



More Than a Certificate: Rethinking Governor Development

Why governor development needs to go beyond the tick box

Introduction

This briefing note invites governing boards to look beyond the mandatory training they attend and consider what meaningful governor development really looks like. Its purpose is to explore how induction, training, reflection and practical experience can build both individual capability and lead to more effective collective governance. We need to move beyond the sometimes passive consumption of an online webinar to working together to share our learning. Apologies if you do this already!

The Reality of Volunteer Governance

Let's be honest: most governors are volunteers juggling governance alongside work, family and other commitments. The average governor might realistically dedicate 10-15 hours per month to their role, including meetings, visits, preparation and training. This isn't a failure of commitment—it's the reality of volunteer governance. That's precisely why we need to be smarter about development. If time is precious, we cannot afford to waste it on training that doesn't translate into better governance. The question isn't whether governors have time for development—it's whether we can afford *not* to make every learning opportunity count. This means ruthlessly prioritising what matters, embedding learning into existing governance activities rather than always adding to them (we'll explore how later), and ensuring that every hour spent on development demonstrably strengthens the board's capability. Development shouldn't feel like another burden on already-stretched volunteers; done well, it should make governance more efficient, more effective and more rewarding.

From governor development to better governance

Perhaps the problem is not that boards provide too little training, but that training has become a shorthand for development. So we talk about induction when we mean orientation, training when we mean learning, CPD when we mean attendance on a course or session, and development when we sometimes mean compliance.

The words matter because they shape the questions we ask. *"What training has everyone completed?"* produces one kind of conversation whereas *"What does this board need to become more capable of doing?"* produces another.

The real measure of governor development is not how much a governor has learned, but what they can now contribute that they could not contribute before. The ultimate test is whether that increased capability leads to better collective governance and better decision-making for children and young people.

The 3 key questions are:

1. How will we create opportunities for governors to apply what they learn?
2. What evidence will show that training has led to changed practice?
3. How will individual development strengthen our collective capability?



Does this situation sound familiar?

A new governor joins a governing board. They receive an induction pack, attend an induction session and complete safeguarding training. Perhaps they also take courses on finance, data and exclusions.

Six months later, the board can easily confirm that the governor has completed their training by checking their lists—but completion is not the same as development. What can the governor now do differently or better? More importantly, how has their development strengthened the board's collective capability?

We often use *induction*, *training*, *learning*, *development* and *CPD* interchangeably. They are related, but they are not the same. The distinction matters because the words we use shape what we expect—and what we measure.

So, what's the difference between training and CPD?

Put simply...

- Training is about acquiring new knowledge or skills needed to carry out a role or responsibility.
- CPD (Continuing Professional Development) is the ongoing process of developing, maintaining and applying knowledge and skills through learning, reflection and experience.

What the guidance actually requires

Current Department for Education guidance for maintained schools places responsibility on the governing body to allocate a governance training and development budget, identify induction and ongoing development needs, provide induction, identify specific training requirements, and encourage governors to develop their knowledge and skills.

Academy-trust guidance follows much the same pattern: induction, ongoing development, specific training, and the development of knowledge and skills. In other words, the DfE does not reduce governor development to training.

The guidance also expects boards to evaluate governance, undertake skills audits, identify gaps and use the findings to inform training and development plans. Its implied model is therefore:

Evaluation → Diagnosis → Development

1. **Evaluation** establishes the board's current effectiveness and capability.
2. **Diagnosis** identifies the specific gaps, needs, or causes revealed.
3. **Development** addresses those findings through targeted learning and improvement.

That is very different from:

- The calendar of available dates checked
- A course selected and booked
- Attendance recorded in the governor training and cpd record
- Certificate issued and filed

From Induction to Development

Induction orients a governor to the role, the organisation and the board's context. Training builds specific knowledge or skills. Learning turns information and experience into understanding. Application puts that understanding into practice. Reflection tests what worked, what was missed and what should change. Development is the resulting growth in capability and effectiveness over time.



CPD is best understood as this continuing process, not as a synonym for attending courses. The development pathway is:

A training course is an event; development is a process. Attendance records the first. Changed capability evidences the second.

Most boards can tell you what training governors have completed. Far fewer can explain what governors can now do as a result. The seven questions below help you test whether your development approach is building real capability—or just ticking boxes.

In summary: think

Training:	Development:	Impact:
A governor attends training on analysing school performance data.	The governor subsequently uses what they learned to interrogate the board's data, asks a different question, recognises a gap in the evidence, and changes how the board discusses performance.	The board has a better-informed conversation and makes a better decision. Governors feel more confident



Seven questions for governing boards

Whichever stage you're at, these seven questions earlier will help you test whether you're moving from activity to development.

1. Are we mistaking attendance for development?

- Boards can easily count courses, modules, certificates, hours and expenditure. They are less likely to measure better questions, improved judgement, stronger strategic understanding, more effective challenge, better use of evidence or changed behaviour.
- The more demanding question is: what evidence would convince us that a governor has actually developed?

2. Can someone be fully trained but underdeveloped?

- A governor may know that the board holds leaders to account without being able to interpret performance information, identify weak assurance, ask the right follow-up question, distinguish strategic from operational matters, recognise bias or revise a view when the evidence changes.
- Knowing governance is not the same as doing governance.

3. Is experience automatically CPD?

- Experience alone does not guarantee development. It becomes developmental through reflection: What happened? What did I assume or miss? What would I do differently? What does this reveal about my practice and the board's practice?

4. Are we developing individuals—or the board?

- A board may include governors with excellent financial, educational or chairing expertise and still be ineffective. Governance is collective. Individual capability asks, "What can I contribute?" Collective capability asks, "What can we do together?" Governance effectiveness asks, "What difference does our collective work make?"



5. Who owns the development?

- Development is not simply a matter of giving governors links and asking them to complete training. The individual owns their willingness to learn; the chair creates expectations and conditions; the board owns its collective capability.

6. Are development needs generic or contextual?

- A newly appointed school leader, accountant, parent with no governance experience and retired community leader do not start from the same place. Good development addresses not only what every governor should know, but what this person, this board and this context need next.

7. What happens after the training?

- The value of an excellent course depends on what follows. A simple discipline can turn activity into development:
 - Before: Why are we doing this?
 - During: What are we learning?
 - After: What will change, and how will we know?

What a Developmental Board Does Well

A developmental governing board:

- Understands the capability it has and the capability it needs;
- Identifies individual and collective gaps;
- Treats induction as contextual rather than transactional;
- Uses training when training is the answer, and other forms of learning when it is not;



- Creates opportunities for application, reflection and learning from experience;
- Uses skills audits and board evaluation diagnostically, not merely administratively; and
- Looks for evidence of changed practice rather than completed activity.

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The words matter because they shape the questions we ask. “What training has everyone completed?” produces one kind of conversation. “What does this board need to become more capable of doing?” produces another.

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Meeting Boards Where They Are: A Staged Approach

The developmental approach described above is the aspiration—but we need to recognise that boards are all at different starting points. Some are still wrestling with basic compliance; others are ready to focus on collective capability and impact. Both positions are valid, and neither represents failure.

The key is to know where your board is now, and what the next realistic step looks like.

Stage 1: Establishing the Foundations (Compliance-Focused)

Where you are:

- Struggling to ensure all governors complete mandatory training
- Training records are incomplete or hard to access
- New governors aren't always inducted properly
- The board doesn't have a clear training plan

Your immediate priority: Get the basics in place. This isn't tick-box for the sake of it—safeguarding training, Prevent duty and understanding KCSIE are genuine statutory requirements that protect children and the board.

What to do next:

- Create a simple training tracker (who's done what, when it needs renewing)
- Identify one person (clerk or chair) to own this
- Set a realistic deadline: "All mandatory training completed by [date]"
- Use one consistent training provider to simplify record-keeping
- Build training completion into your annual governance calendar

The development question at this stage: *"Can we evidence that every governor has completed their statutory training?"*

Quick win: Once mandatory training is complete, add one simple reflection question at the next board meeting: "What's one thing from your safeguarding training that changed how you think about our role?" This tiny step begins to shift from compliance to development.



Stage 2: Building Individual Capability (Training-Focused)

Where you are:

- Mandatory training is up to date
- Governors are attending additional courses (finance, data, Ofsted)
- You have a training budget and a basic plan
- But you're not sure if training is making a difference

Your immediate priority: Move from "everyone's trained" to "everyone can contribute effectively." This means being more strategic about who needs what training, and creating opportunities to apply learning.

What to do next:

- Conduct a skills audit—not just to tick a box, but to genuinely understand capability gaps
- Match training to board priorities: if data scrutiny is weak, prioritise data training for relevant governors
- After any training, add 10 minutes to the next meeting for that governor to share one key learning and one question they'll now ask differently
- Pair newly trained governors with experienced ones for their first opportunity to apply the learning (e.g., first finance deep-dive, first data scrutiny)

The development question at this stage: *"What can our governors now do that they couldn't do six months ago?"*

Quick win: Before booking any training, ask: "What specific board activity will this governor be better able to contribute to afterwards?" If you can't answer, reconsider whether it's the right training.

Stage 3: Strengthening Collective Capability (Development-Focused)

Where you are:

- Individual governors are well-trained and capable
- Training is targeted and purposeful
- But the board's collective effectiveness is inconsistent
- You're ready to focus on how the board works together

Your immediate priority: Shift from developing individuals to developing the board as a team. This means focusing on collective behaviours, shared understanding and how learning translates into better governance decisions.

What to do next:

- Use board evaluation to identify collective gaps (e.g., "We're individually strong on finance but collectively weak at strategic financial planning")
- Build reflection into every meeting: "What worked well in how we approached that discussion? What would we do differently?"
- Create opportunities for collaborative learning: joint training sessions, peer observation, shared reading of key documents followed by discussion



- Track decisions, not just training: "How did governor X's data training change our conversation about pupil outcomes?"

The development question at this stage: *"How has our collective capability improved the decisions we make for children?"*

Quick win: At your next meeting, after a significant decision, spend 5 minutes asking: "What evidence did we use? What questions did we ask? What would we do differently next time?" This is collective reflection in action.

Where Does Your Board Sit?

Most boards will recognise themselves somewhere in this progression. The important thing is to be honest about your starting point and focus on the *next* step, not trying to leap to Stage 3 when you're still at Stage 1.

And here's the crucial point: even at Stage 1, you can begin building developmental habits. The difference between compliance and development isn't about how much training you've done—it's about whether you're asking, "What can we now do differently?" alongside "Have we completed the training?"

A board that's strong on compliance but asks that one question after every training session is already becoming developmental. A board that's completed extensive training but never asks that question is still stuck in tick-box mode.

The staged approach isn't about lowering expectations—it's about being realistic about capacity, honest about where you are, and strategic about where you go next.

The Governance Learning Cycle

As governors and trustees we learn through training and experience, and work hard to apply that learning in meetings and decision making. We try to reflect on what worked and what didn't, and to develop new capabilities as a result. Each piece of learning should feed into the next, creating a continuous cycle of improvement.

A great place to start your own governance CPD journey is by checking out The Great Big Governance Glossary. [The Great Big Governance Glossary](#) a free to download glossary that covers everything from A is for Accountability through Influence and Training to Y is for You.

The mandatory and recommended training areas below provide the essential knowledge base—but remember, completing the training is just the first step in the cycle. The real development happens in the application and reflection that follows.

SBW Governance

Success Begins With ... is a small North Midlands based education governance consultancy offering a range of governance services.

SBW Governance is owned by Fee Stagg, who was a National Leader of Governance until August 2021. Fee has more than 20 years' experience as a governor, trustee, and clerk. She is currently Chair of Trustees in both the East and West Midlands, and also serves as a local governor and Member in other schools and trusts. Fee works as a Governance Professional across a number of schools, trusts, and Local Governing Boards in the north west and midlands areas.



Fee also designs and delivers bespoke governance training, undertakes External Reviews of Governance, and carries out governance health checks across the country. She is an occasional conference speaker and would be pleased to hear from you if she can help.

In her spare(!) time she writes a light-hearted analogous blog about governance and clerking using the pseudonym The Clerk's Elbow (colloquially known as The Elbow). You can find her blog [here](#).



Mandatory Training for Governors

Safeguarding

All governors must complete safeguarding training CPD or training. This is a statutory requirement and should be updated regularly (typically annually). The training should cover:

- Understanding the school's safeguarding policy and procedures
- Recognising signs of abuse and neglect
- Knowing how to respond to concerns
- Understanding the role of the Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL)
- Key requirements from Keeping Children Safe in Education (KCSIE) – all governors now need to read all of KCSIE

Prevent Duty

Governors must understand their duties under the Prevent strategy, which is part of the government's counter-terrorism strategy. This training should cover:

- Understanding radicalisation and extremism risks
- The school's responsibilities under the Prevent duty
- How to identify vulnerable pupils
- Referral processes through Channel

Cyber Security

While not always framed as "mandatory," governing boards have a statutory duty to ensure appropriate cyber security measures are in place. Governor training should include:

- Understanding cyber risks to schools
- The board's oversight role in cyber security
- Data protection responsibilities
- How to challenge leaders on cyber resilience

Highly Recommended Good Practice Training

Data and Performance

- Understanding school performance data and how to interpret it
- Asking effective questions about pupil outcomes
- Understanding progress measures, attainment and contextual data
- Using data to hold leaders to account

Ofsted

- Understanding the inspection framework
- The board's role during inspection
- How governance is evaluated
- Preparing for and responding to inspection



SIAMS or CSI (for Church Schools)

- Understanding the appropriate framework and inspection process
- The distinctive Christian character of the school
- Collective worship and RE provision
- How governance supports the school's vision and values

Finance

- Understanding school budgets and financial planning
- Reading financial reports
- Asking effective questions about resource allocation
- Understanding audit processes

Other Valuable Areas

- Equality and diversity
- SEND provision and the local offer
- Health and safety oversight
- Exclusions and behaviour
- Complaints handling