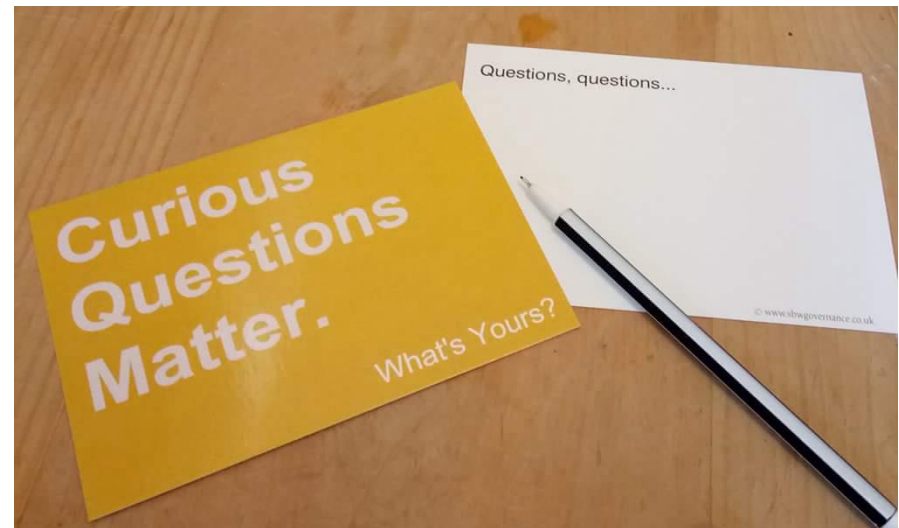


# The Clerk's Elbow – A Year in Blogs



## About

This is a short collection of school governance related blogs published during the last academic year by The Clerk's Elbow, the alter ego of Fee Stagg.

Fee sits on at least two boards as a Chair of Governors or governor and clerks rather more Boards than she cares to think about. The Elbow's blogs are observational, obtuse and sarcastic and although one should never laugh at one's own jokes the Elbow, who has a habit of referring to herself in the third person, enjoys writing them. Requests are sometimes taken and these have been included in this booklet as well.

Whilst The Elbow hopes that she has disguised the identity of the Boards referred to she hopes that you have moments of recognition as you read the blogs and that you find them useful/amusing (delete as applicable) and even if you don't agree that there is something at least thought provoking in there somewhere.

The blogs are published on wordpress and are reproduced here in the order they went live so have no particular order; unlike your minutes one hopes.

Also included are some questions and checklists which you may find useful.

Enjoy! That's not an order it's a respectful request!

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...ology, ogy, oi?

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### **And finally thank you...**

To my mentors. You are both inspirational.

To my family – for putting up with me always being out in the evenings in term time.

To my own Board and Headteacher – your support is much appreciated as without your support I would never have become a clerk in the first place – look what you started!

To Governors and Trustees everywhere – your support and input into schools, academies, colleges, PRU etc is invaluable and we need to shout about this more. Loudly.

And to you for reading this blog book which ended up longer than I was expecting and might take two coffees and a biscuit's worth of your time. Thank you.

The first blog of the year was in September which is a very good place to start don't you think?

## Ch...ch...ch...changes

*Well, here we go again. Another set of minutes drafted and another Chair has been kindly checking my spelling, grammar and punctuation\*. I don't honestly mind. No, really; but please don't do this at the expense of the content.*

I love clerking. Some people may think I am a bit mad but it's true. I do.

So, channelling the late, great David Bowie I want to talk about changes.

Over the last few weeks clerking has started with a vengeance and I am once again working closely with Heads and Chairs to make sure the minutes are a **true and accurate** reflection of your discussions. I have had a debate with them over the meaning of certain words and how they could mean different things to different people. This was most interesting as I am happy to amend minutes for factual accuracy or to include matters I have genuinely missed but discussing interpretation, as The Clerks Elbow said in the last blog before she lost her password, is always open to interpretation. This makes *I know you think you understand what you thought I said but I'm not sure you realise*

*that what you heard is not what I meant". (Alan Greenspan) a case of never a truer word spoken. If you do need to make changes (and none of us clerks are Mary Poppins although I know we all try to be Practically Perfect in Every Way) please think carefully about what you want to change and more importantly why.*

I then began to think about what purpose minutes have -are they?

- an aide memoire full of action points which you hastily read before the next meeting?
- something lovely to show Ofsted?
- a dry record of the longest meeting in history and are verbatim?
- a fabrication because no one asked anything and the Clerk was desperately trying to find something to show you had challenged something, anything...?
- something which you can be proud of because they are evidence of a good meeting?

Most importantly are they evidence of the 3 Core Functions of governance?

There is always much behind the scenes work for the Clerk - elections of Chair and Vice Chair, making sure you minute the HTPM, skills audits, training schedules for the year, website

audits, membership checking, thinking (a most under-rated pastime)...you may think that we are just there to take the minutes. In my world there is no such thing as 'Just A' anything!

*\*these are deliberate errors - I can't vouch for any others!*

## If I could turn back time...

Oh dear, I am now channelling Cher...last time it was David Bowie - what next??!!

As I have said on several previous occasions I love clerking but...

**Admin** (not my forte) - I am organised in that I know what I need to do, and when I need to do it by and I am never late (although there have been times when I have pushed envelope so to speak) but the administrative elements of clerking sometimes elude me. I would therefore like to thank all the School Business Managers I work with who are so supportive. You are the oil in the wheels of a successful school.

**Time** (not enough of it) - I have one free evening between now and the beginning of December and someone just nabbed it. One of those time turning things from Harry Potter is on my Christmas list. Seriously though when you have an evening meeting starting at 6.30 don't go on too long. Put timings on your agenda items. Trust me it works a treat. It does not stifle

debate and helps to remind Governors where the emphasis of the meeting should be (that's around the 3 core functions not the toilets, carpets or school trips).

**Mistakes** (*I've made a few*) - you know that feeling when you have emailed the draft for checking and you think 'oh \*\*\*\* I've missed that page of notes out? The most worrying thing of course is when nobody notices....and trust me this happens more often than I care to share.

**Spot the Difference** - between a typo and a grammatical error; and I make no apologies for going on about this. I know of Governors who will mark policies for the split infinitives and the sentence fragments but make no comments on the actual contents; same happens with minutes. The key question is '***are the minutes an accurate reflection of the meeting?***' not 'does the clerk have a first class honours degree in English Language and sentence construction? Most of us take pride in our work but we are not perfect (although I would like to think that I have been on occasion 'past perfect' (1) as in 'beyond perfect'). If you have time to check the policies in such detail then you have time to **make an impact** in other ways (slips my Chairing hat on there!)

(1) <https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/en/english-grammar/verbs/past-tense/past-perfect>

## Questions

- Which is more important – correctly the odd typo or having accurate content?
- Who checks the minutes and who is responsible for agreeing minutes are sent out in draft and to who?

## Forever and Always

This blog is a plea. If you are a Chair or Vice Chair **please, please keep a copy of all past minutes forever and always** - paper, USB stick, hard drive it doesn't matter. I know we all aim for a paperless lifestyle but please **do not rely on the Headteacher, SBM, clerk to keep copies**. They may not and then where will you be?

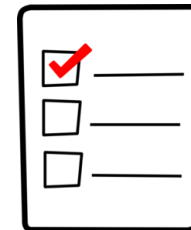
A good clerk will always have **back-up copies** (I use an external hard drive in the case of pc failure) but anything can go wrong. When you are no longer chairing you can pass on the information. Perhaps this could go into your **Disaster Recovery Plan or Critical Incident Plan?**

Many schools are now using **cloud based storage systems** and this is an excellent way of keeping documents safe (that's all the appendices, budget reports and data that you discussed as well).

As an NLG doing External Reviews of Governance I am often dismayed to find that my simple request of *'Can I have copies of the last 12 months minutes please'* is met with mild panic, frantic searching and increasingly desperate emails and admission that no one has them. Yes, I know. Words fail me, after all *'to lose one set of minutes 'may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness'*.

**It is not just an ERG reviewer who needs your minutes - financial audits, safeguarding audits, disciplinaries, appeals, ...oh and Ofsted.** I don't particularly want to envisage a situation when you are faced with an irate Inspector looking for minutes, do you?

**Archiving your minutes** might not be at the forefront of your governing priorities but trust me **a good archive may well save the day.**



## Question

- When did you last check the governor minute files? An External Review of Governance, a Pupil Premium Review, the MAT Board, the LA and Ofsted may request copies. They may also be requested under a Freedom of Information request or during due diligence.

## I can see clearly now the clerking's done

I have been thinking about **minutes** again. I have two sets left to type up this half term (what's a half term break??!) and several sets to informally QA and several things occurred to me...

**Clerks cannot clerk what is not there.** I may be repeating myself here from previous blogs but it is worth saying again. And again as it happens. It is no good having all the paperwork to hand for an Ofsted or other inspection (such as Pupil Premium) and it not being referred to in the minutes. Outstanding governance practice may well be happening but if you are not discussing this at FGB or Board meetings then you are missing a trick.

**Agendas are vital** - don't hide key matters such as safeguarding away in other reports - think about having key items as separate agenda items and ask the clerk to cross reference to committee

reports or link governor visits with dates to meetings or audits. Small hint below.

**Make the agenda work for you** not the other way round. There are items which must go on every agenda and items which need to be discussed at certain times of the year but there is a **degree of flexibility** about the rest of the matters. Ask the Clerk for help - we often work in more than one setting and may be able to share good practice.

**Is your clerk truly independent?** Who do they work for and who pays them? The LA as an employee or agency clerk? Who do they report to? The Board? The Chair? The Head? All of them? Do they work in school already in another capacity? This is worth having a think about as it needs to be clearly understood by everyone.

**And finally who checks the minutes?** Is it a) The Head and just the head? b) The Chair and the just the Chair? c) The Chair and the Head? d) No one?! (I really hope it's not d).

We all need to ensure that we are behaving in an **open and transparent** manner and your minutes are one easy way to demonstrate this key aspect of effective governance. If indeed the Board is behaving in open and transparent manner but that is not a blog for this clerk at the moment!



## Question

- Who writes your agenda? Do you have any control as a Board over content or do you follow an agenda recommended by the LA or set by the MAT?

Think about if your agendas are working for you and cover all the matters you think they need to. The clerk plays a key role in agenda setting.

## Here Comes the Train Again

CPD. Training. Governor Development. Call it what you will. Governors increasingly need to think about what training they need, what information, knowledge and skills gaps there are on their Boards, and how they are going to fill these gaps but most importantly how they record the impact of that training.

There are several quick and easy ways to do this and this is how where your Clerk can be of real help;

- Have a separate agenda item on training so Governors can report back and discuss,
- Develop a template they can fill in when they've done some training which the clerk can summarise in the minutes,
- Agree a termly plan so everyone knows what training is available and who is going. Some LA publish useful lists

which are sent with termly info or are downloadable from websites,

- Ask the Clerk if other Boards have found certain training useful.

I am becoming increasingly aware that Governor training sessions are being cancelled by the providers due to lack of numbers but at the same time I know (because I am a Governor myself) that the pressures on us are increasing. If we don't keep up to date as best we can (and I know we are all busy people) then I worry we aren't able to articulate the impact I know we are having on our schools and academies.

Training is best done in groups in my opinion but I know this isn't everyone's favourite way of learning. Networking is key to collaboration and we all have to collaborate if we are to sustain, survive and grow.

So even if you only read a newsletter, watch a TV programme or attend a meeting where you learnt something new and relevant share it. Your clerk will be more than happy to minute it!

*Make sure that training is on every relevant meeting agenda and think about relating training to the skills audit and to the needs of the Board and the setting. Think about how you report, capture and cascade learning outcomes. If training is poor quality – call it out!*

## The Agenda Agenda

It has come to my attention that those in search of a **good meeting** need to find themselves a **good agenda**.

Are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin; at the beginning as this usually helps. Although some meetings seem to start in the middle which is not a good idea at all.

What is the **first item** on your agenda? As a Chair I like to spend a moment reminding people what the purpose of the meeting is just in case they've forgotten. As a clerk having someone do this helps as well. It's good to be focused. Apologies are vital. Don't miss them out. If you're monitoring pupil attendance it's only right that yours is monitored as well.

The next thing you should be doing is asking for **interest**. This often raises a laugh when someone invariably says they've got none. That's your card marked my friend! I am paid to be there so I have a vested interest in your interest but as the clerk I can't make you be take an interest. Believe me, I've tried.

Next up **minutes of last meeting**. This should not take a long time. Nothing more unnecessary than spending three quarters of an hour ploughing through item 23 bullet point 6 to be told there's a full stop missing. Use your pen and put one in. Go on you know you want to

By now we should have been in the meeting about 10-15 minutes so the chances are most people are still awake.

Here comes the best bit... **Headteacher or Principle's Report**; this could also be reports from departmental leads or subject coordinators. I sincerely hope this generates questions. If not give yourself a good talking to and do your homework. I also hope this report is not tabled at the meeting. If this is the case this must stop forthwith and the clerk should be applying respectful pressure... This is the main element of a FGB (well in the olden days it was anyway... I'm struggling to keep up with all the acronyms flying about for meetings these days so I bet Ofsted are too...so if it looks like an FGB then it is an FGB and it's not a committee; if it looks like an LGB then it's a committee; if it's a working party then it needs to be subject to some terms of reference...)

Next up **sub/committees and governor reports**. This is your chance to show you are actively knowing the school. Make sure your clerk minutes this properly. It's your **chance to shine**, just don't hog the limelight!

**Policies** also need to be reported on the agenda but the meeting is not the place to be a) reading them for the first time, b) marking them and c) going through them page by interminable page. Impossible to clerk for one thing.

**Governing Board matters** are important but shouldn't take a large part of the meeting. Vacancies need monitoring, training recorded, self-evaluation noted but they don't on the whole need to be the focus of the whole meeting. I've seen this happen far too often.

I've been talking about Full Governors Meetings here before you say *oi...* but I've seen Trust Board agendas with no clear purpose or structure and with no opportunity to declare interest. I've also seen minutes that bear no resemblance to the related agenda and minutes which are a record of what looks like a comfy chat.

**Agenda** - A way to **Generate ENgaging Discussion Always**. Or something like that...

## The Dangers of Over Sharing

*Written in December 2016 I was worrying about the sharing of pupil names at meetings.*

Thank you to everyone who has read my blog posts over the last few months I do appreciate your support and comments.

As this is most likely to be the last blog of the term I would like to end on a gentle warning. Never forget your minutes are

**public documents** so please remember the importance of information governance. Don't over share personal information about pupils, governors or staff. If you don't employ an independent clerk and are, for example, a participant in the meeting who is party to personnel knowledge please, please be very careful what you write in the minutes. A professional clerk will help you steer clear of over sharing. I've recently read some minutes which I know were written with the very best of intentions but which made personal disclosures about someone's health; and at a meeting I clerked recently I was handed a report which listed pupils by name, class and achievements. You may think you trust everyone at the meeting but you need to always be aware that once this information leaves your premises you are no longer in control of it. For the record I shredded that report as soon as I realised the content. I will be reminding the school in question of their responsibilities.

**Data protection** is a serious business. Just ask the one billion of us with Yahoo accounts whose details have been hacked or anyone who has had their ID stolen.

### Questions

- Are you ready for the changes to any data protection legislation? Is data on your risk register?

- Do Governors spot check the Single Central Record regularly?
- Have you asked your clerk what they do with all the paper copies of reports, budgets etc after they have left the meeting? How does your clerk store your electronic files if they are not school based? If they are school based are the confidential files kept confidential?

## Tis the Season of Goodwill

There is a blog doing the rounds on Twitter written by @theprimaryhead and it is really funny but fails to mention, even in passing, us poor school Governors which is not at all funny so here at the Elbow Towers although currently wearing our Chair's Hat, we thought we'd respond in kind.

*To whom it may concern;*

Someone once told me that my school is run on goodwill as though this was something I didn't know. All schools run on good will these days my friend just ask any Governor. Now, it is a well-known fact locally that I can't do my sums but, bear with me here as I remember doing this kind of thing at primary school; if there are 300,000 Governors in the country and each one donates 1 hour a week to governance that's 300,000 hours a week (even I can manage that sum). If there are 39 weeks in

an academic year then that's 11.7m hours or 487,500 days or about 1,300 years of time donated every year for free to schools. Wow. Some of us give far more than an hour a week but you get the picture. Use that time wisely for soon it may be gone and all that will be left will be the ghost of governors past.

Here's what I know has happened this year which I want to share with you; and in no particular order we have;

**Safeguarding** – the golden thread running through all the schools I know and work with. From September all Governors had to have a DBS and most of us have L1 safeguarding as well. This just shows you how seriously we take this part of our role. We often hear things that keep us awake at night.

**Edubase** - next thing is that the Govt. will want our inside leg measurements and pictures of our eyes. No doubt they will use this database to send us a copy of the Oath of Allegiance, which is another reasonable idea badly handled. Will you sign it? I will; if you will.

**Governors Competency Framework** – this included over 160 competencies at one point. I ask you. Honestly. 160!! There are only a 10<sup>th</sup> of that number on the Headteachers Standards. And we're volunteers.

**Budgets** – national funding formula, deficit budgets, falling roll, increasing roll, redundancies, appointments, Education Funding Agency requirements, SFVS, increasingly complex needs...it is never ending and us poor Governors are right in there supporting and challenging you although you may not like it very much we mostly love you!

**Training** – looks like that is mandatory now; although it doesn't say that in so many words in the latest iteration of The Big O's Handbook. You do CPD, we do CPD.

**SATs** – dear oh dear oh dear. SPAG leaks, giraffes, silly mistakes, crying pupils, crying teachers, perplexed Heads; a right old dog's dinner if you ask me and in the midst of all that you find us Governors having to ask the difficult questions and be supportive.

**Brexit** – this one will run and run. The impact of Brexit on our teenagers (I know a few who cried) will take a generation to work through.

**Recruitment and Retention** aka succession planning – on the one hand redundancies and VR on the other a crisis in senior leadership. To lose one Head is unfortunate, to lose more than three in a short space of time is Special Measures. And not the alcoholic variety. Stay, we need you!

**Governance** – we all know about weak governance as Ofsted has just published a report about it, and the press love a story about MATs and related party transactions and fancy cars but come on what about the vast majority of schools where governance is good and outstanding and where Governors get on with the job in hand without moaning or breaking the law? Okay we moan but only because we care. A thank you will suffice but gin's better!

**MATs** – Mates MATs, Empty MATs, Flat MATs, Big MACs, big MATs, no MATs, U turns, Z turns, LGB, FGB... welcome to the Land of Confusion. To CEO or not to CEO that is the question. Just remember Chairs have to sign the paperwork as well...

**Clerking** – got to be professional about it as HMI and David Carter think clerks are pivotal and worth their weight in gold. Do you love your clerk? Do you know who they are?

**Twitter** – aaahh Twitter – the place where the soundbite rules and the CPD is free but where would we be without it? Don't answer that!

And finally my 12 Days of Christmas; written in haste as I need to get the sprouts on;

- 12 maintained governors
- 11 full time teachers
- 10 teaching assistants
- 9 Trust Board Members
- 8 new policies
- 7 hours a day (*and the rest!*)
- 6 changes of direction
- 5 large gins
- 4 senior leaders
- 3 sub committees
- 2 self-reviews and a very tired Chair of Governors
- Pass the gin.

## Complicit, Implicit, Explicit, Expletive

*This is a blog about how Board's behave, their interactions and the need to be explicit about decision making.*

Before I begin **Happy New Year – here's to a successful 2017** with no policy U turns, no moving goal posts and a full complement of Governors on all your Boards (I live in hope).

Over the festive period I have been reading a lot of blogs and a Governor colleague of mine recently blogged about **relationships** and governance and it **made me think** about how the various Governing Boards I'm involved with **interact** both *internally* amongst themselves and *externally* with their partner schools, parents, the LA etc. As a **clerk** I am privy to the not quite the inner most workings of Governing Boards but not far off and I see and hear a lot.

Now, I am no expert at anything really but I am an **observer of things**. I notice when Chairs are struggling and when they are in complete control, when Heads are smiling through gritted teeth, when Governors are enjoying the meeting and especially when they are not because I won't be either more than likely. Sometimes these behaviours are really obvious to everyone in the meeting, which is how it should be – everything **open and**

**transparent.** But do you ever notice when your Clerk is struggling; perhaps to keep up with the speed of the meeting or because you **assume** they know the context and subtext? If they are they probably aren't alone.

What worries me most as a Clerk, and as an NLG, is when it is clear that something is not being said. Sometimes the Unsaid should most certainly stay that way but more often than not **the unsaid needs to be said.** I am also more than happy to paraphrase your discussions, to take notes and not minutes, to use confidential agendas; just as long as the conversation is captured in some way. I will note down I left the meeting though!

The key trait that a Clerk must demonstrate is confidentiality. We hear things, we know things and we need you to know that we won't blab. This takes trust and it does not happen overnight; we need to build a relationship. I need to build a strong relationship with the Head and Chair; particularly if I need a pointed reminder I haven't done something I should have done or if they haven't either!

We need to be professional about how we interact with each other. Is there an inherent power imbalance in the Head/Chair/Clerk triumvirate because two people are paid and the other is not? Although as long as we retain a professional relationship at all times all should be well. This

will though I think be a subject we will all need to return to during 2017.

Another useful trait is mindfulness. Not the mindfulness relating to 'being in the moment' but being mindful of governors' personalities, backgrounds, beliefs and friendships. I am all for friendliness - it makes the world go round - but I don't like cosiness. By that I mean the assumption that everyone agrees with everyone else because no one has ever not agreed (perhaps they dare not?) or the implication that everyone already knows (hint – they probably don't). As a clerk this is can be a very uncomfortable place to be as you feel like you are missing something, which in fact you are, and it puts you on the back foot. Mind you it can also make your Clerk complicit in something over which they have no control. I want minutes to be a true and accurate reflection of the 'whole' not a true and accurate reflection of the 'bits' you said. So please do not automatically assume that your Clerk always knows what you are talking about!

Friendly but not friends. I like this description of the way Governing Boards should behave. The Chair and the Head should not be popping down to the pub after the meeting for cosy chat (neither should the Clerk) but should be professional, respectful and friendly because meetings should not be bear pits or resemble the junior playground but be places where everyone, including the clerk and the Head, can be free to express an opinion.

Having a friend or colleague on the Governing Board, or someone you can ask questions of in confidence, is useful (a **mentor** perhaps) as probably know each other's strengths, weaknesses and skills; but we all need to be mindful that we don't populate the Boards with people who agree with us all the time and with clerks who don't challenge us to be better governors.

And finally remember minutes need to make sense to people who weren't there so let's hear it for being **explicit!**

And the **expletive?** Have you never left a meeting and wondered what the \*\*\*\* just happened there then?! I have and I'm fairly certain you have as well – so **check and challenge** your minutes as soon as possible - the minutes are there to help you.

## The Occasional Table

*I've got an occasional table, there it is over there*

*You can tell it's an occasional table, today it's its day off, it's a chair"*

Les Barker - folk poet

The Clerk's Elbow has recently started taking requests and has been asked by a Chair colleague to blog about the **impact on**

**effective governance of tabling documents** at meetings. This blog post is one of those posts where I am wearing two hats - the Chair one (large and purple with a fetching feather) and the Clerk one (a small embroidered one with a little tassel) - though there are days when The Sorting Hat\* would be most useful. I'll leave that thought with you and I may return to it in the future.

**What is tabling?** Tabling, in this instance, is when the Headteacher or Chair, or both, circulate documents for discussion at the meeting having not sent them round to Governors in advance. Hopefully some of you will not know what this is - which is fantastic. Gold star. Go to the top of the class. For some of you this is a regular occurrence. I feel for you.

**What should you do if there are documents tabled?** As a Governor you are perfectly entitled to ask **why** the documents are being tabled:

1. are they for information and do not require action?
2. are they to supplement agenda papers?
3. are they something someone forgot to add to the pack (this is not always the fault of the clerk!) or
4. are they critical to the discussion?
5. are urgent, emergency matters?

There is no right or wrong answer to any of those questions but as a Governor I'd not mind (1), most likely get cross at (2) and (3) and get very cross indeed at (4). As a Clerk I don't mind (1)



but (2)-(4) are most irritating as I end up with piles of paper all over the house and this makes clerking harder; not that I mind hard work but I much prefer efficiency! As a Chair (oh, that's my third hat which is waterproof by the way to protect my head from inclement weather) I do not like anything tabled which I have not seen before apart from (1). (5) is acceptable but should not happen at every meeting.

There are also issues around:

- ensuring those people not at the meeting have copies of ALL the documents referred to at the meeting (who checks?),
- keeping a good quality set of documents for inspection and audit purposes,
- understanding the reasoning behind and context of the documents.

A **good tip** I had from a clerking colleague recently is to list all the tabled documents in the minutes. Worryingly though sometimes this is quite a long list...

### Why is it not good practice?

Apart from the strong possibility that not all governors will have had sight of a full set of papers it also means that the clerk who, chances are, does not have an office in school with a nice filing cabinet or even a drawer, will not have seen them either.

The impact on effective governance is;

- **Governors not having adequate time in the meeting to read, comprehend, digest and question information** - especially if the tabled documents are data or finance. Some Governors like to read documents in detail before formulating questions and challenges and some are more adept at speed reading so you need to give both adequate time,
- **It looks like no one is in control** - evidence of weak leadership? Poor forward planning?
- Makes the Clerk's role a little harder (not that this is the only reason not to table). I believe **effective governance is a Team Effort**.

**Outcomes** (there, that word made you sit up!)

- Tabling regularly can mean that Governors are **unable to effectively 'discharge'** the three core functions particularly *holding the headteacher to account for the educational performance of the school and its pupils, and the performance management of staff, and overseeing the financial performance of the school and making sure its money is well spent.*
- Whilst I appreciate some financial information is **confidential** Governors should be informed via the agenda what information to expect at the meeting and what type of decision they will be expected to make. As

we now expect Governors to come to meetings have read papers and be ready to challenge it is unfair to then drop key information on them at the last minute.

- The overall outcome of regular tabling is a chipping away at effective governance practice and **should be avoided** in my opinion.

### Remember

The Chair is **perfectly entitled to refuse to accept** tabled documents and Governors need to support this stance if they feel strongly.

Heads should be encouraged not to table documents, particularly the Headteacher's Report to Governors; and Clerks need to get more assertive about our deadlines for collating and distributing agenda packs; and thereby ensuring you have all the information you need, and

Chair's should not be tabling either although I am sure we have all done so at some point.

**Think Table. Think Twice. Think Time.**

*\*It's from Harry Potter for those of you not up to date with your literary references.*

### Question

- Have you thought about why information is being tabled? Do you need to think about timings of meetings in the term; the amount of information you may be requesting from senior leaders? Have a think about the power dynamics in the meeting...

## Don't Panic, Don't Panic

In true Dad's Army style when I received my new orders in the form of the latest iteration of the **Governance Handbook** and the new **Competency Framework** the from the DfE yesterday I did exactly the opposite. Had a little panic. Twitter went wild. Facebook had a meltdown. The world stopped spinning. No, they didn't but you get my gist. So, I did what I do best in trying circumstances - had a coffee; and then printed out the Framework (ooh hark at me investing in my own CPD - have you seen the price of printer ink?!) and went off to clerk a board meeting. When I got back home life seemed to have carried on quite nicely in the meantime. Apart from there being no snow after dire warnings of heavy downfalls being given out across all news channels. See, you can't believe everything you read!

A few digital messages with colleagues about the **Competency Framework** elicited a range of responses: *'what do you think really- should we get paid or not after all there are over 60 competencies? Will the unengaged engage? ', 'have you read*

*it?'* - all showed me that we'd reacted in a rather similar sanguine fashion. **Keep Calm and Carry On** seemed to be the consensus. **It's not mandatory. It's guidance.**

**Don't tell 'em Pike.** Are Ofsted really going to tick off whether governors are meeting all the criteria? Of course not. **Sir David Carter**, National Schools Commissioner, is keen to remind us not to panic but to use the Competency Framework to support our CPD as governors and Boards. He said yesterday that the '*Governance Competency Framework is a guide & tool for evaluation to build stronger governance. Not a checklist!*' As a clerk I found the document a **good read** and it will help me help the boards I work with. But we need time to digest it in a measured way. Calmly.

And as for the number of competencies a **Chair** needs? Well, yes there are a lot of them but if you write documents by committee (which is democratically the right thing to do) then it's inevitable that a long list will emerge in situations like this one. Quite this long was rather a surprise though!

There is help out there for you. There are 500 **National Leaders of Governance** in the country. There'll be one near you. You can find us on the **NCTL** website. We are here to help, listen, signpost...just make sure we get the occasional slice of **cake**.

I have to admit I have not read the Handbook yet but I'm told **paras 35 and 36** makes specific reference to **professional clerks**. Please read carefully!

### Question

- Have you read the Competency Framework yet? Good! Has you Headteacher? #ducks #dareIask?

## Minutes? Whose Minutes?\*

Now that you all have a **Lady Bracknell** type earworm I am going to talk to you about minutes. Are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin...

I have blogged about minutes before and no doubt will again as minutes are what clerking is mostly about - it's our **end product** so to speak. Some Governors, and even some Chairs, don't get to see (or appreciate) all the background work and all they often see are the minutes so it is important we all get this bit right.

The **NGA** has recently published an article on minutes in *Governing Matters* (p34 of the January/February 2017 edition if you're interested) and this is well worth a read but I want to add to this debate by making the following observations:

**The clerk works for, and is employed, by the Governing Board.** This could be the MAT Board or the Full Governing Body or the LGB. They are not employed by the Headteacher or the school per se. They may well work in school in one capacity or another but when they are clerking they work for the Governors or should I say those that govern. This can be difficult for everyone in such circumstances but it can work; and often works well.

**The clerk is line managed by the Chair.** In theory anyway. Some of us have a job description, but not all, so we all need to be clear about **expectations** if nothing else.

Following this line of argument through **if the clerk works for the Governing Board then the Governing Board is responsible for the minutes.** By this I mean for their factual accuracy, for ensuring the clerk has clearly captured the detail, and questions and challenges are clearly highlighted. Please do not put your clerk into the position of being asked add things to minutes which you may well have referred obliquely to at the meeting or information you have received by email but they have not. I have had this happen to me and it is not a very nice place to be. I keep my notes...

**Changes.** I aim to make as few typos as possible but it happens. I'm not a very proficient typist but I hope I have not been asked to clerk in so many schools based on my typing skills! Feel free

to point them out - auto-correct is a pain. What I won't do is change the sense of what you said. If you want to delegate your responsibility for checking minutes be clear about this please - personally I'd rather have all the comments and amendments from the Chair in one go but I have to be pragmatic but someone has to have the final say.

**Policies.** Often the bane of my life. Often a complete pain to clerk but I don't need to minute anything other than the title and the dates of adoption and review and the fact all Governors have seen it and the majority (no, not have read it!) have agreed to adopt. If you have circulated a policy by email for comment then please make sure someone is keeping a list of responses and that you tell me you have so done so I can legitimately add it to the minutes as having been seen by Governors. Please do not ask or require or expect me to add references to policies to minutes after I've finalised the drafts. Do that again and I'll **pdf** you!

**Chatty.** Chatty. **Minutes are legal documents.** They are not records of a conversation. I've seen some shockers...and in comic sans too. I'll say no more about it if you promise never to let comic sans pass over your Board again.

\*The answer is of course **your minutes.**

## Knife, Fork, Spoon

During a conversation with a colleague NLG they asked me if I thought that headteachers were spoon feeding governors with information; and if so why.

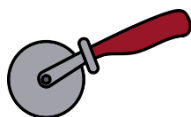
This is a spoon.



This is a fork. ...



And is this is a pizza cutter\*



Now I can hear you ask '*what has this random set of cutlery (known in this house as yaffling spanners for some reason) and*

*kitchen equipment got to do with clerking?* It has **everything to do with governance** and **something to do with clerking**.

**Sir David Carter**, National Schools Commissioner, recently posed the following questions which he says all Boards should be asking themselves.

1. Are we delivering on our strategic goals and are they raising standards?
2. Do we know that our improvement priorities are the right ones?
3. What does the current performance of our school(s) suggest that we need to focus on for the next 12 months?
4. What challenges do we need to anticipate over the next five years?

They are very **good questions** but as I am wearing my clerk's hat for this blog post (this time you find me in a fetching woolly bobble hat in pink) I am more interested in **how we find the answers and if and how these are recorded**. And in order to find the answers I'd like to pose a series of questions.

**Firstly is your Board spoon fed information** by the **Head**? Is your Board spoon fed by the **Chair**? By both? At the same time? Or worse is it spoon fed by the **Clerk**? And what does this spoon feeding look like? Gentle, caring spoon feeding or full on 'here comes the aeroplane' type feeding? After all as EM Forster is

reputed to have said *spoon feeding in the long run teaches us nothing but the shape of the spoon*. The 'sub' question here is why are they spoon feeding? Is it because they fear that if they don't the Board will fail in some way and they daren't risk the consequences? Or is it because they can't help themselves? I have to say that such meetings are fairly straight forward to clerk because no one asks any difficult questions and the meetings flow smoothly without challenge.

The solution to spoon feeding can be relatively simple: go and find out some information about your school for yourselves and bring back this information to the Board and share it. Ofsted now require us Governors to take some responsibility for our own CPD (para 141 of the August 2016 Inspection Handbook if you are interested says *inspectors will consider the effectiveness of governors in discharging their core statutory functions and how committed they are to their own development as governors in order to improve their performance*). The clerk can often help by signposting training.

**Second question is this - does your Board like to prod and poke about?** Does it go in to school on link visits in an organised, structured way? Does it dig into the detail in a messy uncoordinated way or in a save the best bit till last kind of way? Does it stray into the operational? Or are your Governors like **tuning forks** (which have been around for centuries and are the only sure-fire way to tell if an instrument is in tune apparently, sadly I am tone deaf) and **can tell what's what** and

know what they are doing and what they are looking for? I like clerking these Boards as there is lots of cross referencing to do and lots of engagement to demonstrate.

**Or, thirdly, does your Board dissect and share the workload equally** (for it is indeed a growing workload) **or is one piece bigger than all the others?** If this is the case ask yourselves who's the biggest piece and why? The Chair is *de facto* first amongst equals by virtue of their name being immortalised on the Inspection Report but they do not need to dominate or do the majority of the work. Neither should meetings be directed by the content of the Headteacher's Report or by reporting verbatim back from committees; nor should they be dominated by the one person doing all the talking, questioning or challenging. **All governors have equal voice and the value is in their difference.** Although whether they are individually named in the **minutes** is a matter for debate as there are various schools of thought about this subject. I am in two minds about it all as usual.

*Think about the behaviour of your Boards and do some self-review on the behaviours shown.*

## Wash Day Blues

I was going to blog about **cake** after last week's cutlery related outpourings but I've gone for one about **laundry** instead.

I've just been re-reading a book called **Leadership Matters** by Andy Buck. It's really rather good. It's a very easy to read book and I've recommended it many times. The introduction gets straight to the point in my '*wearing a governor hat*' opinion and talks about **discretionary effort**. I looked up discretionary on the world wide web (I do own a dictionary by the way - I use it regularly and have had it since I was at school. Every clerk should have a dictionary) and it said the **synonyms** for discretionary are *optional* (well, we don't have to become governors or clerks I suppose), *non-compulsory* (we make a positive choice to become a governor or clerk), and *voluntary* (yes, us governors and trustees know all about voluntary and whilst I'm paid as a clerk there is an element of the voluntary about how I approach my work).

Andy also writes about **effective meetings** and he says '*it's just as important to remind yourself that what happens before and after a meeting can sometimes be just as important as the things that actually happen in a meeting*'. This is very true but it does rather make a clerk's job difficult at times. Perhaps I need to invest in one of these? Sometimes I think I need one.



When governors start talking first names, job titles, of things that happened and sort of expect you to know who and what they are talking about it's ok to interrupt them and ask for clarification. But I admit it can take courage if you are new to clerking. The Board may not like being interrupted but the clerk does need to be able to write accurate minutes and spell people's names correctly. I've often changed people's genders, married them off or given them a promotion. Oh how we laughed, well I did - they spotted this but didn't ask about the data or discuss impact...

The most difficult thing to clerk is when governors talk of meetings about which as clerk I do not know about and have not had any minutes or notes from but which are actually **governance** and need to be recorded as such. So please remember I don't necessarily need to know all about the



but I do need to know about the way you have ...



As a clerk I am privy to a hearing about a vast range of dirty laundry (and please be assured clerks should not share it or discuss what they hear outside your meetings) but you need to remember the minutes are a matter of public record. **Obfuscation** is not a good look on any one. And I never want my minutes put through the spin cycle! Shudder. Or should that be judder?

**Here's the deal:** if you remember clerks should be **discreet** - we are there to help you not just take the minutes - you should feel able to **talk freely** but it is not an option not to have a clerk (the legislation refers to it specifically) and clerking takes effort. Ask us to sign your Board's Code of Conduct if you think it would help. Clerks should be **independent** of the Board and, if possible, the school. And we need to be **objective** at all times even as we laugh at your jokes and eat your cake.

We in turn will remember that you are all **volunteers** but we can't do our job without your help so please at least check the minutes in a timely manner!

Anyway, going back to leadership...some **questions** for you to ponder:

- Who **sorts your laundry?** Who sets your agenda?
- What's **lurking at the bottom of the laundry basket** that everyone sort of knows is there but doesn't want to get out and look at?
- Do you even have a basket or is the laundry **strewn all over the floor** in some random disorganised representation of a teenagers bedroom with a resplendent unmade bed taking centre stage like a Tracey Emin installation? All the bits are there but...
- **Who's leading your board** and do you feel comfy in asking the difficult questions?
- Does the leader wash all the dirty linen in public and it's all clerked (judicial use of a **confidential appendix** notwithstanding) or do you get the feeling the **subtext** is massive?
- And most importantly of all **who does the ironing?**

## Ironing for Beginners

Last week's **spin cycle** produced a lovely set of laundry now all neatly folded, sorted and ready to iron. Bit like a good set of minutes; all **drafted, crafted and proofed**. Now as you all know I do like a good analogy although sometimes my analogous ramblings meander off in directions that surprise even me. And



when it comes to minutes believe me I've seen A Lot so nothing much surprises me anymore. What does surprise me though are 'adopted' minutes which are quite frankly, well, shoddy and creased. I don't mean in terms of the odd typo but in terms of the lack of clarity. There are ways around this. Bear with me here...

Firstly, I am not encouraging you to fake or make up or reorganise your minutes or reports because as Jess Phillips MP in her new book *Everywoman* so aptly puts it '*faking it, like so many things in life, is a **pointless exercise** that will ultimately leave you dissatisfied*'. If you make your minutes up you will get caught out. What I want you to do is make sure that your minutes reflect the **Real You**.

If your Governing Board is not doing anything of **substance** or does not have a clear sense of direction then the minutes will mostly likely reflect this and Ofsted or an External Reviewer of Governance will spot this instantly. I say most likely because some clerks are very good at turning a '*sort of*' into an '*actual*' which is a good thing and a bad thing at the same time. I'll leave that thought with you. **Ponder it a while**.

The Externals will also be able to quickly ascertain if you are doing everything you need to do well as well. This is brilliant news. Well done.

But how do you get **substance and clarity and the truth** of what you are doing as Governors, Trustees, Directors and Headteachers into the minutes?

The first thing you need is a **clothes horse** or a washing line. On this you can hang out your washing. It can float in the **breeze of your discussions** and you can easily see when it needs to be taken down. Nothing worse than trying to iron an overly dry linen shirt. Bit like trying to sort out a problem you have been putting off for too long - always takes an age to get all the creases out.

If the washing line is your **agenda** then the clothes pegs are the **item numbers**; the bits which keep everything in order. The **prop** is the Clerk keeping everything legal and upright. Those whirly washing lines are ok but are a nightmare when it's windy - washing flies about in all directions. Not entirely helpful. And you can easily lose your smalls. And smalls absolutely matter. They weren't called foundation garments for nothing! Although there are days when as I Clerk I need to wear my undergarments on the outside of my trousers...nice.

What a Clerk can't do is bring the washing in for you because at the end of the day it's the Governors **who generated all the washing** in the first place and so they should be the ones to decide who gets to wear what and when and what order. Seems only fair.

The only downside is, as we all know full well, that doing the washing and ironing is like being on a never-ending spin cycle.

## What's in a Word?

Hint - serious blog ahead. My trusty dictionary defines a **clerk** as 'an official in charge of correspondence, records, transactions or one who deals with letters, accounts etc in an office'. Oh if it were only that simple.

The School Governance (Roles, Procedures and Allowances) (England) Regulations 2013 state that *the governing body must appoint a clerk with a view to ensuring their efficient functioning and must have regard to advice from the clerk as to the nature of the governing body's functions*. Now, I am sure you all do this but may I pose a few **questions...**

- who does the **appointing**? A Panel? The Head? The Chair?
- how do **you** take regard?
- and how does your clerk ensure the **efficient running** of your Board? And do you check?

The Regulations go on to outline the **functions** of the clerk to the governing body (usually referred to as Board these days but the regulations haven't caught up with the real world yet). The clerk to the governing body **must**;

1. *attend meetings of the governing body and ensure minutes of the proceedings are produced in accordance with regulation 15(1);*
2. *maintain a register of members of the governing body and of associate members and report any vacancies to the governing body; and*
3. *perform such other tasks as may be determined by the governing body from time to time.*

I'd say this first part of the first one is rather like stating the obvious but in the days of skype and video and conference calls then I suppose we need to **redefine 'attend'**. The second one is important and a **legal requirement** but if you employ an independent clerk, ie not one working for the LA or other service provider, you need to think about how you ensure that the register is kept as some clerks keep the records and some don't - there is no right or wrong answer to this - but you do need to know you can get registers and signed copies PDQ if needed. It's the third one, which is akin to what used to be written as the last item on my job description when I worked for the L as '*any other duties*', that interests me most. This catch all phrase is a bit like AOB. Could mean anything. 'Other tasks' done from time to time could end up being permanent...

Have you ever said '*I'm just a such and such (insert category) Governor*'? Well, I have had people say to me '*Oh you're just the/a clerk*'. Think about what the *just* in that sentence really means? The clerk is your constitutional conscience and not

solely there to take notes of your discussions. I am very pleased to hear when I talk to other clerks that boards are really beginning to have a much higher regard for the clerk so thank you. Now, when you do my PM - be gentle, you know I can't type!

**'Minute taking - a vital task; an art to do it well'**. Simon Osborne, Chief Executive ICOSA

### Questions

- Has your clerk got a job description?
- Has it been reviewed recently?
- Do you do any performance management for your independent clerk?

## Some Thoughts on Self Review

I recently attended a **WomenEd** conference/gathering in Coventry. I was not sure whether I would enjoy it but it turns out I did. Very much. This was me being 10% brave as the hashtag goes.

I couldn't attend all the workshops obviously and was too chicken to attend one called **Fierce Conversations** but I heard it was very good. I certainly do need to be a bit braver next time! I did go to one called '*strengths based approach to leadership development*' which turned out to be about new ways of

looking at performance management. And so because it is my habit I am going to try and apply the 'headlines' to clerking and governance...

We were asked to think about what our attributes were in relation to 4 quadrants on a leadership model. These were

- **unrealised strengths?** What do you do well but not often? How do you record this? Do you ...?
- **realised strengths?** What do you well and often? What energises you? How can you share this in collaborative endeavours?
- **learned behaviours?** Things you have learned to do well but don't energise you? This phrase made me really think about Boards and are they like a well run meeting that seem to happen without effort? Or have they in the past needed input from an advisor or reviewer? Or does the Board behave the way it does because it always has?
- **weaknesses?** things you find hard to do well and find a bit of a chore? Is there any way you can delegate? And even ask yourselves should you be doing this anyway?

My mind wandered about as it does at conferences and I thought that these could be easily applied to Boards. My random thoughts were;

- Is it worthwhile thinking about the words that **describe the behaviours** on your Boards? Does yours work like a well-oiled machine? Or are they a bit disjointed? Why?
- Think about the words to describe your Chair (you don't have to share these of course!) and then think about your reactions to that word. Are they positive words or ones with negative connotations? And what can you do about them? This could be applied to the way the clerk behaves as well...
- Will answering some of these questions help you with that all important annual self review and subsequent succession planning? After all there is a new NCOGS document called '**Succession breeds success** - how to grow leaders in your governing body' so it is something worth considering.

Just a thought.

## What's in a Name?

A governing board should be *greater than the sum of its parts* which, I have just found out, is a quote from Aristotle. There's hope for me yet!

By this I mean that the board is not the chair or the head or the governors and directors but an amalgam of their skills, knowledge and experience. Whilst every board deserves a

strong leader and clear voices and a good plan, does every member have to be named in the minutes? To name or not to name that is the question.

There was much debate on this topic at a CPD session on **clerking academy boards** which I attended recently. The corporate world is apparently moving towards **naming names** and **attributing actions** to demonstrate an individual's **contribution** to the board. Those of us clerking in the education sector remained to be convinced of this and decided that a '**half way house**' approach would probably be best given, that at the moment anyway, governors and directors are volunteers.

As long as we can all, hand on heart, say we participate in the life of the school, undertake our link visits, question the data, read the information we are sent, do some purposeful training and challenge what we are presented with or find then we are indeed greater than the sum of our parts. And as long as the clerk (who should never begin a sentence with the word and!) is recording this as **accurately** and as completely as possible then all should be well. A good clerk can highlight contributions by using some stock phrases such:

- A governor asked
- The governors challenged
- The Link Governor for
- The Chair/Vice Chair Head reported/commented etc

Mind you that does not leave many places to hide!

We also need to think about how the clerk records **disagreement and dissent** because this too is part of the process of **effective governance**. Perhaps we could also remind ourselves of the **Nolan principles** and think about how these are reflected in our minutes:

1. **Selflessness**
2. **Integrity**
3. **Objectivity**
4. **Accountability**
5. **Openness**
6. **Honesty**
7. **Leadership**
8. **Cake...**

## I'm Weighting

A **weighted agenda** allocates a specific time for each item on the agenda which can be monitored as you go through the meeting. This is useful when there are a large number of items on the agenda. Theoretically when the time is up for any particular item you can decide whether to carry on talking or move on to the next item. Thing is though who decides?

There are some questions (when are there not!?) which we could ask ourselves about agenda setting;

- What if agendas listed "work to be done" rather than "things to talk about"? Oh, we Governors do love to talk... but would doing that make a real difference to how 'well' we talked?
- What items on the agenda are for information only and do not need to be discussed at length?
- What items require active consideration and a decision?
- What items need someone to action them ie actions which someone 'owns' and don't just hang there in the ether looking for a good home...

There are many benefits of having a weighted agenda;

- It should encourage some pre-planning and preparation as everyone can see what the work of the meeting is,
- It shows Governors where they will be expected (required?) to contribute. Passivity is so last year.
- It helps us focus on the things that matter - the 'have to do' not just the 'nice to do'.

**Tick tock, tick tock...**what's the longest meeting you have been part of and were you culpable in its' length? And did you give any consideration to the **Clerk** (and the **Headteacher** for that

matter) who had to clerk your marathon meeting? One clock? Two clocks? Three plus clocks

And if your meeting was more than 2ish hours I hereby award you an honorary egg timer... Use it well...tempus fugit and all that.

## Qué?? Or what the heck?

You know when you read **minutes** and wonder **what** on earth is going on? Bit like those DfE board minutes outed recently in Schools Week (March 2017) which comprised, ooh, all of three lines including the meeting name, date and one line of content. Well, let's see...

**Apologies.** Minutes state that no apologies received from Mr X - this could mean that

1. X genuinely forgot about the meeting
2. Y *cba* to turn up ...again
3. Who's that?

Okay, the first scenario this does happen. I once received some apologies from someone via text during the meeting. She was in the supermarket – least it wasn't the pub I suppose. Come on admit we've all done it. Haven't we? Oh, you haven't? Oops.

If the second scenario happens frequently I think we need to talk. Seriously talk. There may be some really good reasons why someone doesn't want to engage in governance and we need to talk about it.

And as one of the Clerk's **legal responsibilities** is to keep a **record of membership** we really need to know who is supposed to be at the meeting. And who isn't. I always try and identify **governors** from **observers**. Once asked for a show of hands as I was genuinely perplexed as to who was who and this wasn't even my first meeting. Some governors also seemed rather surprised with the response worryingly. Nice to know I wasn't alone I guess. Sometimes I actually have had to tell people who are they.

**Questions.** How often have you read *Governors asked no further questions*. Does this mean one of the following;

1. they'd asked some crackers already and no further questions were needed. Yippee.
2. they'd asked one or two and couldn't really think of anymore however they had tried really hard. Well done. Keep it up.
3. they'd asked absolutely nothing and the Clerk was desperately trying to turn the gossip into something resembling a question and had run out of ideas.

**Holding to account.** Now we get to the heart of the matter. Issues here include

1. wondering how the Clerk can honestly record a full on argy bargy? Seriously? Honestly.
2. when no one does anything resembling anything which could even at a stretch be construed as holding to account? You know like a governor visit. How novel is that?!
3. when no one knows what holding to account actually means?

A response to 1 would be get thee back to the KS1 playground and learn how to play nicely; to 2 schools are usually very pleased to see you – go on it's not hard! And 3 ? Go and do some training and reading and get your head out of the sand. Quick march – Ofsted's a coming round the corner!

And finally **Irrelevant Agenda Items** (known at here at Elbow Towers as IRAITES). These are those items which appear meeting after meeting after meeting on the agenda and either make you groan; often audibly – sorry that was my sciatica - or are those standing items which no one really knows what they are supposed to mean but the **recommended agenda** says they need to be there. Everyone has an IRAITE topic; mine, since we are sharing, is playing field drainage. Drains the life out of me every time...

Mind you if you had been on the NCTL Efficient and Effective Financial Management of Schools governor workshop you would know that you should always follow up on a dripping tap. And not just with the school sick bucket.

## Three Little Words

Requested by a friend and colleague though I don't suppose this was quite what she was expecting when she said **AOB** in her role as a Chair was the bane of her life...

*Three little words that fill your heart with dread*

*That stuff up the timings and mess with your head*

*The three little words that must be agreed*

*Up front too if the clerk is believed.*

*These little words need to be managed with care*

*- So always watch out and be ever aware*

*Of the three little words on the business of things*

*That have your dream to leave early take off on tired wings.*

*Three little 'others', one little thing'*

*Just one more matter to you I must bring.*

*No, it has to be urgent, it has to be done,*

*For **Any Other Business** just spoils all the fun.*

## A Room with a View

I am still digesting the newly issued **Clerks Competency Framework** published yesterday (April 2017) and may blog about it when I, and no doubt, @thesarkyclerk have had a good mull and chunter. Watch this space.

No, the matter which is vexing me as I start the summer term, is **rooms**. As I am no longer a spring chicken, though there's plenty of life left in me yet fear not, I am particularly vexed by rooms. As you know if you have read my blog I am a '**pen and paper**' clerk not a '**straight onto a laptop**' clerk and this means I

need room. Tucking my elbows tight into my sides and trying hard to avoid the governor sitting next to me reading my notes puts a strain on my person; young as I may be I am not a contortionist. Oh and those amazing laptop clerks can't work with the laptop balanced on their knees for more than about 10 minutes btw.

So here are my **Top Tips for a Good Meeting Room**, feng shui aside;

- **Air** - nothing worse than sitting there slowly sinking into a morass of '*overheatedness*' (I know that is not a real word but I like it), shirt sleeves rolled up to your arm pits and shoes off...we all need an air supply. Preferably not pre-owned.
- **Windows** - seems like there are many schools with left over spaces, aka cupboards, which are turned into 'meeting rooms'. Now I know space is at a premium but, please, 10 people in a broom cupboard. Cosy. Seriously why not meet in a classroom (see next bullet point) and then you can do a link visit at the same time. Perfect! Some windows even open. And others have blinds. Who knew?
- **Chairs** - now this may be stating the obvious - I may be small of stature but I am not the size of a KS1 pupil so please don't make me clerk on a KS1 chair. Others share



my pain. Trust me. A chaise longue is not necessary but a comfy chair is useful.

- **A table** - or flat surface. Saves slouching. Sit up straight there at the back. Posture!
- **Poor heating** - not always within your control but cold hands do not a happy clerk make. You can sit on yours or shove them into the aforementioned armpits - the clerk cannot. The Uriah Heap Look is so last year darling.
- **Poor lighting** - a gloomy meeting room makes for a gloomy meeting. Equally being scorched through a huge south facing window is not pleasant either.
- **Space to be comfortable** - I know governors need to be shoulder to shoulder these days as we face increasing pressures from a variety of sources but this not have to be literally. I am not a huge fan of Personal Space Invaders. Just saying.
- An interactive board (optional) - useful for going through the data line by line etc.
- **Cake and Tea.** Goes without saying. Often does but in times of austerity maybe that's ok? No. It's not.

Finally, I hope that you all start(ed) the **new term** with a spring in your step in spite of everything. Last week contained **National Volunteer Day** and as I am often late to the party - here's a heartfelt **thank you** to you from me.

## Sweetie Darling

Channelling Ab Fab and showing my age...

Today's question is what kind of sweet is your Board? Are you/they

- Those sour sweets...acidic on the outside but quite sweet inside? I like them. Bit of a challenge. You certainly know you've eaten one.
- The type of sweet always left in the bottom of the box because the wrapper fell off and no one knows what it is? There's always one sadly.
- A toffee? Really hard going but one of my favourites. A nice salted caramel perhaps or a nice bag of mixed toffees?
- Minty? Fresh and refreshing. Occasionally has a hole in the middle but the name is clear for all to see. Packed in tightly; works like a team.
- Pick n Mix? Lots of variety with something for everyone and always good fun?
- Chocolate eggshell? Looks good on the outside and can contain the occasional surprise?

And the clerk? Wrapper picker upper, sweet hander outer, reminds you to clean your teeth and follow the health warnings but hopefully not hider of evidence behind the sofa...

# A Twitcher's Guide to Governance

*Before I go any further I would like to make it clear that whilst my blog posts may be a little frivolous at times I take governance extremely seriously.*

Right that's the health warning out of the way...

The last blog post was about sweets and whilst I know that not all of you eat sweets I am fairly certain you can tell the difference between a **sparrow** (small and increasingly rare in some parts of the country) and a **seagull** (beady eyed, rapacious, slightly scary). So, as it is a rainy Bank Holiday Monday here at Elbow Towers and, as eldest offspring comes of age soon and I feel like hibernating (apparently only one bird hibernates and that's the **Common Poorwill** - a fact a day and all that!) a blog is in order.

So today's 'Question on Everyone's Lips' is ... What **Bird is your Board** - hoping of course that none of your Board are actually doing bird.

Are you...

A **woodpecker** - chipping away until you get the result you seek? Mind you it's an irritating noise so I hope you get a quick outcome. I do hope you aren't modelling yourselves on a certain woodpecker named Woody. Nice trousers.

An **owl** - various sorts available. Folklore has owls as wise. And wearing glasses. There are times, are there not, when this is a good description...?

*For some time now Pooh had been saying "Yes" and "No" in turn, with his eyes shut, to all that Owl was saying, and having said "Yes, yes" last time, he said "No, not at all" now, without really knowing what Owl was talking about.*

An **ostrich**. According to wikipedia *when threatened, the ostrich will either hide itself by lying flat against the ground, or run away.* Mmm.

An **eagle** - flying high, like a bird in the sky or as Abba puts it

*They came flying from far away, now I'm under their spell  
I love hearing the stories that they tell  
They've seen places beyond my land and they've found new horizons  
They speak strangely but I understand.*

Which describes collaboration nicely when you think about it. Or not.

A **Roadrunner** is a fast-running ground cuckoo apparently. The analogy here is taxing me slightly - are you a 'new governor seeking to usurp' or a 'fast running in any direction governor' when the tasks are delegated. Tricky one that! Neither I hope - I'd like us to have cosy nests where we work together but I am pragmatic if nothing else.

A **magpie**. Stealing or copying everyone else's ideas without necessarily seeing if they fit in the nest properly. Magpies are highly intelligent so why they feel the need to steal I have no idea!

A **pheasant** due to a typing error.

A **parrot**. I'll leave that one there...

Any appropriate additions to my menagerie most welcome!  
**Tweet tweet.**

And me? I am a **swan**, yes, go on a swan...! Think about it...

## Discretion Versus Valour

On following a spat on twitter aka a twitspat between people who should have known better.

**Discretion** is the better part of **valour**. Discuss. 3,000 words by tomorrow morning please. Black ink. No plagiarism. Off you go...

According to Google (which is not the fount of all knowledge some people seem to think it is) this idiom (oh hark at me, hanging out with the Y6's is obviously working #skills) refers to something you say which really means that it is better to be careful and think before you act than it is to be brave and take risks. But how does this work in reality? Do you agree and have you got a social media policy for example? Does everyone sign it including the governors?

Being up with the times a lovely film reference from way back when occurs to me here...so today's QOEL is - are you, and no offence is meant here friends:

- a cowardly lion - all *gggroar* and no bite
- a tin person in search of themselves

- a scarecrow (your dress sense is irrelevant but get those birds out of the classroom please. Think of the mess made by the droppings).

or

- the wizard (hiding behind the curtains fiddling with the heating controls - this is operational folks!)

or even

- the leading character, prancing about with a picnic basket...

In this 1939 film (and there are days when one wonders if we are indeed careering back to the 1930s) our cast of characters also includes a good witch dispensing treats, a bad witch (nice shoes), a small, yappy canine (dogs are not usually allowed on school grounds but their presence can be immensely beneficial apparently), a flying house (huge, massive, humungous H&S risk), a hurricane (rare but has happened in this country so needs to be on the risk register), a couple of relatives (make sure you check that they are who they say they are), and a collection of munchkins. You getting the drift yet?

No? Me neither. Hold on we'll get there in a minute...

Now, our gang of characters, who had not met each other until thrown together by extenuating circumstances, traipse merrily off down the yellow brick road to goodness knows where and have a few adventures on the way. They face adversity, find that they are brave, manage to wangle their way into the Emerald City through wiles and diversions and end up trying to get back to Kansas in a hot air balloon. This is another huge H&S risk.

If this story unfolded today, and here I get to the 'heart' of the matter, they would be tweeting the whole way, posting pics on facebook, whatsapp'ing and the like and generating a whole host of followers; the whole thing would get out of control as the followers would inevitably disagree with each other and they would end up as a headline on 10 o'clock news. Or being trolled although that is different story altogether. What it certainly doesn't need to be is splashed all over social media. The moral of the story is of course tweet/fb/s'app with caution...

I'm all for being brave, for **challenging** the status quo (*here we are and here we are and here we go all aboard and we're hitting the road, here we go, rockin' all over the world...sorry where was I?*) and for **taking risks** but it needs to be done with humour, respect and most importantly solid, quality evidence and should at all times be minuted by your Clerk.

Remember the road map for any trip to see the wizard is either Code of Conduct or the **Nolan Principles**...or both.

And the Clerk should sign it too.

## Walk the Line

There has been much thinking about lines and boundaries going here at Elbow Towers this half term. Whilst ensuring that our schools have decent security fencing with no holes is a key responsibility (strategic) and the lines on the playing field are clearly in place in time for sports day (operational) there are other lines which cause my brow to furrow thereby creating yet more lines on my governance forehead. In no particular order and choosing a range of analogies we have...

**Walking the line...** Do you ever wonder that people are pushing the envelope in terms of behaviour in the real and virtual worlds; over bearing, argumentative, whatever? This may or may not be covered by a code of conduct. Sometimes of course there is no clear line between support and challenge and we stray into asking questions which aren't entirely governance related. It's not always easy for the clerk to say stop.

**Lines in the sand.** What are your non-negotiables in terms of your academy conversations? Your targets? Your feelings towards the budget? What won't you give up?

**Over the line.** This is how everyone will feel when KS2 results come out on July 4th, at the end of term and in August for GCSE and A levels. Or in my case when the school fair is over... Fun but exhausting!

**Parallel Lines** - this one leads me straight to hanging on the telephone ear worms and telephones leads me to mobile phone policies and a gentle reminder that it is quite rude to play games on your phone during a meeting. Playing Candy Crush is so last year so unless you're on the phone on eBay checking out the price of the out of date tech lurking at the back of the store cupboard put it away. Urgent family matters is an acceptable reason for phone use in meeting; after all many of us have received a curt text during a meeting informing us that 'your dinner's in the dog'...

**Delineate.** It's important that we all know the difference between strategic and operational whilst accepting that this is not always clear which is as helpful as it isn't.

**Bottom line.** By now maintained governors will have approved and submitted the budgets. And all I can say is that the bottom line is getting tighter and tighter everywhere and as a clerk I'm

privity to some of the pain the budget conversations cause. How this will affect pupils' outcomes only time will tell. And that is not funny in the slightest.

## The Power of Impact

After reading a blog on impact written by another governor (link below) I thought I'd add a small something to this important debate especially as there are no new wheels in the world and at here at Elbow Towers we love recycling but not plagiarism.

**Impact.** Repeat after me...impact - rolls of the tongue nicely and I can see Edmund Blackadder saying it as I type...

Breaking this word down into some non-existent constituent parts we have:

- **I'm** - *there is no I in team by the way, governance boards are, or most certainly should be, teams.*
- **Imp** - *this is how I feel sometimes. Impish. Deliberately provocative...when I'm feeling brave of course!*
- **Pact** - *hopefully not of silence...*
- **Act** - *Ofsted and others will see straight through that one would hope...*

As a clerk I often sit and wait for the *'impactive'* question - you know that moment when the lightbulb goes off. It is wonderful when it happens and it reinvigorates meetings no end.

I looked up 'Ofsted and Impact' on *t'interweb* and found a study from way back in 2014. In 2014 Ofsted reported that of those surveyed around two thirds of **school leaders** believed that the increased focus on governance would lead to improvement. Well, yes. There are as listed in my colleague's blog plenty of examples out there to prove this point and the December 2016 Ofsted report on effective governance added much to the debate.

There has been **much discussion on impact and governors** on various social media platforms recently; particularly how to measure said impact and whether this is yet another **value judgement**; and leading onto whether this is a good thing or not. I get that. I really do. So now I'm wondering whether we should be looking at impact in a different way. This obviously just my opinion and I offer it as such - it's neither right or wrong:

Starting with your **SDP** or SIP targets, or your Ofsted development points, generate some well thought out questions and **follow and track** them through over a few terms rather than generating new questions at each meeting. I'm sure this will quite quickly show the evidence of progress or whatever it was you were looking to find evidence about. I

haven't seen many sets of minutes where this happens but I'm certain many Boards do actually do this...*(hint to self about preaching and practising...)*

Another way to evidence impact is through **reviewing your Board structures**. If you refresh your structures, aka a restructure, within the remit of what you can change (ie schemes of delegation or loG) it can be very powerful. I've seen it happen. It can be genuinely *impactive*. **Boxes** are there to be thought outside of in my opinion. Here the questions are *what decision making autonomy does your Board have, what is it doing with it and importantly how does this relate to pupil outcomes?* Answers on a postcard please!

Does having **clear values** and considered **ethos** (the **social responsibility** element of governance if you like) help us measure our impact more easily because in theory we have a clear sense of direction? *What impact has reviewing our ethos, which we are encouraged to do regularly, actually have?*

What struck me at as wrote this blog was the **creeping realisation** that we often assume our impact is always positive or at worst has no negative effect; after all it has been some time since this inspection judgement went viral and it is great to see that the inspection outcome was good at the last visit but the danger remains if governance is ineffective that the overall outcomes will be affected. Fortunately there is much

help, guidance and support out there NGA, NLG, other Boards, Teaching Schools, and your clerk. Use it well.

**Finally**, I sometimes think we try too hard so I'm leaving you with an acronym I've never seen on any list for governors - **KISS**; especially appropriate as it's Volunteer week this week. Mwah. Mwah.

**'When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure'**

Which is Goodhart's Law and is something I saw referred to on Social Media, liked it and checked it out. See no new wheels!

## ...ology, ogy, oi?

A **question** for you. You don't need to share the answer with anyone else but may I ask you to think about **why you are a governor?** What was it that sparked your interest? Was it

1. something personal to you and your child/ren?
2. a desire to give something back to society?
3. the offer of free cake and a cosy chat?

If it's 3) oh dear.

A second question – **what have you given back?** Apart from **time** that is. **Skills** I guess. And a perspective from **outside** of education? Is this type of question one which should form part of a self- review ie what's your skill/perspective/area of interest/knowledge?

This **outside perspective** 'angle' is one that interests me greatly when I do External Reviews of Governance. I am always interested in knowing how many of the people on the Board are

- a) staff in one form or another (there are rules about the percentages – just saying)
- b) teachers from other schools
- c) staff from other schools
- d) retired teachers and head teachers?
- e) working in education in one form or another?

Now before you say anything I have absolutely no problem with any of the above but I do have an issue with governor meetings focusing on **pedagogy**. This is operational in my view. Pedagogy is after all *the method and practice of teaching, especially as an academic subject or theoretical concept*. An awareness of the

role of pedagogy in schools is probably enough to get most of us through a teaching and learning or standards committee. As a clerk I've heard a range of conversations at meetings – some of which I have to confess I did not entirely understand.

Following on from this a recent discussion on **@UKGovChat** looked at **impact** and how do we know we are **making a real and perceptible difference**. This is quite hard, even for highly experienced governors and it is a question I struggle with sometimes particularly when thinking about outcomes for pupils – especially quantifiable ones anyway. The questions that we prepare and ask about impact are more often than not based on our experiences and/or prior knowledge and sometimes instinct.

As part of this questioning role governors are continually being asked to **challenge** and, in order to do so effectively, we need to think about **how** we frame the questions we ask in order to have the impact. A useful starting point (and this will help the clerk as well) is to ask yourself – *is my question...*

1. *seeking clarification of the matter being discussed*
2. *seeking more information about something said, read or seen*
3. *seeking to challenge information presented because we have evidence to the contrary*



4. *can my question be followed by ...and? Is it begging for more...*

By having a **clear reason** for asking the question the business of clerking your meeting is a much more logical process – we can't knit fog after all.

I'll leave you with this – if the thinking about governance practice is '*governology*' then the doing of governance is *governogy* and the asking of challenging questions is *oi*...why did that happen; what happened next; and; so what; when; and just as long as we remain aware of the boundaries between strategic and operational questions and behaviours your minutes will stand the test of time.

For those youngsters amongst you the ology reference is an old BT advert from the 80s...

## Wading for Beginners

Here at Elbow Offices things are '**afoot**'. Even after recovering from the unintended consequences of a nice period of purdah (in May and June 2017) the Elbow finds herself sinking rapidly under a mountain of minutes. A veritable cascade at times, a cascade I tell you. On reflection being many 'hatted' took rather a toll. There have been times over the past few weeks when it was more purgatory than purdah this wearing of the many hats

but still every painful exercise is a pulled muscle and all that. This recent testing experience - involving casting votes, the odd swear word, a few tears and much celebration - has made me think of **wading**.

Recently whilst not channelling the Elbow but wearing my fetching purple hat I've waded in to heated debates; situations I could not see an exit plan for; meetings with no clear purpose and yet have emerged bruised but not broken. Though for now whilst my wading days are over I do think, on reflection, that we all need to **Be Prepared More** and how better to prepare other than by wearing wellies. I was mostly prepared for my recent experiences but at the same time I wasn't so that's an action point for next time. This rambling leads me onto today's **QOEL** which is all about rubber or latex or whatever they make Wellington boots out of these days...

In being prepared for every eventuality do you wear...

- Those fetching full length waders with braces? No chance of getting your feet wet but you might catch a nice fish. Useful. Bit OTT in the average circumstances. But not testing your waterproofness in the face of emergencies is short sighted to say the least.
- Normal common or garden Wellingtons. Safe. Predictable. Affordable. Easily replaceable.

- Festival wellies, all flowers and flimsy. Very showy but probably useless in several feet of mud. Can you get glow in the dark wellies? Now that would be useful for illuminating hard to reach corners but bound to show your fun side. All Boards have one...
- Expensive green wellies with a discreet buckle. A once in a lifetime purchase requiring active assessment of the budget position. Steady.
- Boots with 'froggy' eyes. Sadly they don't make these in my size but I'd wear them. Oh yes I would. Didn't have these when I was a youngster. Silly.
- Specialist footwear is always crucial for certain occasions eg H&S audits. You know like toe-tectors, or white wellies or those really expensive gardening boots made of leather and a patented waterproof material. A once in a life time purchase and something which may require an interest free loan and possibly some due diligence as long-term maintenance of such boots is an ongoing issue. A Perfectly Fanciful Indulgence or not?
- And finally galoshes. Useful overshoes. Can you still buy these? Old fashioned but have stood the test of time.

Mind you at the moment as we seem to be in some sort of heat wave\* (I know, it's remarkable) so I'm wearing flip flops; and flip flopping is something I don't like doing at all so I'm not exactly bounding about with joy at the prospect.

And in case you are wondering there is no place in this world for high heeled wellies. Utterly pointless but a talking point I guess and could be used to if one needs to focus attention elsewhere...

\*This did not last sadly and it has been raining ever since I wrote that blog post in early July...

## Everybody's Talkin' at Me

Part One...

Well, here we go with the live blog from The Elbow who's had her passport stamped and is now in London at the NGA annual conference, no honestly I'm not shopping.

The opening speaker tells us to throw ourselves in. What into he wasn't exactly clear about but most of us governors are often prepared to throw ourselves in and as long as we understand the difference between strategic and operational I'd jump right in if I were you but don't forget your water wings.

The next speaker says he's got the keys to the sweetie shop. Really?! He's obviously been reading an earlier blog of The Elbow. I doubt it mind you but hope springs eternal. He quite rightly says we need to be resourceful and resilient. He quotes Philip Larkin The clean quote fear not. Mind you a swear box is

a good way to raise money but would result in a fixed term exclusion.

Seriously though the speaker is talking about correlation between FSM, outcomes and the fact that 194,000 pupils left school after 13 years with no qualifications in English and Maths. Now I wonder what questions we should be asking about this. This did not happen overnight. That's 194,000. I'll leave that there.

The quote - *Life has a practice of living you if you don't live it*'.

Part Two...

In a workshop about risk The Elbow has been made to think about risk but has now got an earworm courtesy of REM though playing Twister and Risk plays havoc with the sciatic nerve.

- A plea from this clerk is this - let's raise risk up the agenda. In an environment of reducing budgets which of course is a risk in itself surely risk needs to be a regular matter for discussion. What are your key risks and how can you as a Board minimise the risks facing our schools. Speaking as a clerk there are risks if you don't read the minutes. Some are fairly obvious...like not being able to keep up in meetings, or the risk of appearing not to know your school in front of Ofsted. Though for me the

greatest risk is not asking any questions at all. Trust me this still happens. Shocking

## Engage, Engage

I have an image in my mind of a sink plunger on a stick coming at me squeaking 'engage, engage'. I blame this on a talk I just heard about governance and engaging with leadership and management executives, cosiness, induction and how important it is to have courageous conversations. But you can't have a conversation if only one person's listening. So my question is this and is two-fold because as you already know I can't count.

**The question is this ... HOW do you engage and on WHAT? And since I'm thinking about Dr Who - WHO are you engaging with and WHY?**

Answers on a postcard to...

## The Art of Being Well

There is quite rightly an increasing amount of emphasis on teacher and head teacher wellbeing and how critical it is that governors are ensuring a work life balance and support is in place. As a clerk I sometimes minute that the Heads are taking

dedicated Headteacher time and for a while my LA had it as a specific agenda item. All power to them.

So, as we move towards the end of term I'd like to leave you with a few thoughts about wellbeing...

As some of you may know I'm not only a clerk but an NLG and Chair as well, and as a Chair I have a fantastic Vice Chair who often checks that I'm looking after my own wellbeing as I'm known to be a bit of a workaholic. **Have you checked if your Chair's ok?** We are all volunteers after all and have families and work commitments too. Share the governance load...

Results days are stressful. Be supportive. **What are you doing to support when things don't go as predicted?** This is aside from your asking why the actual outcomes and the predictions were so different if indeed they were of course. How fabulous if they were in line. Brilliant.

**What extra input into the last few weeks of term are staff doing?** The amount of work that goes into the end of year activities is often phenomenal. But it takes it out of staff. Go be supportive. I'm sure you are already.

There is lots of information out there to help us shape our questions about wellbeing and I'd like to see this have a higher

priority next term and the term after. Have you a plan in place to support wellbeing of your whole school?

Budgets are not going to suddenly increase. **What items have you had to cut from budgets? Was it CPD?** The opportunity for staff to go to other schools, meet others etc is really important and not just for knowledge gathering and sharing but networking. This applies to governor training and development too. The trick is to cascade the learning in a reduced budget environment.

**Have you got a support network who support and challenge you in equal measure?** It's important to have a sounding board. Mine's a total star.

And finally and a bit selfishly...governor wellbeing audit anyone? Leave it with me. It's on my to do list for the holidays...

## Cosy is as Cosy Does

Now listen, as my mother has a habit of saying; although I'm no longer six years old, not this that seems to stop her; I need to talk to you. I am wearing for our little talk a straw trilby in honour of the fact it's supposed to be July. This is a Serious Talk, a Grown Up Talk, a talk about **Relationships**.

I need to ask you a question about what you've been Up To lately. Ok, here goes;

- Is your Board too **cosy**? Does it laugh at its own jokes? Laughing is fine, but in-jokes are tricky to clerk. Is your clerk sitting there going '*what the fraggle?*' whilst wearing a fixed smile and worried eyes. It happens. They may not be alone...
- Is your Board all a bit Cosi fan Tutti? All **operatic** and prone to flouncing? I'm all for being bilingual (I can do a mix of scouse and the potteries) but being on the same hymn sheet helps. (I am not sure that the behaviours displayed in this opera are quite those we wish to be modelling in 2017 but there you go).
- Does your Board need a **comfort blankey**? Is the Headteacher's report something which tells you what questions to ask? Sometimes this is ok but actually not often. I keep reading about boards who've not read MAT schemes of delegation properly and landed with a nasty bump...
- What are the **key relationships** on your Board. Pick one of the following options which best fits - Head/Chair? Chair/Clerk? Head/Clerk? All three? None? Discuss. Whichever fits best you do need an skills audit

Cosy is an adjective meaning giving the giving 'a *feeling of comfort, warmth, and relaxation*' and you certainly don't want to be overly warm in meetings, nor overly comfortable with no

challenge and you certainly don't want governors to be so relaxed they are asleep! Hands up anyone who has seen this happen. Given any thought as to why? Heat? Timing? Illness? Boredom?

As we all know **relationships are the key to effective governance** and we all need to be more **open** and **transparent** about where the **relationship dynamics** are happening and how we handle and acknowledge them; cosy or otherwise. After all it's the ill advised **related party transactions** which end up as front page news and we don't want that now do we?

## When Kafka got a bafta or the case of the oversized ;

This salutary tale takes us nicely towards the end of term and although it may come across as a rant, *aka* good old moan, it most assuredly is nothing of the sort.

Our story began when tens of thousands of Y6 pupils sat down, one hopes under exam conditions, to undertake a Statutory Assessment Test. There they sat pencils sharpened, rulers ready, brains awake, full of a hearty breakfast (possibly) and tears dried. They bravely tackled the reading comprehension paper (a bit more accessible than last year apparently); scaled the maths papers protractor in hand and did their spellings

marvellously. They did this knowing that not all will get to Greater Depth and not all will reach Age Related Expectations. I salute them.

The vast majority will do their absolute best; not just for the benefit of the school or to please their teachers and parents but because they want to show everyone what they can really do. And how do we repay them? By having a marking scheme so inflexible it does not reward a semi colon because its two constituent parts are too far apart. The Elbow thinks this is a '*handwriting*' issue not a '*don't know*' issue but what does she know? After all some of the cleverest people known to person-kind have appalling handwriting. Urban folk lore has it that doctors have illegible handwriting and they are very clever people indeed. The Elbow's handwriting looks lovely and neat from a distance but on closer inspection there are times when even she can make neither head nor tail of the notes she takes. Thankfully her memory has not yet failed her and the final Board minutes are usually accurate. Phew. Anyway back to the story...

This SAT was sat in May and the thousands upon thousands of papers were subsequently marked and the results came out in July. There were reading test results, the outcomes from a couple of writing and maths tests as well as from something called GPS. The Elbow has a theory about GPS. In her world (which is not all minutes and clerking - who knew!??) GPS means Geographical Positioning System and is a system used

to precisely locate something. Very useful. In schools GPS means grammar punctuation and spelling. Again it requires precision and helps you make yourself understood. All in all a very useful skill. The level of precision most of us would need from a GPS sat nav type thing would be such as to get us to our destination and within 100m would probably be sufficient. The same with grammar. #ducks

Some of the thousands and thousands of young people answered the required question; (the question at the heart of our sorry tale) correctly but used an oversized semi colon. They received *nil point*. Oh dear me. Oh dear me indeed. Many people took to the social media airwaves to vent and there were blogs a-plenty; including one from The Elbow. She does not really like to have to repeat herself but this semi colon malarkey has really made her cross. Cross because last year there was a SPAG leak, this year we have a Case of the Over Sized Colon and if one was sitting a GCSE Eng Lit paper total confusion in Romeo and Juliet land so the *kafkaesqueness* is not solely confined to the primary sector. And next year...I dread to think but rumour has it all bets are off.

The lesson in our sorry tale is two-fold and one which we can all learn from check your work and well, check your work. After all as Kafka himself *said start with what is right rather than what is acceptable*. And by doing that would could possibly go wrong?

## Credit Where it's Due

Here at Elbow Towers we've been reflecting on the **Sisyphian** task that was governance during the last term. Like most of us I imagine The Elbow has had good governance days and bad governance days over the last few terms but on the whole the end of term this year came as something of a relief; if only because the inbox was bursting, the ironing piling up and I'd forgotten what the dog looked like. I made the mistake of adding how many hours I'd given this term and wished I hadn't because whilst I don't regret it for a minute it was rather a shock. Governors and Trustees all over the country will have had no doubt similar mixed feelings about end of term – relief tempered with the fact that summer break is not quite long enough to fully recharge especially if the sun doesn't shine.

The Elbow has blogged about the amount of time governors give to their schools before but it is worth repeating; if all governors donate 1 hour per week and all schools have a board of 9 that's 9 hours a week multiplied by 39 weeks per school giving 350 hours per school per year – or 7.85million hours per year. **For free.** Now if schools had to pay for that time and expertise at the minimum living wage that comes to **£60m**. Yes, that's £60m freely given to support schools, academies, staff, pupils, headteachers, each other. You get the idea.

Governors of one description or another have been part of the education system in this country since the 1300's (I read that somewhere but it may not be strictly accurate and probably only applies to public schools and there aren't many of those to the pound round here) but they definitely have been around since the mid 1800's and for some reason I always think of Mr Brocklehurst from Jane Eyre as a governor type person. I've no idea why I think this as it wasn't until 1870 that the Education Act created compulsory education in England and Wales for children aged between 5 and 13. This act also introduced a structure of lay governance that was accountable to the voting population which at that time that excluded women (*humpf*). Mr B can't have been a governor after all as Jane Eyre wasn't published until 1847 which just goes to show a) I should have listened more at school and b) is a relief as he had somewhat of a disregard for safeguarding. I digress as per.

Now back to the theme of money and credit - if a picture paints a thousand words (free earworm there if you can cast your mind back to 1971 and song by Bread – ooh theme emerging here) then a quotation can say it in 8.

### Governors putting the give into governance since 1870

And if we've been putting the give into governance for almost 150 years then it can't be too hard for schools to say thank you but sadly they sometimes forget in the excitement of the last

week of term what with reports, performances, leavers leaving, etc. I get that, I really, really do. We don't want hearts and flowers or whatever we just want to be appreciated and thanked, after all being inclusive doesn't mean taking for granted now does it? So finally here is something from me to you which might go a small way towards you're feeling appreciated...

THANK YOU.

Your schools need you even if they rarely say so!

I hope you have enjoyed this collection of blogs and have found some of the questions thought provoking.

I am happy for you to share some or all of the blog book but do let me know if you do.

I can be found at [www.sbwgovernance.co.uk](http://www.sbwgovernance.co.uk)

Fee Stagg

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