

Busy Governance Guide to Challenge

“Effective boards hold their executive leaders to account for improving pupil and staff performance by asking the right questions.” **Governance Handbook 2020**

1. What is meant by challenge? In terms of governance, challenge is about asking someone to prove or justify something by asking the right questions.

2. What is mean by the ‘right’ questions? Not all questions will provide challenge. In the main the questions that ask just for information are not likely to be providing challenge. **‘What is pupil premium?’** is a question asking for information, but not providing challenge. However, **‘Why do our pupil premium children not make the same progress as other children?’** is asking someone to prove or justify why this is, this is providing challenge. Governors will note that to ask a question that provides relevant challenge, they will often need to have already received some information. Boards can support effective challenge by ensuring that governors have the relevant information well ahead of meetings to consider and then ask informed questions. The Governance Handbook completes the quotation at the top of this page by going on to say: *“It is essential that boards use, and are familiar with, specific data about their school(s) to help inform these questions.”*

3. Why do governors need to challenge? Many boards are happy with the information they receive from their headteacher and ask why they can’t just accept what they are told. Do we routinely accept what we are told? In our day to day lives we are advised to ask for additional quotations or second opinions to ensure that we have more than one source of information to reach the right conclusion, so why not the same thorough approach when discussing education?

4. But the headteacher is the educational expert: Yes, the headteacher is the educational expert. However, governance is designed to be ‘lay’ - no educational expertise is required, because the basic questions are often the most effective. Many believe that your value as a governor is more to do with the questions you ask, rather than the opinions you hold.

5. Headteachers should welcome challenge: The Governance Handbook states that executive leaders should *“...welcome strong governance and actively support their board to understand its role and deliver its core functions effectively. Executive leaders should welcome and enable appropriately robust challenge by providing any data the board requests and responding positively to searching questions”*. Many headteachers say that the best form of support they can receive from their board is to challenge effectively.

6. Robust Challenge? Sometimes governors will need to ask tough questions and to have uncomfortable conversations in the interests of the pupils in their school.

7. What is appropriate challenge? Appropriate challenge is a planned event, it takes place in a meeting, it is polite and it is informed, but it can still be assertive. It supports the working relationship between the headteacher and the board and informs the monitoring process. It is often more about what can ‘we’ do about an issue than what are ‘you’ going to do about this issue.

8. What isn’t appropriate challenge? When a governor is using questions as an opportunity to ambush a leader within a meeting or outside of it. When it involves aggression, pointing the finger (literally) or banging the table, or making demands that undermine the relationship between the headteacher and the board. How effective challenge is does not depend on how ‘challenging’ individual personalities are. Effective challenge requires a board to understand their strategic role and their role in accountability via the monitoring process.

9. The Monitoring process? Governors will be engaged in monitoring pupil progress via key documents relating to attainment, financial information, the school improvement/development plan and the longer-term strategic plan. The headteacher and the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) will

be providing reports throughout the year. Some reports will be provided termly, most will hopefully be in writing and circulated in advance of board meetings. However, reports produced in-house cannot be the only source of governors' information and it is vital that governors remember this.

10. Where else can we get information from? External bodies will be assessing and visiting the school or the academy and generating reports, these should be available to the board, rather than summarised in the headteacher's report. Remember that governor visits are key sources of information and boards could also try to find ways to capture information from anyone who visits the school, advisors, governors or trustees, parents (anonymously) to inform the board of everything from the quality of teaching and learning to the behaviour of the pupils.

11. National Data: Every board should ensure that it sees external data about how well the school or academy is doing from the Department for Education. Analyse School Performance (ASP) is a very detailed source of data for all schools and at least one governor within each board should have the password to access ASP and the training to understand it. The ASP summary document, 'Inspection Data Summary Report' (IDSR) is useful for the whole board to understand the school's strengths and weaknesses. Some schools and academies use the Fischer Family Trust (FFT) for an external assessment of their data, also accessed by a password. All governors should see the government's [Find and Check the Performance of Schools in England](#) site to see the headline data available to any member of the public without any password about their school or academy.

12. Triangulated Information: This generally means ensuring that you have more than one source of information to reach a conclusion. Remember to compare what you are being told with what you and others observe, with what the outcomes/data is telling you to reach a conclusion, if it doesn't appear to add up, find out why.

13. All governors or trustees should ask questions, no previous experience of education is required. Once a governor or trustee has read the papers or reports and considered the information, there is no '*stupid question*', if it has occurred to one governor or trustee, you can guarantee it has occurred to others around the table too. The Governance Handbook has suggested questions and for inexperienced boards headteachers will sometimes include suggested questions in their headteacher's report. This is helpful to get a board to start to challenge, but the board should take responsibility for considering what questions to ask.

14. Open or closed? Do you know the difference between open and closed questions? Closed questions can be answered with a single word or short phrase and therefore don't tend to provide much in the way of detail. Open questions tend to start with 'What', 'Why', 'How' or 'Describe' and require the respondent to think and reflect and therefore provide more detail.

15. One question will invariably lead to another: The more you discover about your school the more follow-up questions you may need to ask to dig deeper on specific issues and actions while focusing on outcomes for the pupils in your school.

16. Prove it: How can governors prove to Ofsted that they are providing challenge? The answer will be in the minutes. It should be possible to see questions asked that provide challenge, answers given, follow up questions and the thread of this questioning running through minutes identifying where the leadership is required to report back on an action or with information. Ofsted regularly criticises boards for too few questions and too little challenge. For an example of what this type of challenge could look like see the '**DAG Challenge Bubble**'.

17. Challenge in difficult times: Boards are now back to discussing the assessment of pupils within their schools and the support required to ensure pupils catch up. Safeguarding continues to be a key priority along with monitoring the wellbeing and welfare of pupils and staff.