



# Setting Up Committees

A Guide for Governors and Clerks

## Setting Up Committees

### Purpose

- This guide has been written to help you set up effective and compliant committees and outlines the key steps.
- Whilst the guide is aimed at maintained schools it refers to local governing boards in Multi Academy Trusts as some of the steps apply to LGB as well.
- The Guide identifies 8 steps you need to go through when setting up a new committee or when approving at your annual governance business meetings, existing committees. In reality you will undertake some of the steps simultaneously.

### Remember

Committee meetings are about;

- Decision making – not talking shops
- Reporting back on actions undertaken
- Fact finding through robust questioning
- Evaluating and problem solving

### Step 1 - Review Your Current Committee Structure

Do you need all the committees you have?

Think about;

- How many committees do you have now? What are their functions?
- Do you think you have too many? Why do you think that?
- Do you think your committees are effective? How do you know?
- Who clerks your committees?
- Are your committees always quorate? Are there more staff than governors? Does everyone have a vote? Is this formalised?
- Are the right people attending? Is the membership based on your skills audit?
- How often and when do your committees meet?
- What impact did your committees have last year
- What have you found out about your committees?

### Top tip

Think – workload; yours, the headteacher and that of the clerk.

### Step 2 - Panels

Make sure that all the governors are aware that they may be called upon to be part of the following panels. These may be different people each time a panel meets. Note – not all schools need all the committees and many only meet on an 'as and when' basis.

- Admissions Appeals

- Complaints
- Disciplinarys
- Exclusions
- Headteacher Performance Management
- Staffing/HR/personnel
- Appeals Panels (except admissions)

These are agreed at the time the membership of the above are agreed and are different people. It is important that information is not inappropriately shared. Your clerk will advise you.

Make sure that at least one person on each of the committees has experience and appropriate training; especially in exclusions and Headteacher Performance Management.

Make sure that if governors are part of any staff interview processes that at least one of them has Safer Recruitment training – this is best practice.

### **Top Tip**

Review the membership of the Panels to ensure transparency, separation and for the 'right skills'.

### **Step 3 -Determine Which Committees You Need For The Academic Year**

Note – if you are a local governing board or academy council you may be required to have certain committees by your academy trust. Some trusts set this out in their Trust governance handbook for example. In other trusts you are free to determine how you will manage the governance activities required of you. Remember LGB are committees of the trust board and you must refer to the Scheme of Delegation.

Most schools have the following committees covering the following topics:

1. Standards, curriculum, achievement, teaching and learning
2. Finance, resources, staffing/personnel , health and safety. Governors on this committee may form a Pay Committee.

Some boards set up committees to look at school improvement, strategy, marketing, future direction such as joining an academy or federating.

Some boards have no committees – this is sometimes called the circle model – and all governors attend all meetings (sometimes every half term or every month). If you run with this model you will still need the panels listed in Step 2 and a group of governors on a pay committee.

It is important that you make sure that you:

- only set up the committees you need,
- consider the wellbeing of school leaders – a governors' meeting every Tuesday is probably not necessary for example.

- Look at your annual year planner or last year's agendas to work out what committees you need.

### **Top Tip**

If you are a Local Governing Board – always refer back to the Scheme of Delegation.

### **Step 4 - Agree the Terms of Reference (ToR)**

Agreeing or confirming the ToR should takes place in at the first FGB of the academic year. Some boards agree them at the end of the summer term ready for the start of the new academic year. Matters to consider are;

- Use the ToR from last year as a baseline and check that they are still fit for purpose. Step 1 will help you will this.
- Make sure that any links to documents and policies which are referred to in the ToR are updated.
- If you do change something major such as the remit of the committee or the name of the committee make sure that you minute the changes.

Some academy trusts have predetermined ToR – make sure that you follow these closely. If you don't you may be operating outside of the scheme of delegation and your decisions could be invalid.

### **Top Tip**

Think about which committee the Link or Nominated Governors report back to – are they on the right committees?

**Note** – your clerk should ensure that you approve ToR on an annual basis.

You now have the building blocks in place.

### **Step 5 - Elect a Chair**

This person needs to be the most appropriate person – remember this is not a popularity contest!

Agree how long the chair will be in the role for – 12 month is usual. Make sure this is clearly stated in the minutes. This should be done by the FGB not the committee. It is not good practice for reasons of transparency and to avoid conflicts. You may also wish to consider appointing a chair for 2 years if the board needs some stability.

It is also not good practice for the staff governor to chair a committee for the same reason. This is in case the chair needs to have the casting vote.

### **Top Tip**

The chair of governors or academy council should not be the chair of all the committees as well. This is not so much about work load but about transparency. Chairing a committee is a great stepping stone in your succession planning tool kit.

## Step 6- Membership

During your discussions at Step 3 you will have determined the skills you need on each committee to ensure that they discharge their duties and activities responsibly and effectively.

You need to agree the following

- the governors on the committee
- any associate members
- staff – it is sometimes appropriate to be clear about which staff members are expected to attend committees and who may be required to attend on an ad hoc basis – this gives staff time to prepare/make themselves available.

When thinking about committee membership consider skills, experience, knowledge and interests of the governors who are interested in being on the committee.

Make sure

- that there is at least one person on the finance/resources committee who has the right skills; the same applies to standards.
- that meetings take place when the majority of people can attend. This includes staff. It is good practice to have the School Business Manager or finance lead attending the Finance committee. Think about the overlap in the roles between the link governor reporting on finance and the SBM reporting the budget.

### Top Tip

Think about how you can balance your quorum – i.e. try to avoid too many situations where the quorum comprises head/chair/staff governor.

## Step 7 - Check Your Meeting Cycle

Looking at your annual meeting calendar:

- are all your committees meeting in the right order – i.e. before the FGB?
- is everyone on the committee able to commit to the dates in advance – sometimes things do change but it is good practice to make sure that all the committee members are able to commit to the majority of meetings – this ensures that you are always quorate.
- be clear about who is going to clerk the meeting – this may not be the same person who clerks your FGB. However, make sure that whoever clerks is impartial and doesn't accidentally bring bias to the minutes.
- only hold the meetings you need!

### Top Tip

Make sure that if you hold extra meetings that everyone gets adequate advance notice of the meetings.

## **Step 8 -Determine How The Committee Will Communicate**

Think about how the committee will report back to the FGB and when.

It is not appropriate to read out committee minutes at FGB but it is good practice for someone usually the chair of the committee to highlight the key decisions made[ some of which will need ratifying by the FGB.

Is there a simple template for reporting back to FGB? This can help keep messages strategic.

Think about how the minutes of the committee meetings are shared and who has access to them – remember some minutes will need to be remain confidential.

### **Top Tip**

Agree a simple template for chairs of the committee to fill in with key decisions and key issues which can be reported upwards to the full LGB or board of trustees.

### **Some Other Considerations**

- ✓ Remember if you are a local governing board that you consider the Scheme of Delegation and any terms of reference provided by the Trust.
- ✓ Think about how your committees will review and adopt policies – remember some policies must be approved by the FGB.
- ✓ Think about who prepares the agendas – the chair of the committee should be leading on this with the clerk, chair and headteacher.
- ✓ Think about the purpose of any reports the committee requests – remember staff and leaders' workloads – what do you need to know and why? What will you do with the information?

### **And Finally Some Procedural Matters**

Always make sure that you have the following matters on every committee meeting agenda;

1. Apologies and confirmation of quorum,
2. An opportunity to declare conflicts of interest,
3. Minutes of the last meeting – if appropriate,
4. Feedback on actions undertaken,
5. Standing items,
6. Date of next meeting.

### **Remember**

Committees are the engine room of effective governance.

*Thank you for reading*

## **The Author**

SBW Governance is a small governance consultancy offering a range of governance services and is based in the North Midlands. SBW is run by Fee Stagg who is a National Leader of Governance, a Trustee, a local academy governor and a governor in the maintained sector at primary level. She is also a clerk and Governance Professional in a variety of schools and multi academy trusts. She writes blogs about governance and clerking, usually in the third person under the pseudonym of The Clerk's Elbow (colloquially known as The Elbow).

Please remember that the contents of the glossary are a personal opinion and you will have further documents and definitions which you could add to the glossary.

Fee can be contacted on [governanceglossary@gmail.com](mailto:governanceglossary@gmail.com)