

The Clerk's Elbow's Guide to Agendas

A well written agenda is a thing of beauty.

The agenda is one of the most powerful instruments in your [effective governance](#) [In the Beginning](#)

There are some matters which are so obvious they ought to go without saying but are worth saying them anyway.

- Every meeting needs a purpose eg something which cannot be met by other ways of communication eg an email or phone call.
- A solution or decision is required which requires dialogue and consideration.
- The vast majority of board meetings need a clerk (or at least someone to take notes). Keeping records is important.

We are going to assume, therefore, that we actually need the meeting for which we are preparing the agenda and that we have a clerk, or are the clerk ourselves...

What is an agenda?

An agenda is basically a list. Anyone can write a list but not everyone can write an agenda. This is because you need to know what exactly to put on the agenda, the order in which to put them to make the meeting flow properly and which bits need to take the most time on. In order to know what you need to put on the agenda you need to know what has gone before, what is happening now and what needs to be done in future. You need to look backwards, forwards and at your feet all at the same time. It's not easy.

Back to Basics

toolkit and one which is often overlooked. Here, [The Clerks Elbow](#) outlines her views on how to draft a good agenda. This will be an exciting read so prepare yourselves...

The Elbow thinks that agenda are like a nice, well-crafted line of coat hooks on which you can hang:

- ✓ The formalities – the bare necessities – the **when, where** and **who** of the meeting,
- ✓ Items to be discussed – the bones of the meeting.

Focusing on:

- ✓ The objectives - the **why** of the meeting,
- ✓ The anticipated outcomes – the **what** of the meeting.

Who gets a copy of the agenda?

Everyone invited to the meeting including any associate members.

The Formalities

Every agenda should have:

The date, time and location – very useful. An indication of how long the meeting should last is always useful.

Name of the meeting eg Local Governing Board, Trust Board, Audit Committee etc.

Apologies – these need to be noted clearly in the minutes and whether they have been accepted or not. This is really important as attendance needs to be published on the school's website. Some clerks keep a register.

Declarations of Interest – in matters on the agenda. This is also really important. Sometimes the only person with an interest in a meeting she is clerking is The Elbow

herself so she respectfully suggests you give this some thought as she feeling somewhat lonely.

Register and declarations of business and other interests –this register must be kept updated and governors and trustees must appraise the meeting of any changes. This register needs to be published on the school website and should be as up to date as possible.

Sometimes the clerk has a business interest. This also needs to be declared in the minutes but not necessarily on the website.

Confidentiality. There are two parts to this;

- (i) matters which need to be considered confidential and which need to form a confidential appendix (often called a Part 2), and to
- (ii) remind those present that the matters discussed at the meeting are to remain confidential until minutes are ratified or unless the meeting agrees the matter can be shared.

Remember minutes do not become public documents until they are ratified. They must be made available for public inspection; sometimes they are published on the website and sometimes they are kept in a file in the reception area. The public inspection files do not include confidential minutes.

Minutes of the Previous Meeting and Matters Arising. These are important but should not dominate the agenda planning or the meeting. Key matters arising could form key items on the substantive agenda.

We must presume that everyone has read the minutes before they turn up at the meeting as they will have gone out at least 7 days before the meeting accompanied by the agenda... You should not spend too long going through the minutes of the last meeting. Nothing more unnecessary than spending three quarters of an hour ploughing through item 23 bullet point 6 just to tell your clerk there's a full stop missing. Use your pen and put one in. Go on you know you want to

Other items on the agenda 'washing line'

These could include the following and the order is dependent on your chair;

Chair and Vice Chair actions – if they use their '*for emergencies only*' powers to act then these need to be noted in the minutes. These items depend entirely on the subject matter of the meeting. These need to be monitored as some chairs do lots and others never do.

Reports – these could be from the Headteacher/CEO/SLT or from committees or from link governors or governors with a specific role such as SEND or pupil outcomes. They could be on the budget or performance management or attendance or a whole myriad of other subjects. These should form the bulk of the agenda. You may wish to prompt governors and explain succinctly what the purpose of the agenda item is and why it is on the agenda. Sometimes it is not obvious.

Policies – these need to be put on the agenda on a regular basis. This helps prevent governors sinking under the policy review mountain¹. Less is more and all that.

Standing items - some boards always have safeguarding on their agendas for example;

¹ This is a real place. The Elbow has been there.

some routinely ask about impact or progress towards the meeting's objectives. Good chairs regularly 'perception test' to make sure everyone is still on message. Other always have progress towards strategic objectives and targets or identify which of the core functions of governance the meeting is about. Sometimes they refer to Ofsted. You haven't broken the law if you don't but with a new inspection framework in the offing it would be remiss if you didn't.

When did your board last consider the [Nolan Principles](#) ? Is it worth putting these on the agenda from time to time? Think your first core function of governance.

Governor development and training. Do you regularly ask *who's done any training?* How often do you consider impact of the training? You may like to consider rewording this agenda item to encourage the discussion. That's a hint by the way.

AOB – in the view of The Elbow this **an optional extra not a right**. Not somewhere where you all go *'oh yes...before you go'* and then announce a major item which needs a decision. You may not be quorate at this point anyway because AOB usually happen at the end of the meeting. Think long and hard about the need for AOB...

The legal bit...

Maintained schools

The School Governance (Roles, Procedures and Allowances) (England) Regulations 2013 states that the clerk of the governing body must give written notice of the meeting and a copy of the agenda for the meeting at least seven clear days in advance to—

a) each governor;

b) the head teacher (whether or not that person is a governor);

c) any associate member; and

d) the local authority, where an agenda item for the meeting involves consideration of a change of school category.

Academies

In an academy the DfE model Articles of Association states *each Trustee shall be given at least seven clear days before the date of a meeting:*

a) notice in writing thereof, signed by the Clerk, and sent to each Trustee at the address provided by each Trustee from time to time; and

b) a copy of the agenda for the meeting;

Who agrees the agenda?

It is important that the agenda is agreed by the chair of the meeting and does not include just what the head, CEO or clerk thinks needs to go on the agenda. If you have a pre-set agenda from your Trust then make sure you have an opportunity to discuss your school. If you follow an agenda from the Local Authority remember this is a recommended or suggested agenda and you can delete items which are not applicable².

There are some matters which have to go on to an agenda at certain times of the year eg

- Performance management of the headteacher,

² Progress 8 does not apply in primary schools...I know, I know...happens.

- Budget ratification,
- Schools Financial Value Standard³,
- Requirements of the [Academies Financial Handbook](#)
- Submission of audits to the Local Authority, and other audits
- Skills Audits,
- Code of Conduct,
- Matters specific to your settings.

If you are not the chair, head or clerk you need to ask to get items on the agenda; you cannot assume you will always get permission.

Tick tock top tip

- ✓ Make sure that you have not planned to discuss more than is reasonably achievable within the time frame of your meeting. A 6 page agenda is not good news; although your minutes need to show that more than a brief discussion took place.
- ✓ Sometimes putting timings on the agenda shows where the emphasis of the meeting discussion needs to be. Don't stick slavishly to the timings though as this can stifle good discussion.

Supporting Documents

If you consider that each item is being discussed and considered for a **purpose** then backing this up with clear reference to any background documents may be worth considering.

Questions

Some agendas include phrases like *governors or trustees may like to consider*

³ Maintained schools only but there are some good questions in there so worth a look if you are an academy.

the following questions. This is not leading the meeting but framing the discussion. All too often boards stray into the operational and by pointing governors in the right direction meetings can stay focused and be over before midnight.

And finally...

You do not have to reinvent the wheel for each meeting. If you are going to use the same template for each meeting though do check that you have

- ✓ The correct time, date, location and term. Last time The Elbow checked March was in the Spring term...
- ✓ Checked for spelling errors – autocorrect is *nit always your fiend*.

The Elbow leaves you with this thought and wishes she had come up with it herself –

'there goes another meeting which could have been an email?'

About the Elbow

The Elbow is a governor, trustee, independent clerk and National Leader of Governance with over 15 years of governance experience. She is always learning and hopes you are too.

She is a passionate believer in the importance of good clerking and doesn't mind saying so; and in fact does so often.

If you are so inclined please follow her on Twitter @thesarkyclerk

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Thank you for reading...