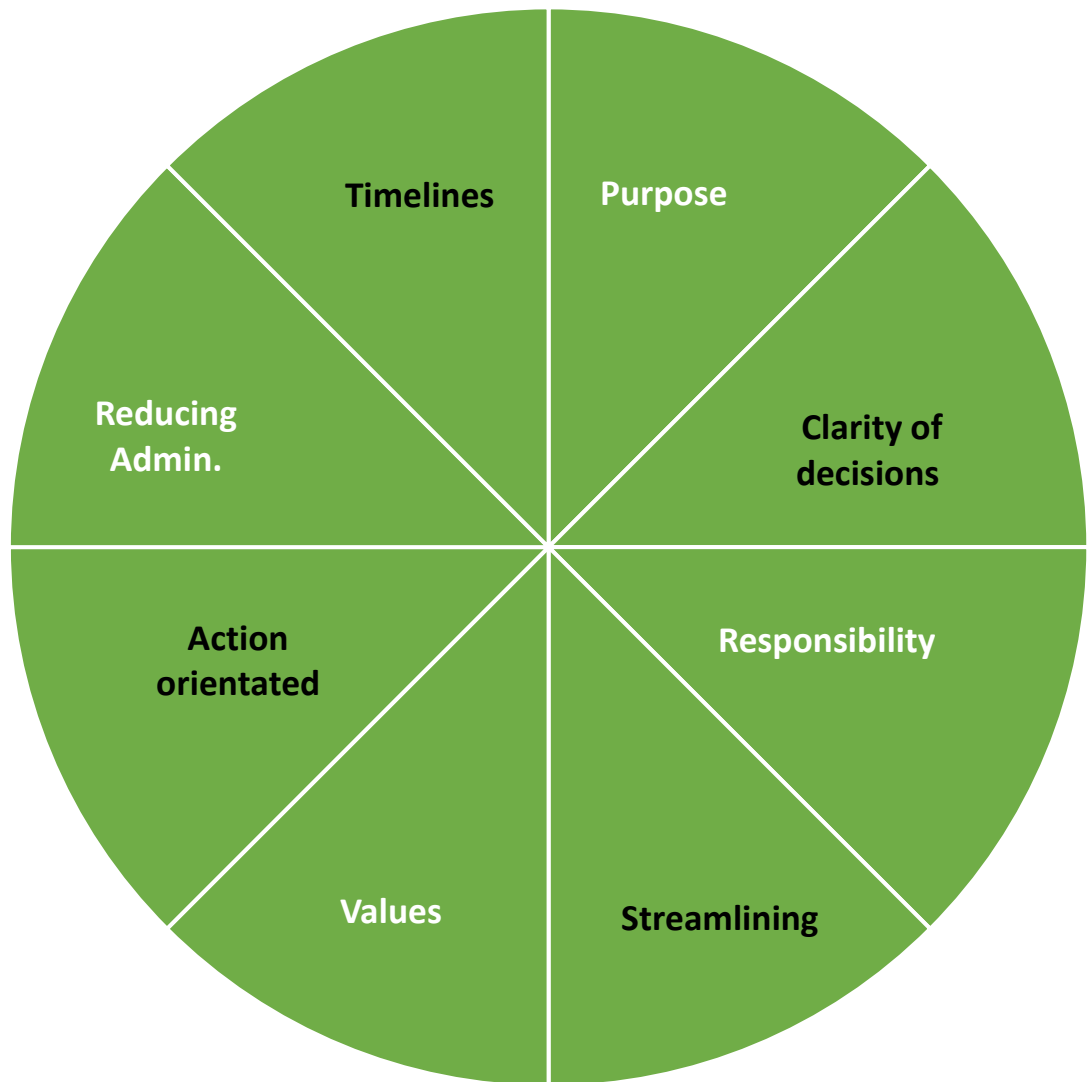
1. Understanding the **purpose** of the meeting,
2. Having **clarity** around decisions which need to be made,
3. Knowing who is **responsible** for preparing reports and papers and who is presenting them,
4. **Streamlining** – reducing papers and attachments, staying focused on priority issues, consider the use of AOB carefully,
5. **Action orientated** – making better use of action logs, report by exception,
6. Restating our **values** – how do we live the school or trust values at meetings? Being outcomes more driven.
7. Managing our standing items to reduce the **admin** – thinking about the order of the meeting.
8. Having clear **timelines** and keeping to deadlines.

#### **Activity 1 – Competency Frameworks**

- Suggest the chairs and chairs of committees review the Clerking Competency Framework; remember that many of the competencies listed may be undertaken by people other than the clerk. Also, it might be worth checking if governors are aware of the Competency Framework for Governors.



## 8 Elements of Effective Agenda Planning



What would you add or remove from this list of suggestions?

## Activity 2 Agenda Order

Take a look at your last meeting agenda: -

- Did the chair take the meeting in the order of the agenda items? If not, why not?
- Did you think that the meeting 'flowed well' or did it feel disjointed?
- Thinking about your agendas, where are you putting the items which require the 'conscious effort' and how are you communicating this?
- Were your agendas intentional and purposeful or just a random list of things to talk about at the meeting?
- Did you defer any items? Which ones and why?
- Did you get all the papers on time? If not how late were they? If you did not have time to fully prepare – say so.

### Reflection Point 1

- An effective and purposeful agenda can drive, in an almost subconscious way, effective, focused and intentional governance.
- Think about **what** and **why** of your agendas.

### The DfE Clerking Competency Framework 2017

1. Any report on agenda planning should take as a reference point the Clerking Competency Framework. The Framework is clear about the role of the clerk in agenda setting and administration of the board. *Taking care of the basics enables the chair and the board to make more effective use of their time and focus on strategic matters. Professional clerking involves developing a forward plan with the chair so that board members are well prepared for meetings and executive leaders are able to provide the right information for discussion.* This can only be achieved by having strong and focused agendas, identifying the right information at the right time and which do not include superfluous information which distracts from the core purpose. As one experienced chair put it *some items would better placed in a newsletter and not the in the Headteacher's Report!*

## The PROCESS of AGENDA SETTING

The process of agenda setting is not as straightforward as it seems; neither should it be overly complicated. By allowing enough time for items for inclusion on an agenda to be agreed by the chair, and for reports and accompanying papers to be prepared and circulated, is crucial. A rushed agenda does not serve good governance.

If you have access to an annual agenda planner or the agenda for the last meeting, then this should form the baseline for your agenda.

The survey asked 3 questions.

1. Who owns and sets the agenda and how much flexibility is there in the agenda-setting process?
2. How long does it take to prepare an agenda?
3. Do governors use board pack software and how confident are they?

### Who owns and sets the agenda?

Governors often ask 'who owns the agenda? How can I get my items of interest onto the agenda?' The final agenda is owned by the chair of the meeting as they have to lead the discussion, but the agenda process itself should be owned by the board. If an individual wishes to have an item included on the agenda, it is sensible to raise this well in advance with the chair and clerk rather than using Any Other Business (AOB). The agenda should be a collaborative document based on input from the clerk, the head or CEO, the finance team, and the chair. Agendas should not be seen in isolation of vision or strategy.

*It's everyone's role.*

*A clerk comments I think a lot of boards rely too heavily on the clerk to know everything and produce an agenda accordingly. The agenda setting process doesn't just rest on the shoulders of the clerk; the HT and chair should also take a responsible approach to check for anything that needs to be added or changed.*

Results of the survey indicate that 37% of respondents follow an agenda set by someone else e.g. the Local Authority or Trust Governance Lead (or equivalent). If this is your board – what control do you as clerk, chair or headteacher have over the agenda items?

Of those who said they had control over the agenda 53% of respondents 'had a lot of (a lot was not defined so it is very subjective) 'as the agenda was viewed in many cases 'as a list of suggested items'.

46% had some control e.g. they have standing items but can add other items as required; and a very small number had no control at all.

### Time Spent on Agenda Preparation

Most respondents who replied that they were responsible for collating the agenda spent approximately 1 hour undertaking the task. Clerks commented that they would like papers well before the deadline, if only so that they had time to read and review and to ensure that any additional support could be put in place or that items have not been missed.



Overwhelmingly clerks reported that they are collating the information ready to be sent out to governors and trustees. 8% of headteachers reported that they are undertaking this task. If this is the case in your school, it might be worth asking why this is the case. One headteacher /CEO commented - *I see the collection of reports as my responsibility I would like the trustees to be more specific in what information they'd like and how they'd like it.* Whilst the second part of that comment is undoubtedly true arguably it should be the chair who is orchestrating the preparation or at least the direction of the agenda planning activity.

If someone other than the clerk is collating the information to be sent to governors there is a potential danger that;

- Compliance with statutory guidance and legislation is not as strong as it could be,
- There are hidden costs – e.g. the time spent by the headteacher or exec. Leader,
- Opportunity for bias and influence – such as only including items which the chair or headteacher think are important or relevant. This could be intentional or well-meaning, but it can lead to 'mission creep'. If you think that this is happening in your school – consider asking for an external review of governance.

- Good practice is overlooked.

## **Board Pack Software**

64% of the respondents to the survey said that their school or trust 'did not offer the option of paper board packs' anymore. If you are preparing paper packs these need to be ready 10 days in advance at least to allow time for printing and postage. Encouragingly 67% of governors and clerks reported that their boards were confident, to a greater or lesser extent, in using board pack software. The recent move to virtual meetings and the benefits this has brought have been reported widely. As a starting point further information can be found at [www.nga.org.uk](http://www.nga.org.uk)

*The benefits are clear.*

*More and more we use Trust SharePoint for people to save papers ahead of meeting, with a set deadline, then clerks pick up from there to pop onto Governor Hub ahead of meetings.*

A clerk commented that using board pack software *saves a lot of emailing back and forth, especially for documents that are used both internally (operationally, eg risk assessments) and for governance. Also started to make clearer whether documents contain stuff that need to be approved, are for discussion or just for information, etc. Also sometimes overview/summary document (eg surveys) plus full info for those who want to dig deeper.*

## **Some Suggested Changes**

### *Streamlining*

Some of the ideas shared by clerks and governors to streamline the paperwork are not 'rocket science' but if consistently applied would save time and refocus meetings.

Some ideas to help with streamlining (thanks to Stephen Covey in his book 'The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People') include;

Putting the First Things First – this is about prioritising; what on your agenda is important, when it is important and why?

Begin with the End in Mind – what is the purpose of the meeting? Plan the agenda around that rather than trying to make things fit. As one clerk so succinctly put it '*fewer items in greater depth*'

Think about...

2. What is always important?
3. What is important now?
4. What can we legitimately remove from the agenda?

*Set yourself a deadline.*

Setting the dates for meetings well in advance allows time for positive preparation. Work back from the date of the meeting and allow enough time to meet the 7 days in advance deadline; time to collate reports and time to prepare them. If you are a clerk keeping on top of deadlines is a key part of the role and board pack software is a great support. Create a shared space for drafts, reports and papers which can be password protected if needed.

*One respondent wrote I struggle to get governors to adopt new practices regarding the receipt of electronic papers and to prepare in advance for meetings. They think they are doing a huge favour by just turning up and it is so obvious when they haven't read the papers and if they missed a meeting, we have to re-hash the last meeting despite being told they could send in questions in advance if they can't make it.*

If your meetings are on a short but regular cycle such as Interim Executive Boards or Rapid Action Working Groups, then there will be a need to be flexible in terms of deadlines, but it is important that those governors on such boards are prepared to read and digest papers at short notice.

### **Reflection Point 2**

- If you are responsible for preparing an FGB agenda how long do you spend?
- What are the main barriers? How can you overcome these?

## The Voices of Clerks and Governors

Respondents were asked to share their thoughts on agendas and meetings and there were a number of comments which are worth sharing – do these statements resonate with you or do you recognise the behaviours highlighted?

*As a governance professional and clerk to the trust board, I also work with report authors to guide content, format etc to ensure trustees have the information they need to make informed decisions.*

*Meetings have been more focused online, but with less contributions from some governors. I have some concern that there are areas which have (by necessity) been neglected while focusing on school reopening and recovery and feel that the late notice and amount of information coming from the DfE has made governance very challenging for everyone.*

*I have answered the above in relation to the MAT academy where I am a governor. I am also a governor at a local community primary school - their meetings are longer; have more agenda items and take longer to prepare for; however there is less discussion at those meetings, feels like it is more rubber stamping with the parent governors (which include the Chair and Vice Chair) having more say and day to day understanding- leaving those of us without children feeling a little side lined.*

*Make clearer whether documents contain stuff that needs to be approved, are for discussion or just for information, etc. Also sometimes overview/summary document (eg surveys) plus full info for those who want to dig deeper.*

*Need to get the whole LGB more involved with items on agenda and direction of travel and development of LGB as a whole.*

### *Better Preparation Makes a Difference*

*I wish governors would read the papers. The meetings would be so much better if everyone was prepared. This was the same pre-COVID so we can't blame the pandemic.*

*I get stressed as the clerk getting all the documents and agenda agreed to meet the circulate 7 days before meeting, I start chasing a month before the meeting and get frustrated that it is common for no one to submit documents or agree my draft agenda until the day of the meeting. Chair relies on HT and Clerk to agree the agenda!*

*When preparing reports it would be good if everyone read them as it takes a huge amount of time to collate the information.*

### *How much!?*

3 chairs who completed the survey admitted to only '*just reading the agenda and the headteachers report*' but fortunately the vast majority of chairs said they read 100% of the papers for the meeting.

34% of clerks said they only read those papers which they had to read which is understandable if they are clerking more than one board. Speed reading is one the clerks hidden superpowers. 14% said they read those papers which were of particular interest. This could include reports which were complicated, or which needed to be minuted carefully. The other 52% of clerks reported that they read all the papers. This is hidden time and is something which is perhaps not recognised as much as it should be?



## PEOPLE and BEHAVIOURS

*A cornerstone of any good governance practice requires that the board understands their role, responsibilities and legal duties. ICSA, the Governance Institute*

*Frustrating when governors discuss a small issue for ages then other important issues are rushed or deferred. Business Manager*

The themes which emerged from the myriad comments can be grouped into 3 main areas;

1. Values
2. Behaviours
3. Agreeing the agenda

### **Values – a quick win**

The first core feature of effective governance is ensuring clarity of vision, ethos and strategic direction but how often are the school or trusts' values referred to on the meeting agenda? One chair commented that she has *them as a header on all agendas - make them explicit, keep them in front of everyone and refer to them. "This next agenda item clearly links with our values by...*

A quick poll on Twitter recently asking if governors referred to values specifically on agendas showed that only 24% do, although the same number of people thought it was worth exploring. One clerk replied '*under the time and date, above the title Agenda. Writ large!*'. Just where they should be!

*Quick question - Do you think adding the values to the agenda is a quick win?*

### **Behaviours (in terms of agenda setting)**

Some of the comments and insights offered by the respondents hint at bigger issues but perhaps this situation could be resolved by having a focused agenda with a clear indication of the decision needed and with timings (not necessarily to the minute) to show where the emphasis should be...*I'd like a chair who chaired. Currently, the chair repeats the information contributed by the other trustees...it wastes so much time and we don't seem to get much done!*

Here another chair is commenting on not only the process of setting agendas but also on content by reminding us that governors and trustees have a responsibility to avoid getting 'trapped in the 'operational weeds'...*the agenda and papers and the way they are brought to the full board are very much determined by the quality of the clerk and the chair. It is also important that the HT knows not to include too many operational items on the agenda and keep the focus strategic.*

Whilst here a clerk identifies a perhaps previously hidden training need - *so much depends on the quality of chair and governors. I could clerk two separate meetings with exactly the same agenda and papers and get different outcomes in terms of efficiency and effectiveness depending on the makeup of the Board members.*

### **Agreeing the Agenda**

The survey indicates clearly that the clerks are taking the lead in preparing agendas either by following suggested termly agendas from the Local Authority or Academy Trust or by using independent governance subscription sites such as The School Bus and The Key who provide annual and termly agenda plans. 65% of respondents replied that the clerk drafts the agenda and then discusses with head and chair, with approx. 1/3<sup>rd</sup> then meeting to agree the agenda. The outliers in terms of clerk, head or chair setting agendas on their own was fortunately less than 2%. About 20% of responses indicated that the chair and/or headteacher inform the clerk of the agenda items – hopefully, these are then incorporated into the agenda which the clerk has already prepopulated with the required items.

Agendas for meetings should never come as a surprise to the person chairing; if they do there has been a breakdown in communication.

## CASE STUDIES

**The case studies are some of the longer comments made by respondents and offer some further insights into agenda preparation, planning and meetings.**

When I became clerk seven years ago, the board was frustratingly stuck in the 'old days', with most of the meetings spent proposing, seconding, and voting on everything, or, at full governors, re-visiting policies, gov visit reports etc that had been discussed at length already at committee stage, going through the (previously circulated) headteacher's report line by line etc. AOB could take longer than the rest of the meeting! It's taken a while, but I think I've got governors where I want/they need to be! Where possible, each agenda item states what is expected of governors at any meeting (eg to note/agree/receive/discuss). AOB is rarely used and it is stipulated on the agenda that it is for urgent matters that cannot wait until the next meeting. We've ditched the 'seconding' and vote only when needed.

The most useful tool now available is a detailed term by term annual plan of each meeting's agenda which is agreed in the summer term for the following year and is an excellent starting point when preparing an agenda. It includes routine items that come up at each meeting (apologies, gov visits, AOB, but then has added detail for each term such as reports from governors with specific responsibilities, pupil premium annual report, equality manager's report, which aspect of the SDP is due to be monitored etc. Alongside this, I have an annual plan for policies due for review broken down by term/committee. Having this information to hand helps to ensure the workload is spread as evenly as possible, and is, therefore, more manageable. It also helps with staff workload and wellbeing as it gives me the opportunity to ensure items that involve a particular member of staff attending a meeting are on the same agenda where possible to save them having to give up too many evenings!

Many agendas for other schools I have worked in have been a box-ticking exercise where governors consider governance has taken place if they work their way through the agenda. I would like to see agenda setting being much more about triangulating evidence to answer the 'how do we know?' question. Governor visits should flow into the meetings and there should be more discussion around this, rather than just receiving information from the HT and asking a few clarifying questions and not providing the proper challenge. The agenda should be set in such a way that governors leaving a meeting should have a clear understanding of strengths and areas for development in the school and if they don't then the agenda-setting needs to be reviewed.

## AGENDA CONTENTS

*There is surely nothing quite so useless as doing with great efficiency what should not be done at all.*

Drucker 1968

Agendas should not be complex, overly long, contain unnecessary information and should make sense to those not present. They should align with the meeting minutes. The agenda of the meeting should be simple so that each participating member can understand the objectives or required outcomes of the meeting.

One clerk sums this up perfectly; begging chairs to *follow the agenda order rather than jump about!*

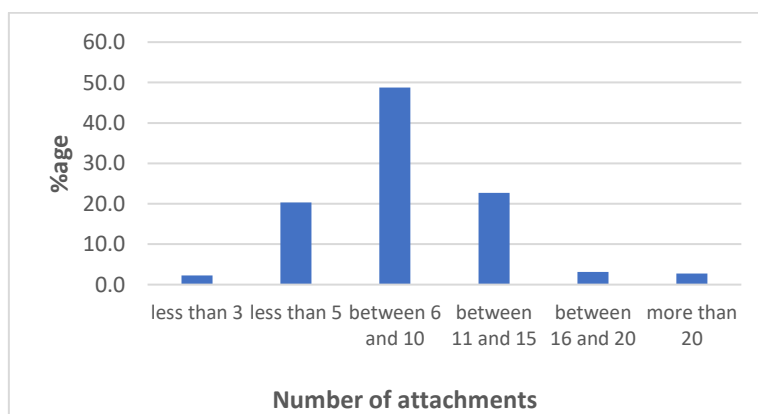
### Key issues

The survey highlighted two key issues – number of attachments and meeting length. Further research could be carried out at an individual board level to ascertain if there is the link and/or between meeting length and the number of agenda items.

### *Manage those attachments!*

A common complaint from governors and trustees is about the number of documents, policies and reports that they have to read to prepare for board meetings.

The majority of respondents reported that for the last meeting they attended the number of attachments was between 6 and 10, excluding the agenda itself and the minutes of the last meeting. 2.7% said there were over 20. If this is the norm on your board then it might be worth considering the purpose of the attachment or at least preparing some executive summaries. A further question asked about the content of the attachments and there was a clear 3 way split between items for approval or ratification, items for information and items for discussion. A fourth purpose was for consultation although this was significantly less than the other three reasons.



### Reflection Point 3

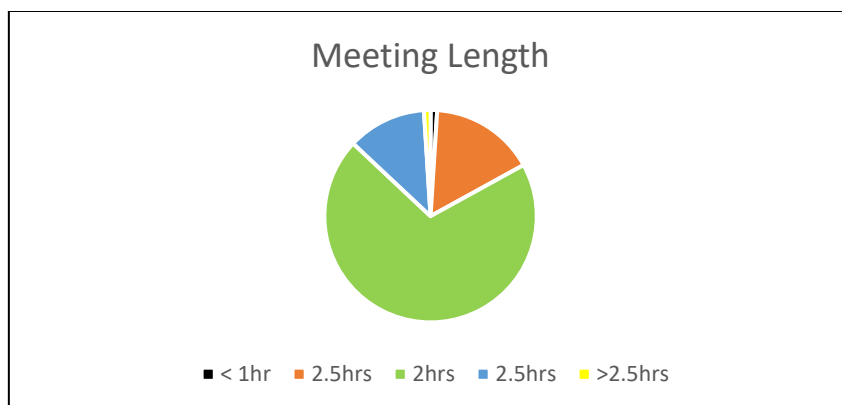
- Were the agenda items clearly labelled as for discussion, decision, or information?
- How long did you spend on each item and did you spend more time on the 'for information' items than on a decision? It may be that this was appropriate if, for example, you were approving a policy which all governors had already read; but if you were discussing information which added nothing to the meeting then it may be time to consider refreshing your agendas. Think about how you can set your agenda to make sure that those items which are important and require detailed and thoughtful discussion are first on the agenda, putting the for information or items requiring a quick decision at the end. Another way of looking at this is that if you know that your meeting may not be quorate towards the end of the meeting then having a key agenda item at the end is not good practice.

Respondents commented that 10% of meetings contained items that were deferred and 20% said that the last few items on the agenda felt rushed. Some solutions to this include.

- Stopping discussion when a decision has been made.
- Considering the required outcomes from agenda items in advance so that everyone is aware of the purpose of an agenda item – decision (approval or ratification), discussion or consultation and items for information etc.
- Having a balanced agenda.
- Encouraging governors and trustees to have read the papers in advance.

The survey results clearly indicate that respondents were aware of the purpose of agenda items with over 80% of responses indicating that agenda items were clearly for approval, information, and discussion.

*How long?!*



If meetings are routinely lasting 2-3 hours or longer then questions need to be asked about whether the agendas are focused on the right things, whether governors are discussing and not deciding or whether the chair needs support and mentoring to be more effective at managing the meeting. Support is available from National Leaders of Governance<sup>4</sup> (and others of course) if you are a chair and think you need to talk to someone.

### Activity 3 – Minutes Matter

Review a set of minutes and the accompanying agenda and identify the following;

- a) Items for decision – **approval or ratification**
- b) Items of **information**
- c) Items for **consultation** e.g. with the stakeholders
- d) Items for **information**

Then ask yourself ...

- How many of each item were there on the agenda?
- Did the minutes reflect decisions taken?
- What order were the items – could the meeting 'energy' be better if the order was changed?  
One chair commented that they are currently focusing on how things are run and are challenging their norms *I have a meeting on Thursday to discuss decision logs, making it clear what decision is needed, action plan for the year, ongoing numbers, moving admin to the end of the meeting etc.*
- How long do you spend on each agenda item? Reading through the last set of minutes and laboriously checking if actions can have been completed is often not time effective. Can the action update be quickly summarised in a short 'action log' report instead?

One chair considered that by *reducing the number of papers by modelling distributive leadership and allowing committees to ratify policies etc thus providing more time at FGB meetings for constructive governance.*

Another commented *if I hadn't read, as an experienced governor, all the papers for the finance committee even though it was my first meeting in this school I would have been sunk – the chair was unable to attend, and I was elected as chair for that meeting. Having some knowledge helped but it*

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<sup>4</sup> Contact an NLG [School-to-school support directory - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](http://www.gov.uk) – although the NLG programme is currently being retendered.

*reminded me about the importance of knowing the direction of the agenda – where did we need to get to, what decisions did we need to make and why and who was attending to help and guide. Thank goodness for the CFO! Here's to CFO and Business Managers – they are so often overlooked in terms of the support they give to governance.*

#### **Activity 4 – Agenda Content**

Review the last meeting agenda –

- Was it clear what the purpose of each agenda item was for?
- Was this stated on the agenda or did you assume because you are experienced – would a new governor know?
- What was the balance between information giving and decision making?

## Case Studies 2

### What lessons can we take form these short case studies?

I'm both a governance professional and a governor. I'm independent but have worked for the local authority governor support team. We use the authority clerks for our support as I can't do it with it being "my" school. I'm finding the costs are going through the roof, the recommended agenda is about 7+ pages long and it's hard work! I personal keep my agenda to one page of A4, items on the front and guidance notes for each item on the back and this method has been welcomed by the schools I look after!

Ensure Chair and board have a role in defining outline of Head's report. Agreeing on a business plan and standing items every year are a great help in ensuring items don't get missed. All reports should have an executive summary and be clear how they link to strategic objectives/plans.

Agendas are often driven by 'business' matters rather than interests - I think this is why we don't often get time for strategising, discussing and ideas generating.

I appreciate that decent report/review writing might not be a generic skill that teachers are taught. However, the current standard of output is neither a good use of teachers or governors time and unlikely to result in much improvement to student outcomes. The fact that governors are either ill-equipped or too polite to challenge the quality of papers means the whole business is more ritualistic than productive.

I always have a sense that a good proportion of others have not prepared for the meeting which is frustrating. But equally, the paperwork is probably overwhelming. Wish to find ways to better manage this without losing the 'colour' which narrative reports provide (even when the narrative is focused on provision-impact-evidence which we ask leaders to focus on). Especially so while we can't get into school. Can't seem to find the balance between monitoring/triangulating role and setting strategic direction role (looking forward). Practical templates and tools for policy review/reporting to board etc would be incredibly helpful (eg from NGA) to save us all reinventing this wheel.



These further comments shared by respondents speak for themselves.

### *Papers in Advance, please!*

*We find it difficult to get all documents circulated in reasonable time before meetings. We aim for 1 week in advance but invariably documents are sent within 2-3 days of the meeting.*

*Receive the information in enough time to read it (recent meeting on a Monday - 13 docs to read received on Thursday evening at 8 pm) and to have input on the agenda.*

*Get them [the papers] out further in advance and set a hard deadline for papers to be in so that adjustments aren't having to be made after the initial papers are sent out.*

### *Pet Hates*

*If I had a fairy godmother wand, I would also wave it to end comic sans as the font of choice.*

*Pet hate? Going to a meeting not knowing what is really going to be discussed; and the feeling of being ambushed. The agenda should enable participants to come to the meeting ready to contribute.*

This was a common complaint. Just over 20% of clerks commented that papers are received late and therefore are sent to governors and trustees late. In a maintained school the deadline for meetings is 7 days.

### *Trust clerks!*

*One thing that I would change is that governors actually do review the papers beforehand so don't a) ask just give me 5 minutes to read through b) ask questions that need a response from someone not at the meeting, so they have to come back to the agenda again and c) spend 1545 minutes discussing grammar and Oxford commas.*

*I clerk for a number of schools and trusts I clerk in the executive leader take the lead on everything. This is not healthy all the way it's meant to be it can be difficult changing this when there is no one willing to replace the chair.*

## CONCLUSIONS and SUMMARY

*“Agenda setting is crucial and is the key to successful meetings with proper impact”.*

One chair offered these thoughts on agendas - *‘It is not the length of the agenda that makes the impact or makes one meeting more important than another, it is the content that makes the impact. A long agenda however well put together could have a negative impact on participants by overwhelming them with information about the decisions needing to be made and papers to be read. We need to give careful consideration to how we support governors and trustees to make decisions and a good agenda does just that’.*

A clerk said that *an agenda should be prepared in such a way say that every participant understands their role and prepares accordingly - people need to know why they are attending a meeting, what is expected of them and how long the meeting will last.*

### Activity 5

- Describe your meetings in one sentence. What do they feel like? Think about the positives and the negatives.
- What can you do to make a difference?
- How long do your meetings last? Are items deferred? Is the agenda too long for the time allowed?
- What matters really need your attention now?
- What can you change yourself (whether you are the chair, the head, or the clerk) to make those meetings more purposeful, more positive, and more effective?
- Did the agenda reflect the meeting?

### Reflection Point 4

Interestingly only 3 respondents mentioned the word *impact* in their replies and that was in terms of meetings themselves having impact. How many agendas include a specific item around impact in terms of

1. Review on how decisions are intended or have impacted on pupils or staff.
2. What difference will the decision make?
3. How do we know?

**How do you know** seems like an excellent question with which to finish because it is the one question to which we all need to know the answer!

## Summary

Activity 1	Review the Competency Frameworks
Activity 2	Consider agenda order
Activity 3	Minutes Matter – review a set of minutes against the accompanying agenda
Activity 4	Agenda contents – was the purpose of each item clear?
Activity 5	Describe your meetings in one sentence or word

Reflection Point 1	How purposeful are your agendas?
Reflection Point 2	Who is and how should be responsible for agenda setting?
Reflection Point 3	The what and why of your agenda?
Reflection Point 4	Review for impact

*Thank you for reading!*

## ABOUT & CONTACT DETAILS

Fee Stagg is a National Leader of Governance, Chair of Governors, trustee and clerk. She currently works for a number of multi academy trusts as well as working as a clerk for a national service provider. She has been a governor since 2004 and has governed in a number of schools; including the faith sector.

She is the author of several **articles and publications** including A Governance Glossary which can be purchased [here](#), as well as a writing a range of Thought Leadership pieces for the Governor Space programme and others. She also offers a range of governance training and development sessions and is affiliated with a number of training providers.

She also publishes a regular **blog** called [The Clerk's Elbow](#), which is a light-hearted look at some of our governance practises and behaviours as well as offering some suggestions for self-review questions. These blogs have been featured in Schools Week.

She also undertakes supportive **External Reviews of Governance** and further information can be found on her website - [www.sbwgovernance.co.uk](http://www.sbwgovernance.co.uk)

Follow Fee on Twitter for **updates**, insights and general governance related conversations.

**Twitter - @sbwgovernance or @dogpaws23**

### Other research reports

Fee co-produced a research report into clerk pay and conditions with the National Association of School and College Clerks – an independent voice for clerks, by clerks. Do check out the website [www.nascc.co.uk](http://www.nascc.co.uk)

## REFERENCES AND BACKGROUND READING

### Available to download from the DfE Website

- Academies Financial Handbook 2020
- Clerking Competency Framework 2017
- DfE Governance Handbook 2020
- Governance Competency Framework 2017

### Other useful books, guidance and articles

- The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People (com.s3.amazonaws.com), S Covey: summary
- Managing for Business Effectiveness Harvard Business Review (website version)
- The Meeting Book - Meetings That Achieve and Deliver-Every Time (Concise Advice Lab) LID publishing – H Chapman 2016,
- National Governance Association – elements of effective governance (website version)
- The Seven Imperatives to Keeping Meetings on Track Harvard Business Review (website version)
- School Governance Regulations 2013